Carpets

Carpet in Church Buildings

The type and use of floor coverings in churches has changed over the years in churches as it has in the domestic and commercial sector. In church buildings, the need for flexibility of use, as more churches are used by the community for other activities, and re-ordering to accommodate changes in liturgy, demand we look again at the use of floor coverings and in particular carpets in our churches.

Carpets are becoming increasingly common in parish churches. To some they provide a friendly warm atmosphere, to others they make the church more like a hotel or domestic interior, and strike a discordant note.

Laying a new carpet may seem to be relatively unimportant, the choice of colour ‘a matter of taste’ and the quality of carpet dependent on funds available. The process, however, can be fraught with difficulty as everyone has an opinion and not all opinions agree. Too often professional help is not deemed necessary due to the ‘minor nature’ of the work even though unless agreed as ‘de minimis’ a Faculty will be required. Usually the task of co-ordination falls to churchwardens, who are then responsible for reaching an agreement on colour, quality and extent of new carpet together with all the appropriate information to accompany a submission to the DAC.

The choice of carpet is important as it can have quite an impact on the experience of worship in a church:

- The right colour can unify the interior and provide focus for the liturgy
- It can convey a sense of warmth and welcome.
- It can help to soften the sound and reduce echo.
- Easy to clean
- Suitable for children’s areas

In some situations, a carpet may be inappropriate:

- It could adversely affect the acoustics
- If laid incorrectly, a carpet may lead to deterioration of the floor beneath
- The wrong colour could prove a distraction, or make the area feel too cold or unwelcoming.
- It may not be the best choice for areas where food and drink are regularly served.
It may hide a floor of historical significance

Sometimes there is a call for a radical re-think, perhaps a bold colour scheme or even the removal of all carpeting but more often it is the more subtle changes to a colour scheme that are most effective. It is unfortunate if parishes miss the opportunity to make such improvements simply because they do not know where to begin. The following points are worth considering:

Liturgical

The traditional use of carpets has been to mark particularly significant places. Thus, a sanctuary carpet before the altar table serves to emphasise the focus of the liturgical action of the Eucharist. The function of carpet in a church is therefore quite different in one respect from its function in other public or private places. The church is a significant space and its furnishings serve a higher purpose than mere comfort. 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 particular areas and the rest of the building into which it is introduced. In wall-to-wall schemes it is important to ensure changes in levels are clearly indicated.

Visual

Choosing a colour and pattern is a subjective matter which can arouse great differences of opinion. The often subtle and muted tones of a church building need to be considered so that the colour of a carpet gives a sense of spiritual peace and harmony. Strong colour should only be used in significant places. The jewelled effect of stained glass windows should not have to compete with strident, misplaced colour or pattern in carpets, curtains or hassocks. Subdued, neutral colours, however, will often satisfy long after strong colour has palled. In churches with different forms of worship, it may be more beneficial to have a more robust or dramatic appearance to the carpet but it is important to consider how any new flooring will work with the whole scheme and not just buy something that looks good in a showroom. Always bring samples to the church and place them where the carpet will be laid before making a decision.
Acoustics

Extensive or heavy carpeting can have a very dampening acoustic effect, hampering speech, singing and other music, as well as sound reinforcement for all of these. An unsympathetic, ‘dead’ acoustic will discourage congregational singing, by making people self-conscious about their efforts. Carpets, curtains and upholstered chairs absorb sound, unlike wooden floors, panelling or plastered walls, all of which reflect it. Have you consulted your organist or choir as to thoughts on the introduction of a carpet? Existing acoustic systems may require reconfiguring following the extensive fitting of carpet.

Conservation

Many churches have ancient or artistically important floors, some with medieval or later brasses and ledger stones. Victorian floor tiles or mosaics, too, require more consideration than is often given them. Carpets by no means always protect a floor. They can retain damp and cause flagstones to decay or wood to rot. Particles of dust and grit which are held in place and work their way through 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 their architect.

If a decision is made, to use carpet throughout much of the church, rather than to confine the carpeted area to liturgically significant spaces, two questions need to be addressed:

1. **What type?**

Any carpet chosen for a church should not be rubber-backed or otherwise impervious to moisture. More than one church 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.
The durability of a carpet depends on its density, resilience and the weight of its pile. The quicker the pile recovers from an impression, the better the carpet. Short, dense fibre carpets are the most durable. Underlays must be breathable. Think about the amount of traffic the area will get and discuss with your supplier. Heavy domestic carpets may be sufficiently durable for some areas whereas public areas will require a contract quality.

In typical mediaeval churches with flagstones and no damp-proof course it is traditional and practical to use coconut, rush or sisal matting, with good quality carpet at the altar steps. The coarse open texture of these mats allows the floor to breathe. They will deteriorate if allowed to become too dry, so occasional damping with a fine low-mist spray is worthwhile. Every year they should be lifted so that the dirt beneath can be removed.

2. Colour and pattern

When choosing colours the debate is often ‘red’ versus ‘blue’ as if these were the only possibilities. Red is a very strong colour, draws the eye and shows up the slightest pale mark. Do we really wish to direct the worshipper’s contemplation to the floor of the church where the colour has no spiritual purpose?

Blue rarely lives happily with the tones of walls and woodwork, liturgical red or violet, and it has a tendency to fade to a grubby grey. Avoid totally plain carpets, because they will show stains and shading, and heavily patterned carpets, as they will detract from windows and liturgical colours. It is essential to look at good-sized samples in the church.

Sometimes it is alleged that new carpet will make the church less drab by introducing bright colour. Drabness can be caused by many other features as well as poor floor coverings. Clutter, untidy notice boards and bookshelves, worn and faded frontals, dusty hassocks, and curtains, all contribute to a drab and neglected appearance.
Other points to consider

- Carpets should be laid on even floors:
  Often to give a good base the floor will need to be levelled, or a special levelling screed must be laid. There are many situations where this will not be possible as such action could damage historic fabric. You should consult the church architect.

- Uneven distribution of wear and tear:
  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. Different surfaces or carpet tiles could be used in wet areas. Carpet tiles can be moved to even wear, but are not always suitable to lay on old or uneven floors and give little in the way of warmth or insulation.

Further information and advice may be found at:

- [New Carpets for Historic Interiors](#)
- [Carpet Beetle](#)
- [18th-century British Floor Coverings](#)