

SACRAMENTAL VESSELS

heritage value

care

disposal



An information leaflet from the
Committee on Church Art and Architecture
of the Church of Scotland
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We tend to give precedence to our buildings, perhaps because of their solidity, but the truth is that a congregation may 'wear out' several churches in the time covered by its set of communion ware. We already agree that important historic buildings should be 'listed' and protected. Perhaps we need to accord at least the same importance to silver and pewter as we do to stone and lime.

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This pamphlet is based on the Report of the Committee to the General Assembly of 2001 and includes an article on the same subject by Douglas Galbraith, the Committee's then Secretary, which appeared in the April 2001 of *Life and Work*. Cover photograph reproduced by permission of *Life and Work* and Sam Sloan.

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Comments and suggestions for inclusion in any revision of this pamphlet are welcomed.

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'Selling the family silver'

Life and Work article April 2001centre pages

Sacramental Vessels

The old and the new

2003: Cardross Parish Church has a problem. Not an unpleasant one. They are faced with four striking, contemporary designs for a new pair of silver Communion cups and an alms dish, the result of a generous gift. The craftsman is John Creed of Lenzie. Whichever one they choose, the impact on the congregation as they gather round the Lord's Table will be immense. These will be the first sacramental vessels to be commissioned in Scotland in the third millennium.

Now imagine yourself in 2,303. The old parish church still stands but time has taken its toll and the roof needs reslated. A voice says, These old silver cups might bring in a fair bit ...

It could happen, because in these straitened times it happens now.

Earlier legislation

What first brought the matter of Communion cups and plate and other related items to the attention of the General Assembly in recent times (1960) was a report that examples of these had been 'displayed for sale as antiques'. The response was to rule that all such surplus items must be retained by the congregation concerned or passed to another Kirk Session for its use. In 1971, however, it was agreed that congregations could apply to the General Assembly for permission to dispose of surplus vessels.

In 1975 for the first time guidelines were published to regulate the disposal of surplus Communion plate. These were: that the historical significance of such items must be

recognised; that only truly surplus items might be sold; and that the proceeds of the sale must be applied to something of more than passing value. Examples given were the preservation of an historic church building, the endowment of a fabric fund, or the further endowment of stipend. The Committee intimated that in addition it would be enquiring into the possibility of valuable items being lent to museums and of establishing in a few suitable centres treasuries in which such plate could be displayed.

In 1985 it was further agreed that “the opinion of the applicant’s Presbytery should be sought with regard to the application”. Again, in 1991, it was resolved that application should be made to the General Assembly not only when a congregation wished to sell Communion vessels but also when it was proposed to give them to a museum or another congregation. Up until this point, each individual request had to come before the Assembly, but after 1992 the Board of Practice and Procedure was given freedom to make decisions in the course of the year, bringing before the Assembly only difficult or controversial cases.

Applying the guidelines

It is important to say at the outset that the Committee sees itself as sharing a decision with the congregation rather than acting solely as the giver or withholder of permission. We believe that congregations are sensitive to the fact that sacramental vessels have value other than monetary value and that there are issues involved other than the immediate needs of a particular group of people at a particular time.

In approaching each case, the Committee’s first enquiry is whether the cups could not be used. Our older vessels serve both as a vivid reminder of the continuity of our Christian worship and witness and as eloquent symbols of the sharing that is at the heart of Holy Communion. It remains a requirement that even where individual cups are in use any

member is entitled to receive communion by way of the common cup¹ if he/she wishes it. Communion cups are often the first things that come to mind when we need money. An organ or a building or other artefact may be worth as much but we are less likely to give these up. Is this just because of their size and ease of disposal or - a serious question - is it because we value Communion less than we should?

The second avenue is to discuss the possibility of significant items being lent or sold to a museum, so that they remain in the public domain and can be examined and appreciated. Another possibility is to give them to another congregation for their use. This could be in this country or overseas, through the Board of World Mission. In the latter case, such redundant items, coming as they do from a country with which there may be links through early missionaries, are particularly valued. The Committee has facilitated transfers of both kinds.

The next step is to ascertain the value of the items in terms of the heritage of church and nation. Where an early item is one of several examples, it is more likely that permission can be given to sell, by auction or through other avenues. Where it is unique, the Committee will work with the congregation in finding a way of keeping it in the public domain. It is not of course automatic that

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¹ James L. Weatherhead ed., *The Constitution and Laws of the Church of Scotland*, (Board of Practice and Procedure, 1997), 109.

Selling the Family Silver **Life and Work, April 2001**

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Passing the bread plate at the Lord's Supper, chances are you might see the command, 'This do in remembrance of me', but what about the accompanying upbeat message, 'Success to the USA'? Yet this is what the congregation of Kilmodan found when they took delivery of their new pewter plates from Glasgow in the 1780s. Here is tangible evidence of how, in the days before electronic media, new causes could be popularised. Craftworkers with convictions might incorporate slogans on spoons, declaring 'abolish slavery' or affirming 'liberty!' Perhaps, though, back in Kilmodan, it's not so strange that a vessel associated with the Meal of the Kingdom should connect with what are seen as signs of hope in the here and now.

More usually you would find the names of those who had donated the item. In the case of the cup acquired in 1698 for Trinity College Church, Edinburgh, which once stood where the train now departs for King's Cross, stamped on the bowl are the names of the minister, elders and deacons of the church. Comparison with other records of the time reveals that among them were a merchant, a tailor, a periwig maker, a craftsman in leather, the legal agent of a Laird, and a painter. The cup is a testament to the way the church penetrated and reflected the civic community of the time.



But not all inscriptions are in words. The same church's collection of Communion and Baptismal plate forms the centre-piece of the Museum of Scotland's *Reformed Church* display. On the silver bread plates are not words but pictures, unique engravings depicting a celebration of Holy Communion in the early seventeenth century. The most striking feature is that at the table, set for the sacrament, is a kneeling figure. It takes us to the heart of a time of turmoil in the Church of Scotland, with James VI and then Charles I attempting to introduce worship practices that conformed to those in the Church of

England. The most deeply unpopular section of the Five Articles of Perth was the one which called for kneeling at Communion, focusing the fury felt by Scottish people which culminated in the signing of the National Covenant of 1638. The minister who commissioned the plate caught the moment and finished up Dean of St. Giles' and Bishop of Brechin, but the king decisively lost his influence over the Scottish church (and his head).

Just as interesting as what is engraved on our cups and plates is what lies behind them. An Act of Parliament of 1617 made it a legal requirement for all churches to have cups, cloths and tables for Communion. Many of the finest items date from this period as congregations hastened to comply. The result was a unique 'eye into history' which puts paid to any notion that after the Reformation there was a rejection of things of beauty in the church. What's more, with no comparable domestic corpus of silver now surviving, our church silver is virtually the only proof of what was an unexpectedly rich period of Scottish craftwork. Equally significant is the fact that before 1850 such items were probably made locally rather than centrally and may be the only surviving examples of the craftwork of a particular town. They speak of a high creativity and deep Christian conviction lying at the heart of the local community.

Many congregations today are counting the cost of being the custodians of such items of historical and cultural significance, especially when unions of congregations cause accumulation. Storage charges, increased insurance premiums, coupled with pressing financial problems in regard to fabric and stipend, have led some congregations to consider selling their silver and pewter communion ware. At the same time, they are aware that they hold such things in trust - for the people of the past who brought them to light, and for the people of the future who might value them in more than monetary terms. How can we be responsible to them as well as to our own immediate and pressing tasks and calling?

We have to keep certain balances. The needs of the present day church seem urgent, but how will they rate in the long term? We are told that the town council of Stirling sold its pre-Reformation silver to mend the holes in the road. These items have vanished, but we still encounter contraflows on the M9! We may despair of keeping up with our fabric or become anxious about being able to contribute to a minister's stipend, and see the solution lying unseen and unused in the bank vault - but what are our successors to say about our stewardship when the roof yet again needs repair or the congregation flourishes under the guidance of a non-stipendiary minister? We tend to give precedence to our buildings, perhaps because of their solidity, but the truth is that a congregation may 'wear out' several churches in the time covered by its set of communion ware. We already agree that important historic buildings should be 'listed' and protected. Perhaps we need to accord at least the same importance to silver and pewter as we do to stone and lime.

Another factor is that these historic items are not simply the possession of the local congregation. Often the whole community contributed to their purchase. The town council minutes of Dunbar record how a collection was taken (which appears to be of silverware as well as coins) to melt down into, or go towards the purchase of, enough silver to make the four cups - still in use - inscribed 'For the bwrugh of Dwmbar 1657'. The cups of the Barony of Glasgow bear the city's coat of arms and the prayer, 'Let Glasgow flourish'. Church made common cause with city. There is some obligation upon us to consider this dimension in any discussion about disposal.

Such is the importance of this part of our heritage that the General Assembly (through the Committee on Artistic Matters) shares responsibility with the congregation when consideration is being given to selling communion ware. The first question is whether the cups might not be used, as both a vivid reminder of the continuity of our Christian worship and witness and as a proper symbol of the sharing that is at the heart of Holy Communion (the right of any member of the church to take communion from a common cup remains on

the statute book). If disposal is being considered, ways are sought to keep the items in the public domain, either by lending or selling to a museum. Where a sale goes ahead, the proceeds must go towards projects which reflect the importance and high profile of the items sold.

There are of course limits. Should too many items be disposed of, museums will begin to have trouble in storing and displaying them. The monetary value at auction will also decrease. Items of national significance could vanish without trace into private collections. There are signs that this situation might be round the corner, and the Committee on Artistic Matters is asking the forthcoming Assembly [2001] to take a fresh look at the matter and consider ways of preserving this part of our heritage while protecting the freedom of congregations to deploy their treasures in the way they consider most responsible. Behind this is the concern that, when we feel forced to sell items of Communion ware, what we might get for them could be much less than what they have still to give to us, as a nation and as a church.

auctioned pieces will be lost; catalogues document items whenever they come on the market, and collectors may enable rare items to be seen and displayed - but there is always the risk that things of heritage value leave the country and they will almost certainly leave the community in which they were commissioned, conceived or used.

Finally, agreement to sell depends also on how the proceeds are to be used. From the start, guidelines have insisted that these should be applied in a way commensurate with the significance of the items, a significance found both in their use as well as in the often costly witness of our forebears in the faith that they represent. To cite as example the recent case of the vessels from the old Trinity College Church (see centre pages), there the proceeds went towards seed capital for the Trinity Centre Project in Wester Hailes, which aims to provide community help and support to one of the most socially disadvantaged and deprived areas of the city of Edinburgh.

To facilitate these processes, forms and requests for detailed information are sent to the congregation.

Challenging the guidelines

In 1997, when the responsibility for dealing with such applications was passed to the Committee on Artistic Matters, the Board of Practice and Procedure commented that applications were likely to increase in number and that in due course a revision of guidelines might become necessary. Several factors have prompted the Committee to re-open discussion of this matter.

1 With the continuing rationalisation of church buildings some congregations are accumulating more items of communion ware than they feel able either to use or to care for. Even if there is a wish to make these accessible, many items are too valuable to display safely.

2 Both local and national museums are experiencing a severe restriction in funds for purchase. Also, as more examples are offered, storage space becomes limited. It may therefore become less likely that museums can assume responsibility for redundant Communion ware.

3 Some congregations are experiencing increased charges for storage. Practices vary, however. One bank contracts out its storage needs, and while the bank itself makes no charge in the case of churches and charities the security company concerned quotes fees for reclaiming items each time they are needed for use. Two of the other main banks retain items on the premises: while one makes charges beginning at a rate of £25 per annum with a small fee for removing and returning items, the other does not charge for churches and charities. Clearly shopping around is desirable but not every congregation has access to the full range of choice.

4 Some find that insurance is often difficult to arrange or too expensive to contemplate. This is a matter of proportion. The Church of Scotland Insurance Company advises that insurance is readily and easily obtainable, a typical annual cost being £22.50 per annum for an item valued at £10,000.

5 A final consideration is the increasing demand locally on financial resources. Contributions to stipend, repairs, the need to provide disabled access, outreach work, all these programmes can be chasing too little money. A congregation may be driven to consider something it would not in happier times contemplate.

Some practical considerations

Sometimes congregations may think the value of, say, the cups they have to sell is rather more than is in fact the case.

The insurance value is generally quite a bit higher than the market value, and it is important to know which is being quoted.

Even though the market value might seem tempting, the reality is often different. More items coming on the market can depress the prices realised. Some congregations recently have been disappointed in the outcome and the Committee's advice is often to stagger a sale, or to withdraw items if they do not reach a reserve and return to the matter a year or two, or more, later.

It should be remembered too that it is usual for an auction house to retain a percentage of the selling price, from 10%-15%. VAT is also deducted. It is wise to make as accurate a calculation as possible of the likely final income from such a sale before deciding to go ahead.

Recording our heritage

The General Assembly of 2001 instructed the Committee to undertake a pilot scheme by which the recording of the sacramental vessels held by the Church would be undertaken. This is a task famously begun by the Rev. Thomas Burns and published in *Old Scottish Communion Plate* (1892). In 1974 the then General Administration Committee, in conjunction with the National Museum of Antiquities, set out to make corrections and additions. Their survey was never completed.

Now the task has been undertaken again in a soundly based project. The intention is to identify those items which are of particular significance and whose disposal, if proposed, must be carefully managed. The pilot scheme is being carried through by the Committee's consultant for sacramental vessels, Kirkpatrick Dobie. Twelve presbyteries have already been surveyed. Each congregation is visited, and the sacramental vessels recorded and photographed. In these

local visits, congregations have welcomed the advice Mr. Dobie is able to give on managing the items they hold, in terms of use, insurance, storage, care and, where relevant, the possibility of disposal.

In attempting to meet today's circumstances, when a congregation might have need of resources and seek to dispose of items of heritage value, the Committee has explored the possibility of creating a central holding place for such sacramental vessels a) where they could be seen and appreciated, and b) so that congregations could have the use of their value, or part thereof. This follows a similar proposal to an earlier Assembly (above p.5) that treasuries be established in several centres. Sadly, after discussions with other Boards and bodies within the Church, this has not turned out to be practical. It is noteworthy that some cathedrals in England and on mainland Europe have their own treasuries, assisted by external funding. The Committee will continue to pursue solutions of this kind, and any others which might help the Church reconcile the need to be responsible conservers of our heritage with our obligation of witnessing to the Gospel in our day and age.

A practical postscript: the care of sacramental vessels

Silver and silver-plated vessels should be treated in the same way. Once they have been cleaned using either a long term polish or proprietary polish - but not jeweller's rouge (all cleaners are abrasive and as such remove a layer of silver at each cleaning), the items should not require any further polishing. They should be washed before and after use with warm soapy water, then rinsed with clean water and dried with a soft cloth. For storage, items should be wrapped in acid-free paper or cloth to avoid tarnishing, and stored in dry conditions.

Where pewter has been cleaned on a regular basis this should be continued. Items which have not been cleaned should only be dusted or wiped with a damp cloth and then dried. Where pewter has started to degrade and is showing blisters or flaking, advice should be sought. Pewter **must** be stored or displayed in dry conditions. It is recommended that all items should be stored in rigid containers to avoid crushing and subsequent damage.

Additional advice on care can be accessed through the office of the Committee on Church Art and Architecture.

The Committee on Church Art and Architecture is based in the Church Offices in Edinburgh. It is staffed by the Rev Nigel Robb, Lynn Johnson, Anna Reid and Mrs. Anne White. Its address and telephone number are: The Church of Scotland, 121 George Street, Edinburgh EH2 4YN, tel. 0131 225 5722, fax. 0131 220 3113. Faxes should be marked for the attention of the Committee. Email address is wordoc@cofscotland.org.uk. Extra copies of this pamphlet may be obtained from the office, price 50p.