



## **DERBY DIOCESAN ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

### **CARPETING IN CHURCHES**

The purpose of this short paper is to introduce and explain the Committee's policy on carpets and other floor coverings in churches:

#### **As a general rule the Diocesan Advisory Committee will not recommend approval for the extensive carpeting of a church**

The policy is the result of discussions which have arisen in the light of applications and experiences derived from visits to churches within the diocese. The reasons which have led to the adoption of the policy, together with some general guidelines, are set out below. For a detailed practical review of the issues involved parishes should be referred at one to the Council for the Care of Churches booklet on Church Floors and Floor Coverings by Daryl Fowler in the series, 'How to look after your Church'. This is an indispensable guide and should be read before a PCC takes any decisions concerning the floor treatment of a church.

### **TO CARPET OR NOT TO CARPET – THE BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM**

Whilst it is understandable that wall to wall carpeting may be used for welcome and children's play areas, we are concerned that increasingly parishes are wishing to carpet in a uniform manner the total floor area of their churches or, at least, to carpet the gangways and other unfurnished spaces within their buildings. Modern fashion has a compelling effect. Shops, offices, clubs and restaurants as well as private houses are now generally provided with fitted wall-to-wall carpeting. People begin to feel that uncarpeted floors are cold and unwelcoming. Carpets deaden the sound of footsteps and are thus reassuring to infrequent churchgoers, fearful lest they should attract attention by their unfamiliar presence. Voluntary workers, who no longer much use mops and scrubbing brushes at home, easily operate the domestic vacuum cleaner in church. Sometimes, too, in these days of colour television and coloured pictures in newspapers and advertisement hoardings, people are inclined to think that a church interior, all brown pews and grey stone, is drab and austere. Against these considerations must be set others which spring to mind less readily. The DAC has particularly identified the following points grouped under four headings:

**LITURGICAL** The traditional use of carpets in churches which could afford them has been to mark particularly significant places. Thus sanctuary carpets before the altars served to emphasise the focus of the liturgical action of the Eucharist. By extension chancels were often similarly carpeted. The function of a carpet in a church is thus quite different in one respect from the function of a carpet in other interiors, public or private. The church is a significant space and its furnishings must sub-serve a higher purpose than mere comfort or the gratification of the eye. Carpet can contribute to, or detract from, the overall spiritual impact of our places of worship. All over carpeting fails to differentiate between the symbolism and function of particularly sacred spots and the rest of the building into which it is introduced.

**VISUAL** In choosing a carpet for a church or, indeed, its curtains or other soft furnishings, we need to look at the building itself. From its often subtle and muted tones we need to pick up the colours which will give a sense of spiritual peace and harmony and unify the interior. Strong colour should normally only be used in significant places. The jewelled effect of stained glass windows proclaiming the glory of God and his saints or the mysteries of the Gospel should not have to compete with strident, misplaced colour in carpets, curtains or hassocks which serve a utilitarian, not an inspirational or teaching purpose. In the book of samples the subdued hues of appropriate carpet will not stand out as very attractive in themselves to those who like bright colour or want 'something cheerful'. Subdued, neutral colours, however, will often satisfy long after gaudy colour has palled.

In choosing carpets and wall-hangings, a PCC debate 'red' versus 'blue' as if these were the only possibilities. In fact the pretty colour selected from the tradesman's 'book' of samples will look quite different when expanded to cover square metres of church floor. Red is a very strong colour and draws the eye. That is why it is often used for 'danger' signals which must claim attention over all other visual distractions. We do not really wish to direct the worshipper's contemplation to the floors of our churches where the colour has no spiritual or dogmatic purpose. Blue rarely lives happily with the predominant colours of our churches, the tones of walls and woodwork, liturgical red or violet and it has a tendency to fade to a grubby variety of grey.

**MUSICAL** Extensive carpeting can have a very dampening acoustic effect, hampering speech, singing and other music. Choirs in chancels sometimes have difficulty in projecting their voices to congregations seated to the west of the chancel arch. An unsympathetic 'dead' acoustic will discourage congregational singing, too, by making people self-conscious about their efforts. Carpets, curtains and upholstered chairs absorb sound, unlike wooden floors, panelling or plastered walls which reflect it.

**CONSERVATIONAL** Many churches have ancient or artistically important floors, some with medieval or later brasses or indents and alabaster slabs. Victorian floor tiles or mosaics, too, require more consideration than is often given them. Carpets by no means always protect a floor. Particles of dust and grit below a carpet can be very abrasive, especially as, even with fitted carpet, foot traffic will cause repeated, slight but damaging, movement. The treatment of historically valuable floors requires specialist advice and a report from a professional conservator may have to be commissioned. If parishes are in any doubt, advice should be sought in the first instance from the DAC.

## **CHOOSING A CARPET**

If a decision is made, in exceptional circumstances, to use wall-to-wall carpet rather than to confine the carpeted area to liturgically significant spaces alone, two questions need to be addressed:

a) What type of carpeting? There is a wide choice here of different types of carpet, not all of which may be kept in stock by your local supplier. An additional paper is available setting out a wide range of possibilities. Further advice will be readily given by the DAC on request. The Committee emphasise that any carpet chosen for a church should not be rubber-backed or otherwise impervious to moisture. More than one church in this diocese has come to regret the laying of such carpet on a wooden floor which has subsequently been destroyed by dry rot. The effect on a stone or tiled floor can be almost as disastrous.

One of the other difficulties that may be encountered is the uneven distribution of wear to extensive carpet. Spaces where foot traffic is directed into a narrow pathway and areas near entrance doors are, of course, most at risk. Accidental spillages will happen in places where tea and coffee are served. Candle grease and oil from sanctuary lamps can also cause trouble. It can be very expensive to replace a complete carpet simply because some areas have become worn or stained. The use of carpet squares in answer to this problem is seldom satisfactory due to uneven fading.

b) Colour and pattern. Colour has already been discussed above but it should be noted that a church carpet does not have to be plain. Textured carpeting can be used. Sometimes it is alleged that new carpet will make the church less drab by introducing bright colour. Drabness is caused not only by poor floor coverings but by many other failures. Are there redundant notices, magazines, hymn books and service sheets scattered about? Is the Holy Table covered as the Canon requires with 'a carpet of silk or other decent stuff' at the time of divine service? Are curtains or other hangings well-chosen and harmonious in their context? Or are they dusty and neglected, perhaps in ancient blue or red velvet. Do the colours of other furnishings clash with any of the usual liturgical colours?

**IN SUMMARY** the DAC is anxious that carpets in churches should contribute to their role as places of worship and mission. Members do not argue for mere 'good taste' or dreary unadventurousness. Our churches have a place for dramatic gesture or striking colour but such bold effects, if not rationed, become self-defeating. Our aim must be not to reproduce the cosy and comfortable atmosphere of the lounge in the hotel or at home but by a certain disciplined restraint to create a setting for prayer and reflection, a ladder of ascent from earthly things to the eternal beauty of the heavenly places.

Contact: Mrs V Davis – DAC Secretary  
Tel. 01332 388650 e-mail: [dac@derby.anglican.org](mailto:dac@derby.anglican.org)