



Diocese of Liverpool

## CHURCH FLOORS

In recent years a large number of parishes have sought approval to make alterations to the interior of their church and these often involve changes to the floors. The desire to re-cover a floor completely may arise following a reordering when a patchwork appearance is left; sometimes it is a wish to play down the east-west feeling that existed when pews were arranged on either side of a long aisle. That there was a previous layout need not be a disadvantage and two or more floor surfaces can be acceptable. Sometimes an original aisle (often Victorian paved) can be visually divided along its length with an alternative material to reduce this effect.

When the nave of a church is provided with moveable chairs rather than fixed pews, it can be used for a variety of functions and for this a uniform floor finish is required. A level floor without a step up onto a pew platform may be desirable, but a differing floor material may remind users of the primary purpose of the building. Any floor chosen for a multipurpose area must be chosen with the greatest care for durability and long term appearance. Flooring should contribute to the setting of worship and be durable and retain its appearance as well as being easy and cheap to maintain. Different floor coverings can also add to the interest of the building.

Stone, clay brick and tile floors have stood the test of time and provide a suitable floor. Such floors can easily accommodate changes in layout without the need to change the floor itself. They allow for extension and alterations without visual disruption as their natural colours and textures blend old and new together. Hard floors also accept floor tablets (where these are appropriate) within their pattern. In a similar way wood floors, usually in hardwood, may be suitable. Wood in the right setting can prove durable with low maintenance costs, but care must be taken to ensure that sub-floors are suitable for wood finishes and there is a suitable damp-proof membrane in place. The possibility of repairing and re-surfacing existing wooden floors by grinding and re-waxing should not be overlooked.

There is an increasing fashion for carpet to be used as a floor covering in churches, and although there are instances where carpet is appropriate, its indiscriminate use is likely to have a number of disadvantages:

- i) Man-made fibre carpets are widely advertised but they tend to crust and flatten in use, as well as 'wearing dirty' and despite advances in technology they hold surface dust through static attraction. Only a high quality natural wool carpet on underfelt is likely to be suitable and this is expensive.
- ii) Many carpets show 'tread marks' due to the construction of the pile and this gives an uncared for appearance. Patterned carpets mask this effect but some patterns are more appropriate to offices or public houses than churches.

- iii) Natural carpets should only be laid on completely dry floors and all carpets should be protected from the risks of condensation. Fixing manmade carpet with adhesive prevents easy removal and may obscure existing features such as floor tablets.
- iv) Every carpet must be laid on level, smooth sub-floors as otherwise irregularities will show through and the carpet will wear. The use of levelling screeds or latex fill is unlikely to be acceptable.
- v) Patterns of traffic (e.g. around doorways and in aisles) will wear carpets unevenly and give the church a worn appearance even though the majority of the flooring is still good. Even carpet tiles that can be replaced in most used areas will present problems of colour matching.

As a result, an apparently cheaper and easier decision to use carpet may in the long term prove expensive and leave future custodians of the church with as great (or even greater) problem than is currently faced. Soft floor coverings will also result in a noticeable alteration in the acoustic response in the majority of churches. Combined with the changed visual impact of carpeting the introduction of 'cosiness' may not always help the life of the congregation.

Nevertheless, carpet is a useful material that has its place in church furnishings. Carefully used in a restrained manner, it can assist in highlighting a particular area, for example, a place set aside for a book stall or welcome/coffee area. There are instances where a nave altar is set on a carpeted platform to assist in defining the visual focus. All such schemes need consideration in the whole context of the building's design.

Beside carpets, there are various materials available for flooring:

- (a) Vinyl tiles: These and similar 'plastic tiles' are unlikely to be satisfactory as they are affected by damp and look domestic in character and are usually manufactured in inappropriate colours. The maintenance of a good surface can be difficult.
- (b) Cork tiles: Occasionally these can be appropriate, but the sub-floor must be damp proof and the tiles must be covered with a factory bonded clear vinyl film, but this tends to discolour and any damp, even from washing, will cloud the vinyl. It can have a reasonably good life span.
- (c) Artificial stone: This material can be considered as a less expensive alternative to natural stone, but care must be taken in choice as many examples are aimed at the garden patio and the over-texturing of the surface and variations in slab sizes would be inappropriate. If artificial stone has to be proposed it should be restrained in style and colour.
- (d) Marble: A very satisfactory and hard wearing material, usually very low maintenance, but will involve a high initial capital outlay.

The DAC is always pleased to give informal advice on flooring. A visit may help to establish the most appropriate material. Good samples of carpet, stone or tile assist members in giving an opinion on the quality



