

RE-ORDERING CHURCH INTERIORS



An information leaflet from the
Committee on Church Art and Architecture
of the Church of Scotland
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“ We shape our buildings, and then they shape us.”
Is it true, as this observation by Sir Winston Churchill suggests, that the kind of Church we are is, to some extent at least, formed by the physical surroundings in which we gather Sunday by Sunday?

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This pamphlet is based on the Report of the Committee to the General Assembly of 2000. Central section, 'Valuing our Heritage', by John R. Hume, Convener of the Committee.

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

CONTENTS

Space for a living church

| | |
|--|----------|
| <i>A building speaks</i> | <i>4</i> |
| <i>Why change?</i> | <i>5</i> |
| <i>Change is not a modern phenomenon</i> | <i>6</i> |
| <i>Ten guiding principles</i> | <i>7</i> |
| 1. Listen to the 'messages' the building already carries | 7 |
| 2. The imagination should have an important place | 8 |
| 3. What's done should be well done | 9 |
| 4. A church building is not a home from home | 10 |
| 5. The building may be asked to speak for us in our absence ... | 20 |
| 6. Other possible uses should be kept in mind | 20 |
| 7. What is it that makes alteration desirable | 21 |
| 8. The need for architectural continuity | 22 |
| 9. The alteration proposed should be the right one for you | 23 |
| 10. We are only the latest in a long line, not the last | 23 |

Valuing our heritage

Getting the most from the givencentre pages

Postscript

Why don't we just whip out all the pews? 25

Coming later from the Committee on Church Art and Architecture a book of illustrations and text with examples of alterations to churches in Scotland and beyond, to help congregations consider their own buildings and plan for the future with imagination.

SPACE FOR A LIVING CHURCH

A building speaks

“We shape our buildings, and then they shape us.” Is it true, as this observation by Sir Winston Churchill suggests, that the kind of Church we are may be partly formed by the physical surroundings in which we gather Sunday by Sunday? To use the same word - *church* - for building and people as we do, so often confusing, also makes this important connection.

What are some of the features of the building that speak to us about our life as a church? The prominence of the pulpit can emphasise the necessary alliance of faith with understanding. A simple interior, devoid of image or adornment, may affirm a God to whom each Christian person has direct access without need of intermediary. Clear glass directs the eye outwards towards the urban or rural landscape where today's disciples witness to the Kingdom of God already taking shape. The changing colours of the pulpit fall offer to keep the worshipper engrossed in the unfolding gospel drama.

Of course, misleading messages can also be given: the lofts and aisles which affirmed social division; the arrangements of seating which allow only surreptitious or sidelong eye contact; narrow vestibules which prevent people meeting; the height of a ceiling which, without balancing features, seems to suggest a God who is too grand for the likes of us; flamboyant furnishings which speak more loudly of a pride in human prosperity and achievement than of the instruction to sell all and give to the poor.

Both lists could be extended almost indefinitely, but even these examples may be enough to suggest how thoughtfully we need to approach the matter of making physical changes to our church buildings, as an increasing number of congregations find themselves doing. Reasons given are varied: space for greater participation in worship, room for people to meet, better access for disabled worshippers, the provision of crèche facilities, a level of comfort more in line with contemporary expectations.

What we should guard against doing is to reach automatically for the 'alterations option' when faced with declining numbers but unsure what to do. It is by no means necessarily the case that to replace an older interior will make the church somehow more effective. It may well be that other features of a congregation's life require attention before tackling the building in which it meets.

Why change?

In a recent book¹, Richard Giles notes how the producers of a recent television drama set in Edwardian England had to dismantle every sign of modern life when filming in the village street, but inside the village church there was nothing that needed to be changed. For him this is an illustration of the way the Church can cling to the past, unwilling to adapt to modern life.

For some congregations this may be so, but there is plenty of evidence today that in Scotland congregations are thinking creatively and sensitively about the buildings they have inherited. In asking serious questions about their life and witness today they have often found that their buildings do not support them in the initiatives they wish to take.

Many are aware of the close relationship which existed between church and local community in the past and wish to recapture that, but they find that their buildings, which they know so well, seem unwelcoming and inflexible to others.

Others recognise that the characteristic layout which prevailed when their church was built, where listening and learning was paramount, need modification in this more actively participative age. They take the view that the healthiest congregations are ones where people can relate to each other - in study, in debate, in social gathering, in counselling, and in prayer - very difficult when there are no suitable meeting places.

People may also feel that their sanctuary is restricting. The more active and costly a congregation's outreach and service, the more it asks from its worship. New themes, new participants, new questions may pull at the old forms. Better interaction between worshippers may imply different seating arrangements. Different demands are made on the available space.

¹ Richard Giles, *Re-pitching the Tent: Re-ordering the Church Building for Worship and Mission* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, revised and expanded edition 1999).

Change is not a modern phenomenon

If what is happening today can be identified as a trend, then it is only the latest in a number of sea changes which have in previous decades and centuries altered the face of our church interiors.

The configuration with pews facing forward, looking towards the relocated pulpit or a “liturgical space” is so common today that we may think of it as the norm. Yet this in many buildings displaced an earlier pattern which had been understood as best expressing the beliefs of the post-Reformation Church, typically a rectangle or a T-shape with the pulpit on the long wall and often incorporating a long communion table. Professor Reymond, in the Church Service Society's Centenary Lecture in 1997,² characterised this as the “Reformed choral square”, which enabled the people to hear and see the preacher and facilitated congregational singing.

Reymond gives as a reason for the now more typical length-wise shape the growing importance of the sermon in eighteenth and nineteenth century evangelicalism and the desire of preachers to have eye contact with individuals in the congregation. Another reason was the greatly increased number of worshippers.

Then there was the Scots Gothic Revival (see p.17 on the ecclesiological movement), which arose from a new interest in the mediaeval church, whose typical layout came to be seen as making for the sense of mystery that was understood to be part of true worship.³ These beliefs, later focused in such bodies as the Scottish Ecclesiological Society, seemed unassailable at the time. Although interiors of great beauty and fine workmanship were the frequent result, some commentators in retrospect see losses as well as

² Bernard Reymond, “The Reformed Worship Buildings: Architectural and Theological Meanings”, *The Record*, Church Service Society, Pentecost 1998, Vol. 34, 1-43.

³ Simon Green, “Nineteenth Century”, in Stell, G. (ed.), *The World of Worship*, Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments, 1999, 33-34.

gains.⁴ Sonia Hackett and Neil Livingston go as far as to say: “Ecclesiological developments at the turn of the 19th century meant, in general, a departure from the Scottish tradition. Few churches survived unchanged, and alterations were often tasteless and carried out in ignorance of the quality of the work that was destroyed”.⁵

Reference to these developments is not made here in judgement or celebration but simply to note that even when a movement seems so obviously unassailable, its momentum can carry things further than may be warranted. It is desirable that in the face of proposed changes today we should not be wise after the event but think through proposed changes so that they do not give rise to later regrets.

Ten guiding principles

When changes are proposed, it will be borne in mind that, like a new colour dropped into an existing palate, even a small change will alter the aspect of the whole building. In this list, an important omission is reference to the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995. The particular issues related to this are explored in the Committee’s pamphlet *Open Church* gives and readers are encouraged to study this. What, then, are some of the considerations that should be borne in mind when changes are contemplated?

1. *Listen to the 'messages' the building already carries*

According to the first *Book of Discipline* (1560), Reformed worship required “a bell to convocate the people together, a pulpit, a basin for baptising, and tables for ministration of the Lord’s Supper”.⁶ Apart from these furnishings, there can be little doubt that the buildings themselves, through the instinct and faith of architect or builder, also bore meanings that were not lost on worshippers. These unspoken signals remain, even when the details of the furnishings and fitments have changed.

⁴ James Whyte remarks that “some [churches] suffered more from nineteenth century ‘restorers’ than they did from the iconoclasm of the Reformers” (“The Setting of Worship”, in Duncan Forrester and Douglas Murray, *Studies in the History of Worship in Scotland* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984, rev. 1996), 160).

⁵ Sonia Hackett and Neil Livingston, “Scottish Parliamentary Churches and their Manses”, in David J. Breeze, *Studies in Scottish Antiquity* (Edinburgh: John Donald Ltd.), 324.

⁶ Quoted in Geoffrey Stell, “Post-Reformation Period”, in Stell, G. (ed.), *The World of Worship*, Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments, 1999, 23.

Professor Reymond, already mentioned, points out what a large statement was being made at the Reformation when the many altars and their accompanying images were removed to create one worshipping space. Reformed interiors were not neutral; they may have been emptier, but the changes made were “enterprising and audacious” and made the aims of the Reformation understandable to ordinary people.⁷ They spoke of the people as being the actors rather than the audience in worship, a people gathered round Christ the living Word, a people nourished at his hand, a baptised people on the journey of faith.

Before planning any alterations, we need to engage with our own buildings and get the feel of why they are the way they are. We need to research the reasons for the shape of the space and the layout of the furnishings. Certain features may have a history attached - a box pew in a particular place, a pew that adapts to become a table, the extra compartment added to the pulpit, the painted pews (we should not assume that they were originally plain). Other features may have a liturgical function, like coloured frontals for the Table or the location and orientation of the choir. That is not at all to say that such things must necessarily be left the way they are; it is rather to say that often the building in its present form can help us achieve what we wish.

2. *The imagination should have an important place*

Church buildings help the people of God to recognise their own Christian identity and guide them into relationship with God and with the world. A strong dose of imagination is required for the worshipper to grasp the promises of God and to see his/her place within them, and this can be stimulated by freshness and creativity in our surroundings. Millar Patrick, among other things convener in the 1930s of what was then called the Advisory Committee on Artistic Questions, speaks of the “divining rod of the imagination”,⁸ as much an essential instrument of thought as reason itself. “If you are to teach the truth of Scripture you must maintain a constant play of the imagination over the symbolic language it uses”.

⁷ Reymond, 3.

⁸ Millar Patrick, “Pulpit and Communion Table”, *Church Service Society Annual* 1932-33, 8.

Stained glass window, mural, mosaic, the colours and designs of pulpit falls or table frontals, tapestry, organ case, carving, these and other artefacts add to the hearing of the gospel and offer to lodge it more securely in the mind. These should not be random additions and care needs to be taken so that they belong together, and with the building, so that the whole is itself a “harmonised canticle of praise”.⁹

A recent Art and Christian Enquiry leaflet underlines the place of the imagination in the preparation, and the context, for worship and suggests that this has a marked influence upon people even if they are not aware of it.

Worship calls out all our sensibilities. We expect words and music to engage us. We are worked upon, often unconsciously, by architecture. Painting and sculpture each in their different ways also have the power to draw us deep into the understanding and the believing which belong to worship. The church building has therefore been a vital and critical setting for works of art created specially for it.¹⁰

3. What's done should be well done

Some of the detail on our older buildings is astonishing and is evidence of a real pride before God in the craft that someone has practised. Indeed, for some, their craft was their prayer. Subsequent worshippers have appreciated the detail they have observed. Not only that but the care expended has contributed to the lasting quality of a furnishing or fitment, not to mention the continuing effectiveness of a well made building.

To hand on this devotion in our own day, we should be prepared to find that what we want to do may cost a good deal, not simply in financial terms but also in effort, imagination, and patience. A project may seem to take too much time to find its best form, as it moves through local and central committees and as sketches turn into plans which turn into blueprints. However, this is no less than is required by a gospel which both demands more than we can easily give but also offers more than we could ever demand.

⁹ *Re-pitching the Tent*, 57.

¹⁰ *New Art for Church Buildings*, London: Church House Publishing.

Such good craft work applies not only to the grand design but also to the detail. A taxi driver in Lahore remarked to a member of the Committee on Artistic Matters, referring to the country's great buildings: 'The Moguls began as giants and finished as jewellers'. The effect of a building on the worshipper results not from any one circumstance but from an accumulation of carefully wrought detail. There is a passage in the book of Exodus (chapter 28) which describes the vestments to be worn by the priests in the Tabernacle - the aubergine and turquoise colour of their embroidered robes, and the bells round the hem of the gown which reassured the laity outside that prayers continued to be made on their behalf. Although not applicable in its particulars to our situation, the passage carries the suggestion that it is worth paying attention to detail, that a building is not just a shell with seating but that many elements come together to give the worshipping space its special character.

4. A church building is not a home from home

One of the major temptations in considering alterations is to try to make the church more 'comfortable', more in keeping with the 'look' of contemporary public or domestic spaces. There is nothing wrong with this impulse in itself; nowadays we know that a certain level of comfort is necessary for us to function fully, for everyone and not just those who move with difficulty or whose age or ailments make prolonged sitting difficult. Taken too far, however, this can fight against the purpose of a church building.

One of the prime purposes of the building is to help constitute a *church* out of a random gathering of people. They are so designed as to point us beyond our natural human togetherness, our 'membership' of each

con. p.19

Central Section

***VALUING
OUR
HERITAGE***

Getting the most from the given

John R. Hume OBE
formerly Chief Inspector of Historic Buildings
Historic Scotland

Reasons for remembering

Why be concerned about the heritage of the church? There we see evidence of the continuity of belief; there is enshrined the evidence of the care expended by our forebears; there, also, is a record of change – in patterns of worship and of the details of belief, of the changing place of the church in the lives of the people.

Our churches are the product not only of the time when they were built, but also of the attitudes of the changing times since they were built. Most churches have been altered in some measure since they were constructed, many of them again and again. An old church may have been in existence for half a millennium or more, and during that time has seen fashions come and go, while still serving the needs of a worshipping and witnessing church.

The purpose of this section is to remind congregations and their members of the many strands of heritage that make up the Church of Scotland today and to outline the ways in which these strands can be recognised in church fabric. It is hoped that this will be an encouragement to treat the heritage of our churches with respect and to consider very carefully the merits of what is there, before rushing to discard it.

Some church interiors can benefit from radical redesign, but in many cases it is possible to provide worship space for modern aspirations without completely discarding existing historic fabric. In a few cases it may be more appropriate to keep a very interesting and important interior little altered, or even unaltered, and to work with existing layouts and fittings, but such churches will be rare.

The earlier centuries

Leaving aside the hermits' cells intended for single-person worship, Christian churches before the Reformation were intended to accommodate the priest (or priests) offering the sacrifice of the Mass, and also one or more gatherings of worshippers who were in one way or another witnesses of this event.

In a parish church, with only one priest, there was generally an altar at the east end of the church, with the gathering of worshippers standing or sitting so as to face the altar. The particular role of the priest as celebrant was often recognised not only in the layout in the church but also in the shape of the enclosing walls. The common division was one into two: nave for the worshippers, and chancel to house the priest and his acolytes. Sometimes an apse was added to the end of the chancel, giving three spaces.

Another possibility was the construction of transepts, giving a cross-shaped layout. In Abbey churches transepts allowed altars to be installed on the east walls, giving monks who were also priests the opportunity to celebrate the Mass simultaneously. In many smaller churches, especially in Western Scotland, altar, priest and congregation shared the same rectangular space.

Regardless of the layout, however, an east-end altar, with the priest facing it, and worshippers watching, seems to have been common to all pre-Reformation worship. In the abbey churches of orders, such as the Cistercians, with brethren in minor orders, as well as those in full priestly standing, the monks' and 'lay' brothers' worship spaces seem generally to have been separated. In parish churches and cathedrals there seem to have been pulpits, centrally placed.

The Reformation

The extent to which the layout of worship space changed after the Reformation is unclear. It certainly looks as though there were two strands of thought in the reformed Church of Scotland. One favoured minimal alteration, and it is likely that most churches initially substituted a communion table for the altar, and turned the Mass into Communion, having the minister facing the congregation. The pulpit seems to have remained in the centre of the worship space.

The other strand favoured central celebration of Communion, as well as preaching of the Word, and some churches may have been adapted to suit that approach. The only church likely to have been

built specifically with these principles in mind is Burntisland, although the evidence there is not unequivocal.

After James VI went to England in 1603, he decided that the presbyterian form of church government, established after the Reformation, should be supplanted by episcopacy. This was duly implemented, in 1605, largely through George Home, Earl of Dunbar. It seems increasingly likely that the model for Scottish episcopacy was not, however, Anglican, but rather Lutheran, and Danish Lutheran at that. This would not be surprising given that James VI's wife, Anne, was sister to Christian IV, King of Denmark, a country where a Lutheran state church had been happily in existence for the best part of a century, and where the church was, with public acceptance, a part of the polity of the state.

It certainly seems that, with some exceptions, churches built between 1605 and 1690, when Presbyterianism was re-established, were laid out for east-end celebration of Holy Communion, often in a chancel, as at the Tron Church, Edinburgh, and the Canongate Kirk, now also within the city bounds. The exceptions may include Greyfriars Church, Edinburgh, as originally constructed, and almost certainly include New Cumnock Parish Church (1659) built during the Cromwellian interregnum. New Cumnock, in upland Ayrshire, was built in an area where Covenanters were influential.

The Presbyterian form of church government was restored in 1690, following the ousting of James VII for his Roman Catholicism, and his replacement by William III, Prince of Orange, and his wife, Mary. The architect of the reintroduction was William Carstares, a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church who had been chaplain to William in Holland. Carstares appears to have been anxious to distance the presbyterian Church of Scotland from its episcopal predecessor, and this could be achieved by adopting the Dutch Reformed Church layout, with a central pulpit and a space for the celebration of Holy Communion in front of it. As many of the ministers who were to serve the re-established Presbyterian church

had been in Holland, this type of worship would have been familiar to them.

Initially the sacrament seems to have been celebrated in an enclosure in front of the pulpit, marked off by partitions which could be used for ordinary seating except when Communion was being celebrated, when it had a table or tables set up, groups of communicants sitting round the table in relays. In the early 19th century, this arrangement led to the permanent installation of long communion tables, capable of accommodating larger numbers of communicants, either across the church in front of the pulpit, or along the church in line with the pulpit.

The construction of churches and their upkeep was the responsibility of the town councils in the burghs, and of the landowners in the country. This led the councillors and the landed families to instal their own pews, often in a gallery – hence the ‘laird’s loft’, but sometimes in box-shaped pews, or other enclosures.

Growth, schism and reunion

As the population grew, and in particular as non land-owning wealth increased, there was both a need for larger churches and for more of them. Pressure was obviously greatest in the towns, but in some rural areas, notably in the Highlands and Islands, population growth and concentration created a need for new churches.

To some extent the Church of Scotland itself made provision for new needs, but its ability to respond was qualified by the fact that the parish was not only a division of the country for church purposes, but also for local government purposes. At first ‘chapels of ease’ were built, coming under the supervision of the Kirk Session of the parish church, though in the cities there was some limited creation of new parishes. In the Highlands and Islands, in the late 1820s, ‘Parliamentary Parishes’ were carved out of existing parishes, with churches, manse and stipends part-funded by central government.

Alongside the development of the Church of Scotland was the creation of parallel denominations established, on presbyterian

lines, by ministers and laymen who objected to the right of the landowners and town councils to appoint ministers, which went with their duty to provide the buildings. The first of these was the Glasite church, followed by the Original Secession which itself split in a bewildering fashion during the 18th century before substantially recombining in 1820 as the United Secession Church.

Another major denomination was the Relief Church, mainly established in burghs, which eventually combined with the United Secession in 1847 to form the United Presbyterian Church. The buildings constructed by these various churches were generally simple structures, both for reasons of financial constraint and of principle. Most were on broad rectangular plans, often with galleries. Arrangements for Communion seem to have been similar to those in Church of Scotland churches.

By the time of the creation of the United Presbyterian Church, however, the Church of Scotland had itself split in a dramatic manner, ostensibly over the issue of the right to appoint ministers, though the divide was also on 'moderate'/'evangelical' lines. Those ministers who formed the new Free Church of Scotland in 1843 walked out of church building, manse, and stipend, and the new church had to find all three, very quickly. The result was the construction of a large number of new buildings, as cheaply as possible. Many of these were, however, replaced or substantially rebuilt in the following years.

The existence of three major presbyterian denominations in Scotland between 1847 and 1900 (when the United Presbyterian and Free churches amalgamated, for the most part, to form the United Free Church), led to competitive church building, denominations vying with each other, and with the now officially recognised Scottish Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches who built places of worship which advertised their claim to legitimacy and attractiveness to potential members. It was partly competition for members that led, in the Church of Scotland 'continuing', to the introduction of church organs and choirs, though the United

Presbyterians, and later also the Free Church, also followed this route. Each of the major churches really had to emphasise their distinctiveness, and this meant developing meaningful distinctions one from another.

In the Church of Scotland, which saw itself as the Established Church in a very meaningful sense, this resulted in shared interests with the parallel established Church south of the Border, the Church of England. This was most obviously expressed in a Scottish equivalent to the Oxford Movement in the Church of England. This so-called 'ecclesiological movement', though it had complex roots, was based on a study of the medieval church and the way it worked as a place of worship. It laid stress on the active use of worship space during services, with the minister, or priest in the Church of England, using pulpit, lectern, prayer-desk and Communion table in a 'ritual' manner, to emphasise by movement round the building the significance of different parts of an ordered service. The construction of new churches to reflect this strand of thinking began in Scotland in the 1880s, and the adaptation of existing churches was more or less contemporaneous.

The practical effect on church design was the movement of the pulpit from the central position it had occupied since 1690, to one side (the left), the movement of the Communion table to the end of the 'chancel', where it became the equivalent, as a visual focal point, of an altar, and the positioning of a lectern and sometimes a prayer desk opposite the pulpit, on the right hand side of the 'chancel'. Larger churches arranged in this way usually had an organ, on one side or other of the chancel (occasionally at the rear), and choir stalls on one or both sides of the chancel, between the pulpit and the Communion table.

This layout became almost standard in the Church of Scotland, both for new construction and for re-ordering, up to 1929, when the church joined with the United Free Church of Scotland (most of it) to become a re-united Church of Scotland. Between 1900 and 1929 the United Free had retained central pulpits, often with organs behind the pulpit, as a characteristic of its new buildings. The re-united church, however, adopted the 'ecclesiological' model

for the new churches built in the 1930s, mostly in new housing areas.

After the Second World War, money was tight, building materials were scarce, and there was an urgent need for new churches in the housing schemes that were springing up round Scottish towns and cities to replace older, decaying inner-city areas. Most of these were built as Church Extension churches, though some were 'translations' of inner-city churches and a handful were built with private benefaction. Almost all were brick built, many of them dual-purpose buildings, halls during the week and churches on Sundays. The 'chancel' areas were usually flattened, in the case of hall churches to make the maximum proportion of the building available for hall use. The layout generally was a faint echo of the 'ecclesiological', translated into an almost linear arrangement across the front of the church of the pulpit, table, lectern, font, and sometimes the choir stall. Both economy and changing theology led to very simple decorative treatments, sometimes carrying simplicity to the point of starkness. In the 1960s, however, the central planning, eloquently seen at Burntisland, was revived, notably at St. Columba's Glenrothes and St. Mungo's Cumbernauld.

Conclusion

The church buildings we have today, drawn from a complex net of traditions, embody in physical terms almost a millennium of ideas about worship, and taken together are firm evidence to both church-goers and to non-church-goers of the continuity of worship in Scotland during that period. They incorporate a spectrum of approaches to worship and belief ranging from the very simple to the richly ornate. All of these are responses to the interaction between the human and the divine which in its mystery is at the heart, not just of our churches and the way we use them, but of life itself. Taken together, they are fundamentally enriching, the whole being very much greater than the sum of the parts. Change is both inevitable and essential, but it is in the interests of the whole church that change is modulated by respect for and understanding of how we came to be where we are now. All those centuries of

human thought, feeling, and creative imagination about people's relationship with God demand the most thoughtful of responses.

other, to the truth that we are made 'members of Christ'. There will thus be something about the building and its furnishings that speaks of this wider dimension. Professor James Whyte speaks of a necessary 'foreignness' in a building which must express values that are at odds with many of the values round about.¹¹ Church buildings, in addition to practical considerations, 'speak of another realm and of loftier things'. They acknowledge that we are people on a journey rather than people tied to a particular place, while at the same time acknowledging the unchangeable nature of God. Thus the first *Book of Discipline* instructs us to make sure that the 'preparation within ... appertaineth as well to the Magestie of God as unto the ease and commodity of the people'.¹² There will be elements of 'difference' about such 'preparation' and, while it may acknowledge modern materials and design, it will not merely reproduce the spaces used in our common life in society.

There will therefore be elements of the provisional as well as the lasting, aspects that invite renewal and replacement as well as those which, if lost, we may lose our way. The temptation towards a domestic cosiness is to be avoided. Re-ordering is not about 'changing rooms' but expanding spiritual space. We therefore do seek merely to echo the surroundings we have become used to in our daily lives, the seminar room, the airport lounge, even the shopping mall, the front parlour.

A practical example of a change which threatens to earths a building too much in the here and now is the frequent desire to introduce carpeting. Its obvious attraction is that it can introduce colour in a dour building, but, whereas in a modern lecture theatre the intention is to allow people to listen in relaxed comfort, a church is a space not for an audience but for a community which are together in prayer and praise. A well carpeted building too often deadens the acoustic to an unacceptable degree, so that people feel that they are "singing into a giant sponge".¹³ Carpet may

¹¹ James A. Whyte, "The Theological Basis of Church Architecture", in Peter Hammond (ed.), *Towards a Church Architecture* (London: The Architectural Press, 1962), 186.

¹² J.K. Cameron, *The First Book of Discipline* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1972), 202.

¹³ Carl Schalk, "A Lament for Resounding Praise", *The Christian Century*, March 23-30, 1983, 269.

improve the appearance but it can literally stifle worship, effectively isolating individuals from each other when they sing.

5. *The building may be asked to speak for us in our absence*

It is true that in the Reformed tradition a church building was not seen as being in itself 'holy', nor were the items within it. Calvin warned against "imagining that churches are the proper dwellings of God" when it is Christian people who are the "true temples".¹⁴ However, a building will give intimations of its purpose and information about its inhabitants even when empty. *Scotland's Churches Scheme*¹⁵, albeit only recently inaugurated, now lists well over 700 churches which have arranged to be open to the public. The scheme is a reminder that more and more people today do not have a lively contact with a Christian congregation and only know the Church out of hours, relying on the building itself to speak to them and to assist them, perhaps, in coming into the presence of God.

For this reason, in considering alterations we should perhaps pay more heed to the ongoing witness of our buildings by seeking to incorporate welcoming areas (if not people) with information about the history of the building and the Christian traditions of the locality, as well as about the current custodians and their contemporary witness. Such hospitable spaces, with both the tourist and the curious local in mind, can not only bear information but carry an invitation.

6. *Other possible uses should be kept in mind*

Today, the cost of the upkeep of buildings is high, and there are sometimes too many buildings in one location. This has led some congregations to develop their buildings in the direction of alternative public use, receiving much needed income from the unique kind of venue that many churches can provide.

However, there are also questions of mission and witness. In a time when the people of the community are less likely to flock to their local parish church there may be ways of making them welcome in the context of community use, either in direct outreach or in enabling other groups (e.g.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes*, III, xx, 30.

¹⁵ The seventh edition of the Guidebook (2002) records that 118 new churches have joined the scheme since the previous year, making 765 in all. *Churches to Visit in Scotland* (NMS Publishing) is available from bookshops at £7.50.

addressing various kinds of need) to have the space they need to pursue their aims. In this way, not only will people become used to going in and out of their parish church but the church may be enabled to serve the community by providing hospitable space for wider activities. Whether it allows the church to be used for asylum seekers or support groups, or whether it encourages the life of the arts and the imagination, such forward thinking can be a signal to the community that the church cares for it and seeks to know it better.

Another consideration is the possible use of the church by people of other Christian traditions. Today, with greater mobility, it is common for people of one background to move to a place where the only church is in another tradition. These may easily join in with what they find, but in some areas members of a specific ethnic/religious group may seek to continue their own style of worship in a borrowed building. Further, with the aforementioned restrictions, it may not only be desirable from an ecumenical standpoint but the only practical solution in certain circumstances for more than one denomination to share one building.

With all these factors in mind, congregations considering possible alterations to their buildings would do well not to approach this in any narrow sense, but ask whether now might be the time to prepare constructively for future eventualities, in terms both of creating a setting for worship and providing open access.

7. What is it that makes alteration desirable?

It was suggested above that it can be too easy in response to anxiety about the numerical strength or the age distribution of the congregation to reach for the alterations option, believing that physical change will change our fortunes. This may contribute, but the church is a human community and any renewal must first and foremost reside in who we are and how we conduct our life together.

When it is clear that physical change in the environment is desirable, it is important to be as specific as possible about what the needs of the congregation actually are. 'Flexibility' is often mentioned, but flexibility to do what? Quite a lot more may be possible in your building as it stands, without the need of alteration. However, when development is indicated,

being specific about things that you wish to see can lead to far more satisfactory changes than can be the case if one simply follows the fashion, say, for removing all the pews (see 'Postscript' p.25) or screening off the space under the gallery.

One way of approaching these matters is for a group to be set up to monitor the practices of the congregation and to make plans, perhaps after assessing the needs of different interest groups (age-related, choir and musicians, minister and any other leaders of worship, organisations, community groups, always remembering to take into account those who at the moment 'never darken the doors of the kirk'). Then the work of matching the various needs and visions to the existing space can begin.

8. The need for architectural continuity

Reference to the centre pages of this pamphlet will underline the truth that there is no one 'Church of Scotland' style of building, even though there might be many examples of this type or that. Each shape or style, even the simplest, is based on a design whose details and features which together contribute to the impact the building has on the user.

Sometimes a congregation is tempted to propose an alteration - for example, the clearing of a particular area to create more flexible space - which may seem to meet immediate needs but which fights against the building as a whole. A symmetrical style of building may be rendered lopsided by emptying one side of furnishings or indeed by filling in another side by a screen. This is not just in theory; when it is done, members of the congregation may feel this in practice, as physical as a draught. A building may have a focus that the alteration disrupts, with a resultant feeling of disorientation. Or it may derive its grace from straight lines, and not sit happily in an arrangement which features curves or circles (or *vice versa*).

This is by no means to say that the aims of the congregation cannot be met. It is just to say that there are ways of achieving solutions which are pleasing because they actually capitalise on the existing features of the building. Sometimes of course, creativity, patience and lateral thinking is required before the solution emerges! It is good to look at what other congregations have done because it stimulates the imagination and helps to clarify aims, but at the same time it is not necessarily the case that their solution is right for you. Your own version might look very different.

Occasionally, of course, an aim just cannot be met, but - again - even this can be the right solution, in that it could lead to an enforced change of practice whose advantages in time are appreciated. For example, no-one has laid down that 'all-age worship' means having children gather at the front at one point in the service; there are many other ways of valuing children and enabling them to participate - perhaps even better ones.

9. *The alteration proposed must be the right one for you*

It is a good plan to visit congregations who have made successful changes. It helps to see what can be done. However, what is being examined is what worked in that particular building. (Of course, you may also be examining something that local people - or you as visitors of course - feel hasn't worked very well, and something is learned from that.) It does not follow that that particular solution will work in your building.

Reasons why this might be so are often quite practical: too low a roof for a horizontal division; a different shape of gallery; the way the windows are arranged; a slope on the floor; where the attention is focused. There may also be historical imperatives, a feature which if removed could lead to a sense of loss. Congregations have different identities, their homes are varied in feel and furnishing, and the shape of their mission takes its character and content from the context in which they witness.

10. *We are only the latest in a long line, not the last*

One dimension of this is conservation, and here we are talking of more than design. In its Report to the General Assembly of 1999, the Committee acknowledged the tensions that often lay between creating "space for a living church" and our responsibility towards those who have gone before and those who will follow after.¹⁶ We are both nourished by the heritage we have received, and we have it in our power to nourish the church of the future. There is across our land quite an extraordinary variety of settings for worship, and across the landscape of our history a similar variety of practice. The buildings we have inherited enshrine both. There is a sense in which each individual congregation does not have *carte blanche* in making alterations, since it may be that it is the proud custodian of the only,

¹⁶ *Reports to the General Assembly*, 1999, 16.1-2.

or the most eloquent, example of some artefact or arrangement which reflects something of the past life of church and nation. Thus, to approach the matter only from the point of view of the needs of the contemporary church may not be the best course of action.

Conservation in its truest sense, however, will not necessarily consist merely in leaving well alone. James Whyte writes: "A congregation which is alive will want to do more than simply preserve its building. Some of the most pleasing of our ancient buildings are those where each generation has left its mark, enriched its heritage, and one can read something of history and of present reality in the wood and stone. But this possibly happens only when there is real respect and understanding of what has gone before".¹⁷ We should bear in mind too that a building's scars may be as noble and as interesting as the most carefully preserved of its features.

The Committee believes that the duty of conservation is an important ingredient in its responsibilities and that any re-ordering of an interior or change to an exterior of a church building must, as far as possible, be appropriately continuous with what is presently the case. It works equally hard to make it possible for local churches to modify their buildings so as to be more effective in the Church's witness and worship in the present day, when appropriate changes and developments may be hindered by buildings designed for a different era. Neither consideration should unilaterally dictate the outcome. Rather, solutions must be sought by which the historical and theological record that the building itself enshrines can contribute positively to the desired contemporary outcome.

There are of course very many instances where there is no conflict between heritage and contemporary witness. In other cases, a delicate balance must be struck. Sometimes the best solution is to make the feature that should be retained work to the advantage of the contemporary situation. This is achievable in more circumstances than one might imagine. It is not always the case that space has to be cleared for anything new to happen. A televised service one New Year was of worship at its most exuberant from an African setting in a building solidly populated with pews! Talking of which ...

¹⁷ James A. Whyte, "The Setting of Worship", in Duncan Forrester and Douglas Murray, *Studies in the History of Worship in Scotland* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1996), 167.

APPENDIX

Why don't we just whip out all the pews?

Proposals for the removal of some pews from a building frequently come before the committee and usually have a positive outcome. As regards the rarer proposals for the removal of all pews from building, or all from the downstairs area, the issues may be more complex. Arguments put forward against pews include:

1. For some, the very existence of pews speaks of a church that is out of date and unable to change. Pews, it is believed, recall the days when the desire was to fit as many people in a building so as to be addressed by a preacher, whereas today the dynamic is different.
2. In a less than packed church pews contribute to the dispersal rather than the gathering together of people, since people thus arranged feel less confident about 'singing out' and may feel they are participating less in worship.
3. Although their arrangement may have been originally intended to gather a people round pulpit or table, to many, pews militate against a feeling of fellowship, as people stare at the backs of the heads of those in front.
4. Once, where the 'named' pews of farm or family were eloquent of the bringing of the life of the world under the aegis of the Gospel, today many fear that this personalising of the pew can cause visitors to feel uneasy about usurping someone else's place.
5. With the propensity for people to sit towards the back of the church, the minister can feel isolated and out of touch with the congregation.
6. Although once a welcome place to sit where, before, churches had few furnishings, many in our day find pews uncomfortable, rigid and unwelcoming, physically as well as in their appearance.

An interesting slant on the question comes from the Orthodox Church in the USA in whose buildings pews are increasingly being introduced where before there was only open space. An article published on the internet deplors: the way pews teach people to stay in their place, passively watching what is going on; the invitation they provide to people to 'sit back and relax'; their destruction of the traditional feeling of freedom and

movement; the way they fill up the open space in the middle of the building where clergy moved among the ever changing configuration of people, censing and processing - 'How can we dance with pews on the ballroom floor?' When one realises, however, that the article is equally attacking the filling of traditionally empty space with rows of chairs, we are reminded that many of the alleged faults of pews cited above are capable of being true also with chairs. Some instal chairs 'for greater flexibility' but they are rarely, if ever, moved. People may still sit at the back or scatter themselves throughout a building full of chairs just as much as they do with pews.

It is acknowledged that pews have not invariably been part of our tradition, as the alleged actions of Jenny Geddes remind us. Later, however, pews were part of the design of the interior and may often contribute to the distinctive appearance of a particular building. Even in cases where the existing pews are not original, they may be a particularly successful and pleasing addition. Again, the pews in a particular building may be a rare or unique survival of a liturgical or social characteristic of the time: box pews which remind us of the emphasis on the family unit, or the feudal structure, or the 'extended family' of the farm, or pews which were arranged in accordance with earlier practices of receiving Communion.

In sum, there are cases where the removal of all the pews may be acceptable - where they are particularly uncomfortable (although of course they could be replaced by redundant pews from another building as happily as by chairs), where a building has been re-orientated during its history, where the existing pews are not of great merit, or where there is a particular urgency relating to a congregation's present situation and opportunities. Frequently, a congregation will retain the front boards so that the integrity of the layout is preserved.

There are also cases, however, where such a course of action would be undesirable - where present and future generations would in the end be disappointed, where something of historical or aesthetic significance would be lost, where a theological or liturgical principle considered important to our tradition was being violated. All in all, the Committee approaches each proposal on its merits, working through the matter in close consultation with the congregation concerned, and in association with the General Trustees.

When the total removal of pews seems wrong in a particular case, other options have been found to recommend themselves to a congregation. Pews may be spaced more widely. The angle of their backs can sometimes be changed. A more comfortable set of pews may be obtained

from a redundant church. They may be reduced in number and the rows angled differently. Where the wood is of high quality, their appearance can be dramatically changed by cleaning off layers of paint and varnish and returning to the original finish, where appropriate. It is worth bearing in mind in this connection that in many cases the quality of materials and finishes of pews are higher than that found in modern chairs. It is also true that more people can be seated in pews than in chairs.

The Committee on Church Art and Architecture is based in the Church Offices in Edinburgh. It is staffed by the Rev Nigel Robb, Miss Lynn Johnson, Mrs Eva Elder and Ms 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.