

Planning the Future of the Sanctuary

A discussion paper

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to facilitate discussion on how we see the interior of St. Michael's – the Sanctuary – best serving the current and future needs of the congregation and the wider community. This issue was being considered by the Church of Scotland centrally and also by individual churches before lockdown restrictions were imposed for COVID-19. However, the inability to use church buildings during the lockdown period, and the likely continuation of a number of the restrictions for a considerable period of time, suggest the need to accelerate this thinking.

In addition, the heating system within the church, while adequate for current needs, is fairly basic and less efficient than modern systems. The boiler was installed in 2001 and, on the assumption that it will require to be replaced within the next few years, the Property Team have already undertaken a considerable amount of investigative work into options for the design and installation of a new system. There is certainly potential to plan and install a system which is significantly greener and more cost-efficient. It makes sense to consider this in tandem with reviewing the current and future uses of the Sanctuary, and in the context of developing a new vision about St Michael's place at the heart of our community.

Background

St Michael's is widely considered to be one of the most important and beautiful church buildings in Scotland. Its present interior stems primarily from the efforts of Rev Dr John Fergusson at the end of the 19th century, who – under the influence of romanticism and an interest in liturgy – sought to restore the interior of the sanctuary to a similar form as existed prior to the Reformation.

The major difference between Fergusson's interior and that of the pre-Reformation sanctuary was the pews. Prior to the Reformation there was very little seating in the sanctuary and congregants would either stand for the Mass or bring their own portable seating. While we tend to think of them as being permanent fixtures of any church, pews were therefore an innovation - an innovation appropriate for the needs of the time.

After Fergusson's restoration, many other important and beautiful adornments have been made to the church, many funded by the Friends of St Michael's. These include, most notably, the gates to the porch and the St Katherine's Aisle window.

How the Sanctuary is Used

First and foremost, the Sanctuary is a place of worship. While other spaces are also used for communal worship – Springfield School, the Kirk Hall, the Adam Room, and not forgetting our recent experience of online worship – the church building is and should remain our primary place of worship. It is a very special space, with a special place in the hearts and minds of all who have shared the privilege of worshipping God together there.

Styles of worship, however, change and develop over time to meet changing needs. While formality, orderliness and unchanging forms were considered to be important means for approaching God and the spiritual dimension of life, these aspects now often act as a barrier to younger generations - who prefer more experiential and creative forms of worship - from experiencing God. Further, when we bear in mind that attendance at Church of Scotland services nationally has decreased by over 40% in the last 16 years, and that the Kirk's membership has fallen from 1.3 million in 1956 to 300,000 today, it is hardly surprising to find that many people in our community have no experience whatsoever of church worship, and no emotional connection at all with styles of worship that we may find comforting in their familiarity.

The church building also meets other requirements for St Michael's. It provides a place for fellowship where we can share our responses to worship and deepen relationships (all assisted by tea, coffee and biscuits). We have used it as a theatre for productions ranging from 'Joseph' to 'The Seed Must Die'. On occasions, it serves as the location for large meetings. And, of course, it is the venue for significant events such as weddings and funerals.

Looking more widely, Linlithgow is blessed with many community groups and events, and St Michael's is the largest extant single-space building in the town. Many civic functions are indelibly associated with the church building. It is used regularly by schools and by Linlithgow Arts Guild. We might consider whether such usage could be increased through changes to seating and greater flexibility of layout.

The Future

One question raised by many participants in the '2030: Our Story' workshops concerned the pews. Most church members may simply accept the pews as a given, since we have known nothing else in our lifetimes. This is a sensitive issue: many of us may link particular associations and family ties with specific pews. While acknowledging and respecting the strength of these ties, however, we should consider whether to plan to introduce greater flexibility into the layout of the church building at the same time as modernising our heating system.

The principal way to do this would seem to be by replacing the pews in the body of the building with robust but moveable seating. (The choir stalls and the seating around the communion table would remain unchanged.)

Experiences from Elsewhere

There may well be a feeling that an important historic building such as St Michael's has a certain ambience and aesthetic that should not be altered. While any alteration in seating would certainly change this ambience and aesthetic, experience from other historic churches suggests that new seating can be appropriate for the building and attractive. The adoption of movable seating in both Greyfriars Kirk and St Giles in Edinburgh has increased the scope for flexible use of each church and provided the congregations with new revenue streams to fund the maintenance of their historic buildings. Other examples of churches which have introduced moveable seating include St Mary's, Haddington, and Lanark Greyfriars.



Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh



Lanark Greyfriars set up for communion in the round

Potential Benefits

A change to seating could benefit worship in a number of ways. For example:

- at family communions, chairs could be arranged in the round, so as to represent the communion that comes with participation in Christ
- contemplative services could be held with different prayer stations placed around the church
- there could be more activities in the middle of services – such as discussions, or even separate areas for different activities in the one service
- labyrinths and other physical activities aimed at prayer and contemplation could take place in the main body of the sanctuary, with the chairs moved to the side
- school services and activities – of which we are blessed to have many – could be conducted in a more creative way, helping children to have a positive encounter with the Church.

In addition to these liturgical benefits other, but no less important, practical benefits could accrue:

- any on-going health measures involving physical distancing could be accommodated by re-spacing of chairs
- wheelchair users and those with decreased mobility would have more space in which to sit and in a place of their choosing
- those unfamiliar with churches – now the majority of the population – would regard chairs as being less formal than pews and likely to be seen as being more welcoming
- chairs are far softer than pews, ideal for those with health complaints (or who simply prefer being comfortable!)
- on those occasions when refreshments are being offered to those attending a service or other event, the ability to move seats around to make best use of the space would be a considerable advantage.

Flexible seating could also encourage increased use of the building by external users. Some obvious examples would include:

- concerts, which could be better accommodated if the area at the front of the church could be enlarged through the moving of chairs and if the audience were seated in greater comfort
- conferences, which could include tables for discussion within a flexible space
- drama productions such as those presented by L.A.M.P, which would benefit from flexible seating and more space for staging.

Potential Drawbacks

There are also potential drawbacks associated with replacement of the pews. As noted earlier, the emotional cost requires to be considered, above all for those who have personal or familial ties associated with particular pews. So too does the financial cost: not only for the purchase of new seating, but also for the re-design of the heating system to replace the existing pipework. Practical issues such as storage would also require to be planned in.

A further question to consider is how the pews might be re-purposed. Some members might wish the opportunity to purchase a shortened pew as a domestic link with the history of St Michael's. We might be able to find a partner such as The Grassmarket Project to utilise the high-quality timber in creative new work. Again, however, all of this would require to be done with sensitivity to the place of the pews in the minds and hearts of many church members.

Conclusion

As with every other aspect of the life of our church, the ultimate question here is: what will best facilitate our mission within Linlithgow of knowing Christ better, serving Him together and making Him known to others? While being sensitive to our history and to the feelings of members, in order to equip St Michael's with the means to reach our neighbours and provide a sacred space in which a wide variety of people can experience God, should we consider working towards a more flexible and adaptive sanctuary?