

Mission to the Wider Community

A discussion paper on behalf of the Standing Committee

In response to the question, “Which commandment is the greatest?”, Jesus replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And a second is like it: “you shall love your neighbour as yourself”. Matt. 22: 36-39

As individual Christians and as a church community we have a commitment to ensuring we follow these commandments as far as we are able. But how do we follow these commandments when thinking about our church building?

The Purpose of Christ Church.

Christ Church was built for the primary purpose of enabling Christians to come together to worship God. This may be as individuals or as a community at the set times for services. As far as the church building is concerned we fulfil the first of these two commandments by offering the following:

- The church is open during the day to enable people to come in for private prayer or just to sit in the presence of God.
- We have a number of liturgical services following either BCP Holy Communion, Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, Common Worship Holy Communion, Morning Prayer, Evensong, Choral Evensong and Evening Prayer – these constitute most of our services.
- We also have two non-liturgical services – a monthly All Age service and a weekly informal service – Searchlight.
- As Christ Church is the biggest church in Swindon it enables us to have civic services and services which require seating for large numbers e.g. Carol Stone’s funeral.

The above fulfils in measure the first of these two commandments but what about the latter? Are we loving our neighbour as much as we love ourselves when it comes to worship?

As members of Christ’s church it is our responsibility to help facilitate worship for the benefit of **all** to enable people to encounter God in this place.

There are many people in our community who might come if the church was more inviting. The church building is uninviting in that it is cold, dark and uncomfortable. For many, our liturgical services are hard to follow and make little sense – there is evidence of this from people who have attended Alpha courses. We love our services – I am assuming we do or we wouldn’t come – but most of the people in our community don’t come. Bishop Mike has said he believes that the Church of England has 8 years to turn itself around. Surely we have a responsibility to try what we can to make Christ Church a

place where people want to come, feel comfortable and at home and come to a living faith in the God we love and trust?

There are many other forms of services we could introduce that might be more acceptable to those not used to attending church –

- a lively informal type of service with crèche and children's activities for ages 0 – 14 year olds (research confirms that children who are used to participating in services are more likely to stay in church or return in later life)
- a reflective service (similar to Searchlight),
- an All Age family service (possibly at 4 p.m. followed by a sandwich tea)
- a contemporary service (extended time of worship and prayer ministry)
- a Taize or similar type of service allowing space for quiet reflection

These are just some ideas but none of them will be really successful if those attending are sitting in pews i.e. in lines looking at the back of people's heads. Lecture style seating does not lend itself to informal, interactive services.

As Caroline Hallett (Chair of Friends of Christ Church) pointed out families don't sit together in lecture style seating looking at each other's backs. Families look at each other, communicate with each other – there is free flow between them. If we are the family of God shouldn't we be like this in our services? If we are inviting people to become part of the family of God are we really offering them services in which the building indicates they will sit in rows and be lectured to?

By substituting the pews with chairs, we have the ability to facilitate all manner of worship – we can still have the traditional formal setting when that is needed but we also have the ability to offer worship in a more relaxed informal way that is far more in keeping with the 21st century. There would be no need to re-order any part of the chancel or lady chapel.

From the churches I have contact with who have removed pews there seems to be no regret. As far as I know there is no research which would give any national figures on this so it is mostly anecdotal. However, by way of an example, a colleague who was priest in charge of a church in the Forest of Dean re-ordered the interior of her church which included removing the pews and saw growth in all manner of ways. This is what she says -

- The dynamics of worship changed instantly - people were more relaxed, there was interaction. Church members started to invite friends. These were non churchgoers who felt comfortable and enjoyed worship - and then returned. People were happy to sit in the front row and answer when you asked a question!
- The congregation has grown with people new to faith
- The church is used by the community most days of the week - it has become possibly the best meeting venue in the Forest - a real blessing to so many people. It is used for all kinds of activities now including wedding and funeral receptions.

- Styles of worship are more varied now. We are still able to have the traditional arrangement of chairs - but also other configurations depending on the type of service e.g. a circle arrangement of rows for a large healing service where the altar was part of the circle; semi-circle arrangement, south facing; cafe style round tables, very relaxed and comfortable, with newspapers on tables and people would pick out items for intercessions. This helped people to pray aloud.
- People were instantly more open to God and more spontaneous in worship. The congregation decided to make a huge circle to receive bread and wine and chose to wait until every one had received in the circle. As there was such a strong sense of God's presence people were open to the Holy Spirit and then offered words - sometimes amazingly a prophetic word... or start to sing... often people who would rarely contribute at all.
- maybe the most important change was that the sacred space changed profoundly - it is easy to sense the presence of God there - previously it was very cluttered - now it is simple and bright - comfortable and beautiful.

The incumbent is no longer at this church but on a visit this February she said, "It was wonderful to see that it continues to improve because people are taking such a pride in it - it is kept beautifully clean and tidy and just continues to get better".

And of course as far as Christ Church is concerned with the removal of the pews we would be able to have a completely level floor which would make the building inclusive to all; we could offer a large space which could be used in all manner of ways by the church family but also by the community in the 21st century – Christ Church at the heart of the community.

Isn't this loving God and loving our neighbour?

Christ Church Standing Committee

9.3.15