



## Guidance on Textiles, Embroideries and Carpets in Churches

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The churches of Britain contain a matchless heritage of precious and beautiful things, not least of which are the splendid fabrics and embroideries which may have been inherited from the past or newly commissioned from skillful artists and craftspeople. Those who care for our churches are the stewards and trustees of this inheritance, and have an obligation to care for fine textiles and to hand them on to future generations in good heart. This short Guidance Note offers some basic advice on the care and maintenance of textiles, and also touches on the sometimes contentious matter of carpets in churches.

Please remember that a faculty is required before the introduction of any new altar frontals, pulpit falls and permanent banners or flags, including all guild, legionary or regimental banners and flags which are being laid-up in the church. This is regardless of the cost of these items. Faculties are not required for the introduction of surplices, albs, cassocks and choir or verger's robes or altar linen. However, the conservation or repair of historic textiles and embroideries will require a faculty.

Replacement of existing carpets or other floor can be authorised by the Archdeacon. If you are in any doubt, please consult the DAC Secretary or the Registry.

### Care of textiles and embroideries

Of all the contents of most churches, textiles are often the least regarded, yet can be among the most demanding in terms of regular care and long-term preservation. Just like household furnishings, embroideries, linens and vestments can change from pristine condition to being faded or shabby almost unnoticed, and changes in fashion or taste often lead to them being altered, poorly stored or discarded. Sadly, it is not unusual to find spectacular and beautiful examples of fine embroidery languishing un-used and un-cared for in a frontal chest. You may find the following guidance useful.

- Be aware of the textiles, fabrics and embroideries in your care - in vestries, in storage or in regular use in your church. Do you know what is in the frontal chest, in the vestry cupboards, in the linen press, in the robe cupboards, or in

those old cardboard boxes which seem to collect in churches? Have all the items been listed and correctly described in your Church Inventory? They might include any or all of the following: frontals, pulpit and lectern falls, vestments, banners, hangings or curtains, kneelers, pew runners or cushions, carpets, white linen items, burses and chalice veils.

- The PCC should address the subject of correct storage, laundering or cleaning, and proper handling and hanging during use.
- Check regularly on the condition of items for signs of wear, or damage by light, insects or mice. Irreversible damage can occur if items are stored badly. Is the storage adequate, secure and dry? Try to keep textiles flat in a drawer or box, un-folded if possible, and do not pile items on top of each other if you can avoid it. When not in use, never leave items in direct sunlight or strong light. Damp conditions encourage mould growth and condensation, so fabrics should be kept dry and well ventilated. If you have a frontal chest, make sure it is not over-full, does not stand directly against a damp wall and is ventilated.
- Banners and old or interesting textiles are sometimes displayed in glazed frames or cases. Frames should not sit directly against the wall, but should have moisture-proof back and be hung with cork spacers to keep the frame away from the wall and allow air to circulate behind. These frames or cases should themselves be discreetly ventilated top and bottom through insect-proof mesh.
- Textiles should be handled carefully, and as infrequently as possible. When lifting them, try not to pick them up by one edge or corner, but support the overall weight.
- Please take photographs of old, unusual or interesting items (just as many parishes do sensibly with stained glass windows). The photographs should be properly labelled and kept with the Inventory.
- Whilst repairs, cleaning and decorating works are being carried out make sure that other textiles are protected. Including banners and kneelers.

### **New textiles and embroideries in churches**

From time to time it becomes necessary to commission or buy new textiles for our churches. This is a great opportunity to show the very best of which our generation is capable, and to create new work of vision and beauty, which will enhance your church and give lasting pleasure to future generations. The process of commissioning a unique piece of fine craftsmanship should be an inspiring and rewarding adventure. It can give all concerned the opportunity to take part in a creative partnership leading to a result in which all can take pride and pleasure.

- Before agreeing to commission or purchase new items a clear brief should be drawn up, based on full and wide-ranging discussion. When composing the brief, bear in mind very carefully the significance of liturgical colours, and the use of appropriate and carefully-considered symbolism. Prominent or prevailing colours and textures within the church should be taken into consideration.
- If a private donor has offered to contribute to the cost, have they been consulted? Have you consulted the Diocesan Advisory Committee and the

Diocesan Fabrics Advisor? They have considerable experience in these matters, and their advice is free to parishes.

- Always aim to inspire worship and to deepen awareness through well-chosen symbols which are non-verbal. Textile art must have its own integrity and communicate its message in its own terms, not simply as an imitation or illustration of other art-forms. Textile or embroidery designs must be able to be 'read' at a distance and in the context of the church interior as a whole. Scale is therefore of enormous importance.
- Consider carefully how an item might be hung, draped, lit, cleaned and stored.
- Remember that if sufficient expertise is not available locally, assistance is available within the diocese and further afield on such matters as the design of church textiles, the sourcing of correct fabrics and materials, repair, renovation and conservation.

### **Carpets in churches**

Floors are often taken for granted as one of the most humble and least regarded parts of the church, but their appropriate treatment and maintenance can add immeasurably to the appearance and atmosphere of your church building. Many ancient church floors contain monuments, brasses, ledger stones or sensitive materials like medieval tiles or bricks which are of historic significance and often require special care. Many nineteenth century floors are magnificent displays of glazed or encaustic tiles (tiles with inlaid patterns of different coloured clays), increasing in elaboration towards the chancel and sanctuary. These are meant to be seen, and are a major element in the design and colour of the interior.

In mediaeval churches, it is traditional and very practical to use coconut, rush or sisal matting on the floors. However, in recent years there has been a tendency to introduce large areas of carpet and other soft furnishings into churches, in the hope of making them feel warmer and more welcoming. Whilst a few churches have carpeted, this can have surprisingly dramatic and damaging consequences for the building itself.

Before introducing carpets into any church, the advantages and disadvantages should be carefully considered. While they may reduce noise and seem to make a church more welcoming, carpets are simply not suitable everywhere: most old churches have damp and uneven floors or important memorial stones which will suffer from being covered; high humidity, condensation and rising damp are highly damaging to most historic floors and to the fabric of all buildings, and moisture will be trapped under unsuitable carpets, backings, underlays or sealants; carpeting can change the acoustics in a church, often rendering music less effective and making expensive sound amplification necessary; fully-fitted carpets fail to distinguish between the different liturgical spaces and actions; good carpets are costly to buy and to replace, which should be done at least every 25 years, although some areas may begin to look shabby or worn even earlier. Please bear the following guidance in mind:

- Where major carpeting schemes are being considered the church Inspecting Architect and the DAC should be consulted at an early stage. Hollow wooden floors must be adequately ventilated, and should not routinely be covered in carpet. Do not carpet right up to the bases of stone elements like columns or font bases if it can possibly be avoided.
- Carpets and rugs should be of high quality natural materials or a natural/man-made fibre mix with a canvas or hessian backing. Rubber-backed and gel-backed carpets are usually inappropriate, and rubber underlay should NEVER be used. Underlay should always be of good quality felt.
- Great care should be taken when choosing carpet colours. Many reds and blues can be unduly dominant, and become more so over a large area. Strong colours will draw attention to the floor and away from the more significant elements in the building. Neutral colours are usually to be preferred.
- Carpets or rugs should normally be laid loose, without fixings. Where fixings are necessary they should be concealed, and domestic edging strips should not be used. Carpets should have properly whipped or bound edges.
- Where concealed fixings are used they should never be fixed to ancient stonework or memorials, and adhesives should never be used. If in doubt refer to your church architect or to the Church Buildings Officer (DAC Secretary).
- Where coverings other than carpet are being considered (e.g. linoleum or thermoplastic tiles) your architect should always be consulted.

#### Sources of further advice

- The advice of the DAC Textiles Advisor can be sought from the Secretary to the DAC ([emma.bakewell@bristoldiocese.org](mailto:emma.bakewell@bristoldiocese.org)).
- Useful information on textiles and floor coverings is available on the ChurchCare website: [www.churchcare.co.uk](http://www.churchcare.co.uk)

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