



The World's Largest Cathedral Trusts Vicon to Deliver World-Class Security

Background

When it comes to world-famous architecture, Manhattan is best known for its skyscrapers, but the island is also home to the largest Cathedral in the world and the world's fifth largest church building. The Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, the Cathedral church of the Episcopal Diocese of New York, is a world-famous landmark located in the Morningside Heights section of Harlem. A combination of Romanesque-Byzantine and Gothic Revival architecture, the Cathedral itself is an awe-inspiring work of art; services are held every day of the year while it also plays host to a busy schedule of art exhibitions, concerts, receptions, public and private events and visiting dignitaries. It also serves as a place for community programming and social outreach.

Construction of the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine began in 1892, and like the great medieval cathedrals and churches of the world, it remains a work in progress. So does its security system, which is continuously being expanded and refined to meet the rigorous demands of such a high-profile and heavily trafficked historic site. Its latest update is a new Valerus video management system from Vicon and the addition of 23 new high-resolution Vicon IP cameras.

Responsibility for the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine's security system falls to Keith Hinkson, the Director of Security, and Geoff Smith, the Director of Technology. For the past decade, they have worked together with ITSavvy, a Chicago-based IT products and technology solutions provider, initially for managed support of their exchange server, and in more recent years, for the installation and maintenance of their physical security systems. Greg Montgomery, Director of Project Management at ITSavvy's Hauppauge, NY offices, has played a key role in guiding them through the evolution of their surveillance system, bringing it to the highly advanced state that it is today. When Vicon launched Valerus in early 2017, Keith recommended that the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine migrate to the new solution from an older Vicon platform so as to take advantage of its enhanced features and simplified user interface.

Organization

Cathedral of Saint John the Divine



The Cathedral
Church of **Saint John**
the Divine

Challenges

- Provide surveillance coverage of the largest Cathedral in the world and its 11.3 acre property, which is a NYC landmark and busy destination for worship, cultural arts, social services and tourism.
- Display and record excellent video quality in a wide range of challenging conditions, including filtered and low light within the Cathedral and coverage of heavily trafficked city streets.
- Offer convenient platform for sharing of surveillance video with NYPD and private neighborhood security forces.
- Need for easy and quick search functions for security incidents from a large number of cameras.

Solution

The Cathedral upgraded its VMS platform to Vicon's Valerus to take advantage of its superior user interface, capabilities and ease of use. Each year additional Vicon cameras are added to the system to expand coverage and enhance visibility in areas of concern.

Results

The Cathedral's security team is able to view more cameras simultaneously and more expeditiously. Functions like archiving, searching and exporting are much easier. Strategically placed cameras help protect the Cathedral from liability in cases of slip-and-fall, and has allowed guards to monitor the property more efficiently and with less staff.

“Anything we’ve wanted in a system is now included.
We may not be taking advantage of it yet, but it’s there.”

~ Geoff Smith, Director of Technology

Security Objectives

The new system, which combines over 70 high-resolution IP cameras, a Valerus application server and multiple recording servers, provides coverage of almost the entire 11.3 acre complex, called “The Close.” This includes the Cathedral, administrative and residential buildings to support the Bishop, clergy and Diocese, a world-class textile conservation laboratory and all of the surrounding grounds and gardens. Cameras are also focused on the visitor center and information booths. (A kindergarten through 8th grade school, adjacent to the Cathedral, is not currently part of this system.)

As head of all security operations within The Close, Mr. Hinkson decides where each camera goes. Providing safety for visitors, staff, residents and students as well as protecting the property and its many valuable artifacts, are his primary concerns. One of the problems he deals with regularly is tourists who are so busy looking around that they aren’t paying attention to their footing. “We have accidental falls, and sometimes lawsuits arise. Having cameras everywhere provides us with a visual of how accidents occurred and that can protect us from liability,” says Keith.

Other challenges relate to the services the Cathedral provides to the indigent. “We have a soup kitchen in the basement that feeds up to 300 people on Sundays. Sometimes we have guests who are disruptive. With cameras, we are able to capture footage that we can show to first responders.” Keith also cites a number of mentally ill visitors to the Cathedral who sometimes exhibit problematic behavior.

The cameras are important for protecting property as well as people. Geoff Smith explains that strategic placement of the cameras within the Cathedral has given them another resource in addition to the security guards they employ to supervise the church’s many art exhibitions and keep an eye on its priceless artifacts. Famous tapestries, sculptures and paintings are displayed within the chapels around the perimeter of the Cathedral’s interior. With the recent addition of cameras in each of these spaces, individual guards are no longer assigned to each chapel. Instead, security officers can



monitor the surveillance cameras from security booths and dispatch roving guards to specific chapels, as needed.

VIP events and visits from dignitaries, which can bring thousands of people to the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, are the most hectic and stressful times for the security team, which expands in size to accommodate such events. “Some of our more famous visitors have included Nelson Mandela, The Most Reverend Desmond Tutu and President Bill Clinton,” says Keith. “And in terms of private events with high visibility and media coverage, the funeral of James Gandolfini, TV’s Tony Soprano, ranks pretty high. That was attended by a huge number of celebrities.”

Sometimes, it’s less famous dignitaries that pose the greatest security risks. “One of the busiest times for us was the celebration of the Israeli 62nd anniversary of independence. We had all of the top Israeli officials in the US here at the same time. It posed a significant security challenge.”

The Vicon Solution

In all of these scenarios, having the right cameras, in the right places, is critically important. The Cathedral of Saint John the Divine makes use of a wide range of Vicon megapixel models. PTZ cameras with powerful zoom, mounted on the exterior of buildings, provide coverage of the streets bordering The Close.

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~ Keith Hinkson, the Director of Security

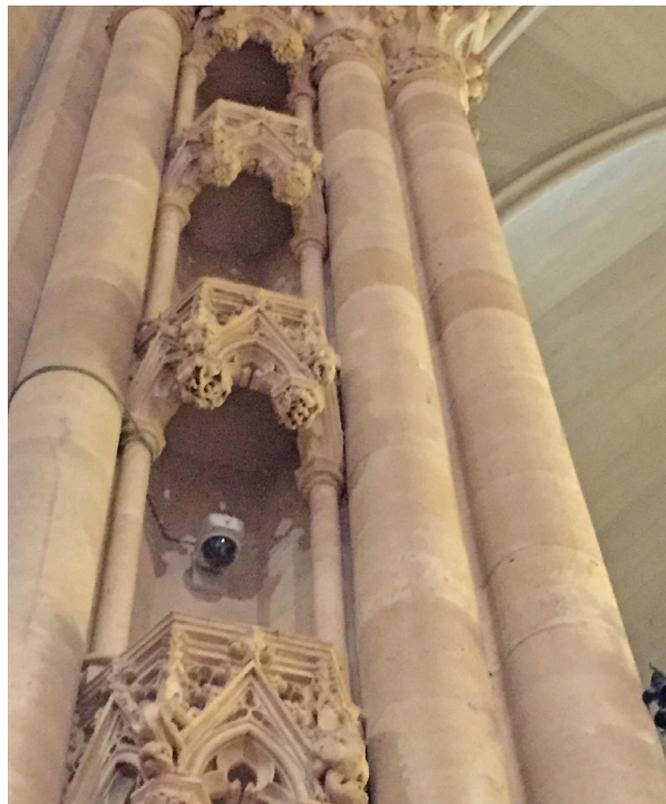
Geoff says that on occasions, when the NYPD has come to look at video from their cameras, the officers have been amazed at the detail captured. “You can read the license plate off a bus from a block away.”

Keith elaborates, “If we want to give an image to the NYPD, we can zoom in and we can actually see a mole on the person’s face. These are high megapixel cameras.”

Within the Cathedral, cameras need to accommodate for challenging lighting conditions, such as sunlight passing through stained glass windows and low lighting in certain chapels to protect artifacts on display. “The Vicon cameras we use adjust automatically throughout the day,” says Keith. “We also have night vision cameras.”

Geoff explains that installing cameras in and around a property with landmark status requires coordination with city authorities. “Ultimately, aesthetic concerns will never trump security, but we do need to be sensitive to preservation of the building’s historical significance.” Greg, from ITsavvy, explains that before any cameras were installed, a complete study was done and all locations and positions of the cameras were sent to Landmarks for approval. “Vicon has been very cordial and patient in working with us and the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine on issues like these,” he says.

The new Valerus software platform has made managing video from the network of Vicon cameras much easier for the security team. Geoff explains, “We are able to view more cameras simultaneously and more expeditiously. Health monitoring, archiving, searching and exporting...all those features are also so much easier now. When we look at the health dashboard and see that there are no errors, it gives us confidence that everything is working as it should.”

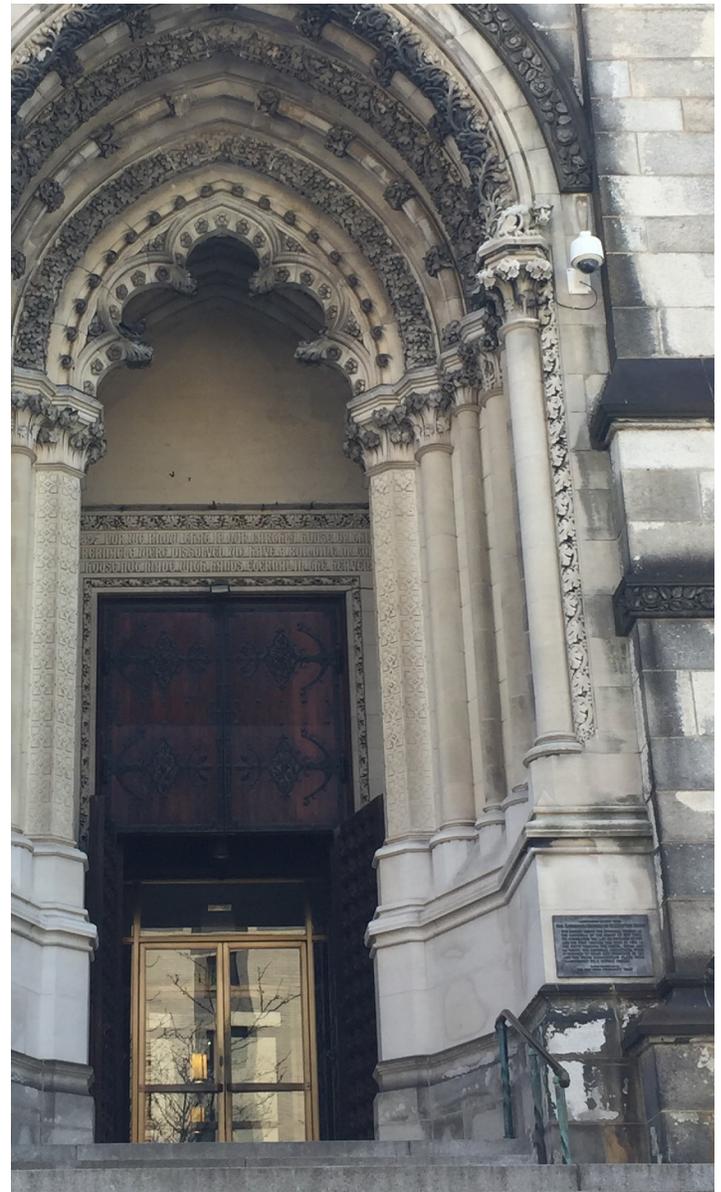


The system is monitored from two security booths with full time guards, the Security Director’s office and from a viewing station in the server room. Greg says, “One of the really nice things about Valerus is that because it uses a thin client, the interface is always the same. The Security Director and others routinely log in from home, and with Valerus, the user experience is consistent. There are no limits to features or different ways to navigate if you’re using a mobile device or connecting remotely.” Geoff agrees. “In addition to viewing from the server room, I like being able to see all of the cameras right on my desktop computer in my office.”

A Community Effort

The Cathedral of Saint John the Divine is located in a neighborhood where a large number of private, prestigious institutions are concentrated in a very small area. Columbia University, Barnard College, Riverside Church, the Jewish Theological Seminary, Saint Luke’s and Bank Street College are just a few of the institutions located within a few blocks of the Cathedral, and each has its own private security organization. Keith explains that all of them work together, meeting monthly with the NYPD, to talk about crime trends and other shared concerns.

“We all have cameras, and we share with each other any information we have. If something happens, we all do what we can to help local law enforcement, including sharing video and still footage of persons of interest.”



With Valerus now in place, it's much easier for Keith's team to assist with investigations. "The searching feature is so much easier on Valerus, and we can see up to 99 cameras on one screen. This is huge for an institution like ours. I can go from one camera to the next with no trouble whatsoever."

While the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine's security organization operates as part of the greater community formed by the 26th Precinct, the team at ITsavvy contributes as members of the Cathedral's own in-house security team. In fact, an employee from ITsavvy works onsite alongside Geoff and his staff three days each week. Of this unusual relationship, Geoff says, "I'm all about service.

I hope I wouldn't accept an inferior product in place of good service, but the quality of service is paramount when I work with a vendor. We have a superb relationship with ITsavvy. I count on them."

Fortunately, Geoff is equally pleased with the performance of the Valerus system. "Anything we've wanted in a system is now included. We may not be taking advantage of it yet, but it's there." With system expansion and enhancements an ongoing project with no end in sight, the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine's new security system – like the Cathedral itself – now has a foundation equipped to grow and evolve along with the community it serves.



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