

THE RECORD

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EDITORIAL NOTE

This issue of the Record is concerned mainly with the internal arrangements of churches and their impact on worship. The Editor is grateful to Mr Brown, Dr Todd and Dr Galbraith for their articles and to Dr Galbraith and Mr McAlister for their reviews. He also records his thanks to Miss Susan Wilson for her help in typing and presentation.

H.R.S.



QUEEN'S CROSS PARISH CHURCH, ABERDEEN

Sanctuary Alterations

Robert F. Brown

Church buildings are both practical and theological. They are designed to be functional, but the way they are built also tells us what the people who designed them and use them believe. A mediaeval cathedral, with its great roof space and high altar away in the distance, stresses the transcendence, the holiness, the majesty, the mystery of God: God is the Other before whom we bow down in awe and wonder. A hall church of the kind built by the Church of Scotland in the 1950s in church extension parishes, with the stage at one end and the chancel at the other, is different entirely. The chairs which face the chancel on Sunday can be turned round or cleared away after the service so that the space used for worship can also be used for ordinary, secular activities during the week. The building points not so much to the transcendence but to

the immanence of God. A Free Church has a bridge pulpit built into the short wall at the level of the gallery. The communion table is relatively small and insignificant. Worshippers look past it and above it to the preacher in the pulpit. The people in this building believe that God is to be met in worship primarily in the word proclaimed. In a Roman Catholic chapel, the table dominates the chancel; the relatively small pulpit is off to the side. What this says is that God is to be met in worship especially in the eucharist. The chapel of the Corrymeela Community's residential centre at Ballycastle in Northern Ireland is built in the shape of an ear. This underlines the belief of the community that God is to be met by listening in the quietness to what he has to say to his people. Worshippers at Carberry Tower near Musselburgh look through the chapel's glass wall to a cross in the grounds **outside** the sanctuary. This reminds them that God's concern is for the world, and it emphasizes that the purpose of worship is to enable those inside to tune in to what God is doing in the world outside.

Examples could be multiplied indefinitely, but there is no need to labour the point. Church buildings are not only practical, they are theological. Anyone changing the interior of a building has to be concerned with both aspects. Queen's Cross was built in 1881, a classic Free Church of the kind described above. It was a 'preaching station'. At one end, a large bridge pulpit on the short wall almost at the level of the gallery dominated the chancel area. At the opposite end, a beautiful big window allowed light to flood the building. The ground floor was not raked, because it did not need to be. Worshippers looked up to the preacher high above them. In its original form, it met both the practical and theological needs of the worshipping community. Before the recent refurbishing last year, it had been altered significantly on two previous occasions, to mark the 75th anniversary in 1956, and the centenary in 1981. At the time of the first alteration forty-four years ago, the minister wrote: *Although our church has a certain stateliness, you could not in all honesty call it lovely. The chancel and pulpit, backed as they are by such a sombre tapestry, give an extremely heavy effect. The pulpit is more massive than graceful, and the chancel is overcrowded with furniture - cluttered would not be too strong a word to use.* The reason for this change seems to have

been more practical than theological. The theological was there in the sense that there was concern to beautify the sanctuary, but the essential purpose was to reduce the clutter in the chancel area by making a smaller pulpit, a larger table, and removing elders' chairs and choir stalls. At the same time, the organ console and pipes were to be moved to the back gallery. All that made eminently good sense, except for the moving of the organ pipes to where they still are today. To me, that was an astonishing decision, because they block entirely the west window of the church. This window was obviously an architectural feature of the building, but it can now no longer be appreciated from inside. It has been effectively bricked up. The pipes block all the light which previously must have flooded through the window. We are left with the contradiction that the building was 'beautified' at the expense of the light coming through the beautiful west window, now no longer able to be seen or to bathe the sanctuary with light.

The centenary change was more radical. The pulpit was removed entirely, the chancel area was reformed in the style of a stage, and all the furniture - communion table, lectern, choir chairs, etc - was made so that it could be fairly easily moved. The centenary booklet tells us: *The desire to improve congregational sight lines, to have more appropriate positioning for the choir, cater for movement as an integral part of worship, accommodate instrumentalists, and free the east wall for a more sympathetic and aesthetic treatment were the motives which dominated the renovation plans finally approved by a joint meeting of Congregational Board and Session.* This was a very successful alteration. There was a theological dimension to it in that it gave people a new experience of God through beauty, space, drama and movement. Two of the features of the new chancel area were the stunning hanging on the east wall where the pulpit had been originally and the striking new colour of the wall itself. Both made, and still do make, that end of the building beautiful. The alteration was practical, too, in that it did indeed 'improve congregational sight lines' and it made performing and moving easier.

However, the thought that struck me when I saw it first was: why did they do all this and leave the pews? The reasons, I suspect, were entirely

practical. Either they ran out of money or they thought that this would have been considered a step 'too far'. Eighteen years later, we agreed to remove the pews and replace them with chairs, and to make alterations to the vestibule area. Again, the reasons were both theological and practical.

One theological reason for the change was to do with the believing/worshipping community itself. We wanted to try to create a new experience of God in worship, to enable people to experience God as the One who brings us together in community - it is simply a fact that chairs arranged in an 'inclusive shape' so that people see each other helps to create a sense of the community of faith and faith as a community experience in a way that pews arranged in rows cannot and do not; to persuade people to believe that God is the One who wants his people to be flexible and imaginative - the ability to move the chairs to create different 'shapes' encourages the worshipping community to be flexible and imaginative in a way that pews arranged in rows cannot and do not; and by creating space and beautifying the sanctuary, to help people to know God as the One who wants us to have room to grow, and who is the creator of whatever is beautiful. The other theological reason for change was to do with the community beyond the church. We wanted to encourage the use of the building by church and outside groups for music, art, poetry and drama in the belief that the arts speak to us of God and the things of God, and that God in Christ has knocked down the dividing wall between sacred and secular; to encourage the wider community to use the building in the belief that God's concern is for the world; and to enable people to know that the church is an open, inclusive community.

The practical reasons were also important. We started from the position that pews have no theological or ecclesiastical significance. They were simply a cheap and efficient, and often uncomfortable, way of seating people in a previous age. However popular they may be in pubs, they have no special place in churches. So one of the reasons was obviously the comfort of seats as opposed to pews. Another was that taking out pews and replacing them with chairs is a statement about the future. It

suggests that the congregation is not stuck in the past, but is concerned to modernize and be forward thinking. Another was the fact that you only put out the number of seats you think you'll need on any Sunday. This gives the impression that the church is full, and that is good for morale at a time when the church generally is low in spirits and many congregations are disheartened. Compare this to the standard Victorian church building where on any ordinary Sunday there is often a considerable number of empty pews with a corresponding lowering of morale. Something else achieved by this is the removal of empty rows at the front. In a building with pews, people fill from the back to the front, and traditionally leave the first few rows empty. Another was that seats encourage people to sit beside each other in a way that pews do not. A person can come into a pew and nod to someone in the middle or behind, or even simply ignore him/her, as evidenced by the way people sit in ones and twos scattered around churches on Sundays. It is much more difficult to do this, and people are much less inclined to do it, where there are seats. Another was the increased use of the building during the week. A church with fixed pews is 'dead space' for 166 hours per week. A church with flexible/movable/removable seats can be used for all kinds of purposes during these hours, like the church extension hall churches of the 1950s mentioned earlier. It was hoped, too, that there would be some financial benefit in being able to let the space to outside groups.

Have we achieved the theological and practical goals we set for ourselves? I am obviously biased, but I think we have. The new sanctuary has given people a lift. It is more open, and by common consent more beautiful. A new lighting system has made it brighter. There is a different 'feel' to worship. The space is being used increasingly by outside groups during the week. And despite the misgivings of the sceptics before the change was made, I think it would be hard to find anyone who would want to put things back the way they were.

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