

Flexibility since “The Battle of Ambridge”

by Anthony Russell

With the exception of a spirited “counter attack” by the evangelicals flank, it is often argued that like the monarchy, the Church of England has been fighting a rearguard action for many decades. A study by Christian Research has declared that over the next three decades, church attendance is likely to drop by two-thirds, resulting in the possible closure of over 18,000 churches. And this is not an exclusively Anglican phenomenon but mirrored by the Roman Catholic, Methodist and United Reformed Churches alike. Not that religious attendance itself will drop, as it is expected that the number of Muslims attending service at British mosques will be double that of Christians.

So follows the cry from many quarters that a real crisis looms and that though the buildings may survive, if unchecked, many will no longer be places of worship and only the best will be preserved as monuments of historic curiosity. Nature shows us that it is change that defines life, while our experience, that only vigilance ensures the constant presence of the Spirit. Without change, even as a gradual evolution, a slow death is inevitable and we are now seeing the results of much misplaced antagonism to change. Church buildings have suffered as a result, with leaking roofs, locked doors and cold services once a week for an aging congregation.

One might suppose the picture to be pretty grim, without much sign of anything to stem the tide. But those who spend much time traveling round the parishes and great churches will see green shoots of progress everywhere. There is a revival under way not always appreciated by the casual observer and seldom reported in the media. Many churches



are once again becoming alive with activity, remembering a time as the most important buildings at the centre of any community.

It is true that available funds, whether cash or capital, can inspire radical change for the better, but not always. There are cases of immensely wealthy churches unprepared to consider any change, while impoverished parishes with the vision, drive and know-how can raise funds from apparently nowhere and breathe new life into their spaces. So often, the funds available appear limitless to those prepared to chase them, where one great fundraising exercise can give the understanding and drive to undertake another. This is sometimes interpreted as unconditional love generating unlimited resources.

But with such ambition comes the conflict between the “reformers” and the “conservators”. Once the lead has been replaced on the roof, the guttering, windows and stonework restored, attention turns to the internal space and then so often the conflicting sentiments become markedly unchristian. Attention might then focus on the woefully inadequate and expensive heating system. There is the possibility of under-floor heating to consider but this is in itself a bold statement. Such systems cannot be activated half an hour before the Sunday service and then turned off to allow the church to return to the temperature of the graveyard for the rest of the week. It presupposes continual use and by its installation a church is saying, “we are always ready and welcoming”.

To some, such radical changes are merely the slippery slope to replacing the pews. To a great extent medieval pews or those fine examples contemporary with the building and designed by the same architect are safe. The several amenities groups are vigilant and rightfully so, if we are to safeguard posterity from excessive enthusiasm. In the words of the furniture designer Luke Hughes, “fine architecture is grossly undermined by bad

furniture” and this is felt today by architects and clergymen alike. The first great sin is clutter. With the best intentions, many parish churches have become depositories for an endless variety of mediocre furniture. Homely it may be but the DAC at its national conference warned against dumbing down church interiors, with the loss of liturgical clarity and in conflict with the architecture.

But it is generally with consideration to the removal of the pews that the arguments really start to heat. We all remember with amusement the all too contemporary dilemma faced by the Archer’s PCC at St Stephen’s Church in Ambridge, over whether to remove the fixed pews. The vicar’s desire for greater flexibility sparked a vociferous reaction from a highly motivated section of the village. In reality, the argument for retention usually focuses around the desire to preserve long cherished seating that was designed to fill the church to >??

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capacity when required, does not need the upkeep of upholstered chairs and avoids their cluttered effect. This is a strong argument and very often will have the support of a powerful and eloquent lobby within any community.

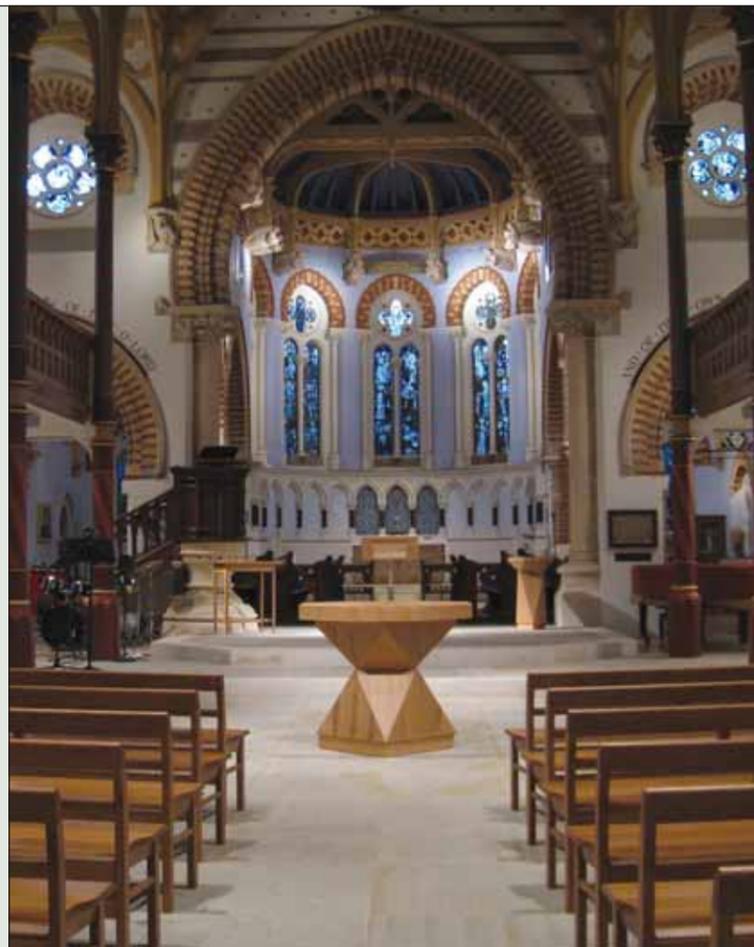
But even the Victorian Society feels that many 19th century pews are simply not worth the fight. Many are of undistinguished design, inferior timber and extremely uncomfortable. Others fill the church with an impenetrable labyrinth, designed for a very sedentary worship. For surely it is not that the Word no longer matters but that greater variety of activities (many familiar to a medieval worshiper), are returning and require space. One could also argue that fixed seating encourages regular occupancy of the same position, which can in itself lead to staid thought and inflexibility of mind, as any play group will contest.

Even when “conservator” and amenity groups agree about removal, the alternatives so often appear to be badly designed stacking chairs with (for some reason) florescent blue upholstery. However much one loves the colour blue (or bright red) or argues that it hides the scars of time best, ancient churches revolve around a set of subtle low hues and anything deviating from this dramatically, will have an adverse impact. Good reorderings adhere to a clear hierarchy of furniture, where the altar is at the pinnacle and the seating somewhere near the bottom. A full congregation might reduce the unfortunate visual impact of such seating, however churches are more often viewed empty and must therefore read best liturgically when so.

Not that the requirement to hide the scars of time is not a real issue and this is recognised by DACs who predominantly shy away from upholstered seating. Upholstery, other than leather, will begin to look shabby and soiled all too quickly, burdening subsequent PCCs with large reupholstery commitments. It is also true that where the design of chairs introduces new angles and leaves the perpendicular and horizontals, its impact is likewise increased. There are few chair designs that have the simple lines and low visual impact typical of pews. At the same time, the Victorians apparently understood that low hierarchy did not necessitate cheap looking options and they lavished on the humble seat the care and attention for which they were renowned. It is therefore regrettable that cost should be the overriding consideration of many a modern reordering and with results to match.

The cry for “flexibility” will not go away and comes predominantly from the church itself. There is a call for different styles of worship and greater social involvement with local communities. I notice from the clergy an almost willful determination to open this hornet’s nest for the sake of seeing progress. For it is understood that conflicting attitudes create challenges and from them new dialogue and fresh opportunities arise. There is also an understanding that radical change needs careful consideration and takes time; time to understand the true extent of the crisis facing the church; time to evaluate past failures and time to consider the best way forward.

Fortunately consistory courts are mercifully rare and either a compromise is reached with the possibility of inferior seating or nothing is done and the church must soldier on with the furnishing of a previous age. But if the existing pews must go and the cheap chair with its stark upholstery is condemned, there needs to be a viable alternative. There is as never before an overpowering need for seating well designed and constructed, with minimal visual impact and all the advantages



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of a traditional pew, yet with the capacity to stack and clear away. There is only one designer who has tackled this very dilemma head on and created what must be the world’s first “stacking pew”. It has been designed with the capacity for standard or bespoke detailing, standard or bespoke sizes. It is as comfortable as a non-upholstered timber seat can be and has the ability to store papers and books discretely and without affecting the stack-ability. In what is in effect a stacking bench, the “Charterhouse” combines in its design, respect for the existing architecture with clean modern lines. It still allows the church to achieve maximum capacity and also the friendliness that sharing a pew always implied. If, as often happens, examples of the original fixed pews can be retained somewhere in the church, then one can also achieve a sense of historic continuity.

Now new seating can have quality, character, comfort and flexibility, while giving a satisfactory resolution to the entrenched arguments. No wonder this ingenious solution is becoming the pride or envy of parishes throughout the country. ■

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