

PEWS, BENCHES & CHAIRS



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24. The appropriate alternatives to fixed seating

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The opportunities

IF CHURCHES ARE INDEED amongst the most important buildings in the centre of any community, whether urban or rural, there is now an overriding need to re-establish that primacy. The church should be of service to all, so that its very space becomes a pair of open hands, to receive the whole community. Churches can become vital, flexible, living spaces, with services of different type, perhaps even of different denomination, through the week, and in addition have the opportunity of being a place for presentations, lectures, exhibitions, meetings and receptions, and of offering wider services such as community advice, or a 'caretaker' living within the environment and providing a constant presence.

In this way churches also benefit from an additional potential for income generation, although despite the claims of some, there is little evidence that the driving force behind the current popularity of these reorderings is solely economic. There exists a genuine desire to instigate fresh ideas and approaches.

It is to meet these (admittedly not universally celebrated) aspirations, that many seek to clear the existing fixed seating and general clutter of inherited furniture. (Though it should be said that for a variety of reasons removing fixed pews generally appeals less to Roman Catholics.) Much existing seating creates rigidity in every sense, while cluttering the simple lines of the architecture. After what may be years of deliberation by a church, one is constantly met with startled delight at the sense of space, clarity and opportunity that sweeping away the fixed seating has provided (Fig. 1). Add to that flexible lighting, to support different activities and moods, or under-floor heating to give a constant welcome and no amount of planning can prepare for the result.

It is sometimes pointed out that churches have removed their fixed seating and then barely ever changed the position of their new flexible seating. But this may not be an indication of the pointlessness of the exercise but of an inability to follow through the thinking and maximise the new potential.

Benches and chairs

While the most appropriate seating solution for any church depends upon churchmanship as well as architecture, forms of worship can and do change. Surveyors and architects, keenly aware of their long-term responsibility to the fabric, may live through a constant flow of incumbents and refurbishments. So in an ancient



Fig. 1: Interior of St Michael & All Angels, Kingsnorth, Kent, before and after reordering.

church, there is an argument for maintaining a set of traditional style seating, perhaps modern movable benches, in the central nave. This can provide constant seating for regular services with a minimal visual impact, while providing a clear indication of purpose to the casual observer when the church is not in use. Additional lightweight, stacking chairs, perhaps steel framed, can then be brought in when required (Fig. 2). With this arrangement, a stacking timber bench and a lightweight chair should provide for most church needs.

In general, the traditionally heavier timber chair (of the type originally designed by Gordon Russell for Coventry Cathedral) has a greater visual impact and can distract from the architecture and more important furniture (Fig. 3). Arguably, therefore, timber chairs are more appropriate to side chapels, where regular reconfiguring does not require the lighter more flexible form of seat.

There are fine stacking benches that have the lowest possible visual impact of any seating (Figs. 4a and 4b). There is also a question of cost, as the timber chair can be the most expensive option per person. The best designs in stacking benches can currently be obtained for around £200 per person and have a life expectancy of at least fifty years. No chair of equal quality can compete on price or longevity.



Fig 2 (left): One example of modern light weight, steel-framed, high stacking and comfortable seating with minimal visual impact (the 'Daylight' chair, by KI). Fig. 3 (right): Well-designed stacking oak seating in Canterbury Cathedral Chapter House. Designed by Luke Hughes, this chair's ancestry can be traced back to the seating designed by Gordon Russell for Coventry Cathedral.

Diocesan Advisory Committees and their equivalents in other denominations should discourage upholstered seating (and many do). It usually appears inappropriate in ancient churches, and the refurbishment costs soon become apparent to compound the aesthetic defects. Timber seating if well designed can be remarkably comfortable without upholstery.

Design

Good design is a balance between achieving minimal visual impact and harmony with the existing fabric. Modern CNC (Computer Numerical Control) routers ensure a flexibility of design never imaginable in the early days of mass production. Complex and original designs can be achieved by machine and hand finished, to provide unique effects at relatively low costs. It is a golden rule of minimalist design within a church setting that diagonals should be avoided in favour of horizontals and verticals, while detailing should show a structural integrity that is never gratuitous. The spirit of existing architectural detail is better emulated than slavishly copied and the best designers can achieve this by simply echoing a rhythm or a subtle curve.

Skill is also required in achieving a balance of scale. Too often modern seating designs have a heaviness reminiscent more of driftwood off the beach, while too spindly designs look inconsequential and apologetic.

Error can occur in the design of arms that may not even be necessary and will affect the stackability of benches. It is possible to design benches with a solidity that allows anyone requiring additional support to use the top rails in front and behind to lever themselves up and avoid completely the need for arms. Additionally, it is possible to design book rests under the seat that do not affect the stackability or spoil the appearance. However, many now argue that it is more practical to collect books and papers after a service and store them separately.

Weight is an important consideration in what is another balancing trick. Seating must obviously be substantial enough to last at least fifty years, while substance will also help a bench hold its position without the need for cumbersome looking or expensive linking devices. This increases safety but also avoids the need for time consuming repositioning of disordered seating. However, to remain a flexible space, the seating must be light enough to move easily. It must also be remembered that while an individual might carry a single chair, two may be able to handle a six-seater stacking bench, thereby vastly speeding up a reconfiguring process.

Unfortunately, as a result of ignoring a time-honoured tradition whereby only the finest craftsmanship was permitted in any church, we are now confronted by a wide range of inferior and ugly furniture. It fails on every level, as it will not last and confuses the visual and liturgical clarity within the space. Furthermore, it offends basic economic sense by throwing hard-earned cash at temporary measures.

Colour

Colour is a much underestimated factor in the success of any reordering. The first guiding principle is that careful attention should be paid to the intensity of hue. It is an inescapable fact that reorderings using high colour hues do not have the effect of lifting a dull interior. On the contrary, they will increase it by contrast. The low hues that time places upon the architectural fabric require subtle colour ranges to allow the natural richness to be revealed. This is particularly relevant to upholstery but also significant for timber, where oak has the colour traditionally considered most harmonious with the hues of an ancient church. Because of its fine figuring, richness of colour and durability, the appeal of oak is obvious but beech is also a strong contender, particularly as it is considerably cheaper.

Similarly, there is a tendency to consider staining new seating to match existing panelling or liturgical furniture. Staining can give a 'reproduction' effect and therefore appear somewhat apologetic, thereby compromising good design. Good reorderings adhere clearly to a strict hierarchy within any church, where the altar is at the pinnacle and the seating somewhere near the bottom. Although a full congregation might reduce the unfortunate visual impact of bad seating, churches are more often viewed empty and must therefore read best liturgically when so. Therefore slight variation in colour between seating and other furniture is not important. Also, as a rule, pale coloured timbers darken in time, while dark timbers bleach in the sun. However, there is an argument for applying a slight overall stain, to given an evenness of effect, where individual timber pieces might otherwise initially stand out.

Making the change

The length of time required from conception to achieving a reordering is not only affected by available funds but by the level of understanding within each church community.

Admittedly, there are churches where consultation is kept to a minimum and 'patriarchal' traditions prevail, but many require a lengthy process, perhaps over several years, to allow for consensus,



Fig. 4a: Interior of St George's, Bloomsbury, London, before the recent major refurbishment.



Fig 4b: St George's, Bloomsbury on completion of the work, with the new Luke Hughes mobile bench seating. The liturgical axis has been rotated through ninety degrees, and the previous position of the altar is off the photograph to the left.

and this itself can promote a consultative and open culture. It is important to consider other points of view and remain inclusive, as it is equally important to advise the appropriate authorising bodies of the proposals at the earliest stage. Incumbents regularly acknowledge that even the lengthy or laborious discussion of new plans is a worthwhile process in itself.

In conclusion. . .

The past few years have witnessed a sea change in attitudes to removing fixed seating in parish churches. Increasingly, the arguments don't have to be made for revitalising a church building in this way. Churches can become vital, flexible, living spaces. As never before, the church needs to reach out not only to those suffering particularly in these difficult times, but to all in the community.