

DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER

ADVICE NOTE: CONSIDERATION OF CHURCH FLOORS

In recent years a large number of parishes have sought approval to make alterations in the layout of seating arrangements of their church and frequently these schemes have involved making changes in (to?) the floors.

As a result, the DAC has been asked to advise upon a number of alternative floor finishes and these notes are intended to assist in forecasting the effect that a particular proposal is likely to have upon the appearance and performance of the floor.

Many of our churches have been adapted more than once in their life to suit the needs of the parish and provide for a particular pattern of worship, with the result that they exhibit in their fabric the traces of these alterations. Not all will be harmonious, but many are. Every one contributes to the sense of history and to sweep all this away, or at least cover it over with any flooring surface of uniform colour, type or texture is a bold, even controversial step that should only be taken after all the factors have been considered.

The value of the sense of visual and aesthetic impact upon entering a church should never be under-rated, and the first impression that a church is the spiritual centre of the community must be maintained. A church should exhibit its special qualities as a place of worship that will set it subtly apart from other places of public assembly, giving a feeling of awe or even welcoming austerity. In a scheme for re-flooring it is unlikely that a soft floor will foster these qualities and even a totally new hard floor should be carefully chosen and designed.

The desire to re-cover overall sometimes arises when as part of a re-ordering scheme it is felt that a patchwork appearance will be left combined with a wish visually to play down the "axial" feeling that existed when pews were arranged on either side of a long aisle. The recognition that there was a previous layout need not be a disadvantage and two or more floor surfaces can be acceptable. Possibly the original aisle (often Victorian paved) can be visually divided along its length with an alternative material to reduce its linear effect.

There is an increasing vogue for carpet to be used as a floor covering either partly or entirely in churches, and although there are instances where carpet is appropriate its indiscriminate use is likely to have a number of disadvantages:-

- (i) Man-made fibre carpets are widely advertised but they tend to crust and flatten in use, as well as "wearing dirty" and despite advances in technology they still hold surface dust through static attraction. Only a high quality natural wool carpet on underfelt is likely to be suitable and this is expensive.
- (ii) Many carpets show "tread marks" due to the construction of the pile and this gives an uncared for appearance. Patterned carpets mask this effect but many patterns are more appropriate to offices or even public houses than churches.
- (iii) Natural carpets should only be laid on completely dry floors and all carpets should be protected from the risks of condensation. Fixing man-made carpet with adhesive prevents easy removal and may obscure existing features such as floor tablets.
- (iv) Every carpet must be laid on level or smooth sub-floors as otherwise irregularities will show through and the carpet will wear. The use of levelling screeds or latex fill is unlikely to be acceptable.
- (v) Because of the pattern of traffic (e.g. around doorways and in aisles) carpet floors will wear unevenly and give the church a worn appearance even though the majority of the flooring is serviceable. Even carpet tiles that can be replaced in main thoroughfare areas will present problems of colour matching.

It may well prove therefore that an apparently cheaper and easier decision to use carpet may in the long term prove expensive and leave future custodians of the church with as great or even greater problem than is currently faced.

It is sometimes suggested that the nave of a church, if provided with moveable chairs rather than fixed pews, can be used for a variety of church and worship functions and for this a uniform floor finish is required. Certainly in this case a level floor without a step up onto a pew platform is desirable, but a differing floor material may assist in reminding users of the primary purpose of the building. Any floor chosen for a multi-purpose area must be chosen with the greatest care for durability and long-term appearance.

Whilst realising that acoustics is an inexact, and to many people, a subjective science, there seems little doubt that soft floor coverings will result in a noticeable alteration in the acoustic response in the majority of churches. Frequently the top edge of the spoken voice will be lost and music will be less resonant. Combined with the changed visual impact of wall-to-wall carpeting the acoustic introduction of “forced cosiness” to public worship may not always contribute positively to the life of the congregation.

Flooring should make a contribution to the setting for worship and be as far as possible durable and retain its original appearance as well as being easy and cheap to maintain. It should be remembered that one of the attractive features of many churches, especially old ones, is the pattern effect of different floor coverings.

There can be little doubt that stone and clay brick and tile floors have stood the test of time and provide a particularly suitable floor. Additionally such floors can easily accommodate changes in furniture layout without the need to change the floor itself. They also allow for extension and alterations without visual disruption as their natural colours and textures blend old and new together. Hard floors also accept floor tablets (where these are appropriate) within their pattern.

In a similar way wood floors usually in hardwood, either blocks or strip, may be suitable, although the small “mosaic” wood block may be too domestic in character and also be out of scale with the building. Wood in the right setting is likely to prove durable with low maintenance costs but care must be taken to ensure that sub-floors are suitable for wood finishes.

The possibilities of repairing and re-surfacing existing pine or softwood floors by grinding and re-waxing to provide a useable and satisfactory wearing surface should not be overlooked.

Nevertheless, carpet is a useful material that has its place in church furnishings. Carefully used in a restrained manner it can assist in highlighting a particular area. For example, a place set aside for a bookstall. There are instances where a nave altar is set on a platform under or in front of a chancel arch, and provided the setting is right the platform can possibly be carpeted to assist in defining the visual focus. All such schemes need consideration in the whole context of the design of the building.

Of the various materials, apart from carpet, available for flooring, the following have been proposed and in some cases employed.

- (a) Vinyl tiles. These and similar “plastic tiles” are unlikely to be satisfactory as they are affected by damp, and tend to be aesthetically domestic in character, and are usually manufactured in inappropriate colours. The maintenance of a good surface can be difficult.
- (b) Cork tiles. Occasionally these can be appropriate, but the sub-floor must be damp proof and the tiles must be covered with a factory bonded clear vinyl film. This tends to discolour and any damp, even from washing, will cloud the vinyl. It however has a reasonably good life span.
- (c) Artificial stone. This material, essentially a sand/cement and aggregate mixture can be considered as a less expensive alternative to natural stone. Care must be exercised in choice as many examples are aimed at the garden patio market and the over-texturing of the surface and variations in slab sizes would be inappropriate. If artificial stone has to be proposed it should be restrained in style and colour.