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Diocesan Advisory Committee
for the Care of Churches

GUIDANCE ON COMMISSIONING NEW ART OR STAINED GLASS

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Introduction

This note is intended to offer guidance for PCCs thinking about commissioning an artist or craftsperson to create a new object for their church building. It outlines the stages of the faculty process, which are of particular relevance for this kind of commission, but also offers some tips and pointers on involving the church or wider community in the project.

Faculty procedures and the DAC

Any new introduction into a church building requires a faculty. This is granted by the Chancellor of the Diocese, who makes his decision with the assistance of the views of the DAC, the Council for the Care of Churches and other experts, if appropriate. This is not simply a rubber-stamping exercise, and the Chancellor may refuse a proposed piece of stained glass or artwork if it is not regarded as being of sufficient quality to stand in what may well be an important heritage building.

Early Opinion from the DAC

It is well worth seeking the early opinion of the DAC on the brief for the commission to ensure that the proposed work is going to be considered appropriate. This avoids problems further down the process if general agreement over the approach you are proposing to take is established early on. There is nothing worse than getting the local community behind a project, only for it to get held up or rejected entirely at a later stage.

Factors

A number of factors (listed below) are taken into account by the DAC in coming to its view as to whether what is proposed is an appropriate addition. It is worth taking heed of these when starting to think about your project. Here, for example, is the list of factors for a new picture: -

1. Design
 - What is the composition going to look like?
 - Figurative?
 - Abstract?
2. Style
 - What are the techniques that are going to be used?
3. Theology
 - Is there a clear theological message?
 - Who, or what, is being portrayed?
 - Is its grounding 'secure'?
 - Is the iconography widely accepted?
4. Artist's credentials
 - Is the artist or craftsperson well established, with a good track record of successful commissions for similar buildings in the past?
5. Context
 - Will the new piece sit comfortably in the building, which has its own mood and feel?
 - Will it be deliberately different from its surroundings?
 - If so, will it be a reasonable 'marriage' between the new and the old?
6. Location in the church
 - Is this the best setting?
 - Are there any consequences for the building in terms of the arrangement of furniture, or change in the centre of focus for worship or contemplation?

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7. Nuts and bolts

- How big is it?
- How will it be fixed to the wall?
- Are there any special lighting requirements?
- Is it secure?
- Will it be affected by environmental factors such as sunlight or damp?

Most importantly, the DAC looks to ensure that the proposals has been thoroughly looked at and sorted out.

The Brief

Any commission should have a brief. This document should: -

- Encapsulate what the client (the church community) wants
- Be long enough to include all the key information and details of any elements that must be in the design
- Be short enough to avoid getting bogged down in detail - try to keep it to one side of A4 paper
- Be used by the artist as the framework for their ideas and design
- Be very tightly written, unambiguous, and refer, if appropriate, to other literature which describes the event, person or mood that you want to depict
- Certainly give some theological background
- Above all, say: -
 - What the new work is for
 - Who it is for
 - If appropriate, how it is to be used
- Have, in a single sentence at the top of the brief, a succinct but accurate summary.

It is this briefing document that you refer to as the artist or craftsman produces his/her sketches and develops ideas. By this means, you can tell whether the brief has been met – or not.

A Sub-Committee

Once the brief has been written, the process of seeing it through, with the artist or craftsman, should be left to a small sub-committee. Three or four people are enough. If you must have more, avoid going over seven (which is the magic number in committee size – any more people than this and you'll never make a good decision). The role of that sub-committee is to ensure that the wishes of the community, as described in the brief, are met. It is not to re-define the brief or to add or take away elements from the design. A new stained glass window, a painting or even a piece of furniture, are all fashioned by creative acts, and creativity by committee is rarely successful. Through the whole process, it is vitally important that you have a good chairperson. This is not only important for the routine business of keeping meetings on track, but also to ensure that, having agreed a brief, you stick to it. It is not only very irritating for the artist to accommodate late changes to the brief, but it is also very time consuming, and, once you've started changing things, it is difficult to know when to stop!

Involving the Church Community and the Wider Community

It is also helpful for the DAC, and improves your case, if you can furnish evidence of community involvement in the project.

Quite often the idea to create a new window or piece of art is a celebration of the community, both the worshipping members of the church, but also the wider community. Efforts to involve the community usually take the form of asking people what they want. This can result, especially in paintings or stained glass windows, in a work that is over packed with too many diverse elements held together loosely on the theme of 'community' or some local feature. The problem is that having asked people what they want to see, they tell you and expect to see their idea in the final composition. Under those circumstances, it is very difficult not to include it, and the result is a mess.

The other common device used to involve the community is to allow a vote on a choice of compositions produced by the artist. There are a number of difficulties with this. Firstly, who do you allow to have a vote? The worshipping community? Everyone on the Electoral Roll? Everyone in the parish? Everyone who has made a contribution to the fundraising? Next, there is the problem of the outcome of the vote. You run the risk of ending up with the 'least worst option', which offends nobody but lacks vigour and the energy that you should be able to detect in any work of art or craftsmanship.

How to avoid these problems while allowing people their say? One approach is to offer community involvement at the early stage of selecting the artist or craftsman. Choose a small number of people who could do the work, and get them to present examples of previous commissions, which give a sense of their range and style. The vote is taken on the person who is to do the job. Once selected, that person should be allowed to develop his/her own ideas working on a well-written brief.

Avoid having a competition in which the artists/craftspeople come up with sketched ideas, which are used as the main criterion for selection. You can get locked into a particular design, before a proper brief has been issued.

What will you need with your faculty application?

When you come to apply for a faculty, in addition to the petition form and attendant paperwork, you will need to furnish a sketch or drawing of the work, together with a copy of your brief to the artist or craftsman, and a curriculum vitae (CV) together with photographs of previous commissions in a similar setting or context from the artist.