

Building Structure

As the hymn goes, the Church is people, for us, SPC was the epitome of this, because of the warmth congregation's welcome.

However, we had to ignore the way the Church presented itself to the outside world, to experience the joy of its fellowship within. We had to walk through the door and sit through a few services before the deal was 'clinched'. A less determined 'shopper' would not have been impressed,

The first concern was what happened inside? The Church's website did not 'howl' topicality and vibrancy, so we had to visit in person. When we made the trip, the front door was closed most of the time, and we couldn't find anyone 'in residence' - we had to be determined to find out.

But the 'in-crowd' would know. From the street, we couldn't see inside - people needed to belong to the 'clique' of people that went there already to know what happened - if we hadn't looked up at the spire, it could have been a telephone exchange! We found the Church's notice board after a moment, because we looked for it! It didn't leap out conspicuously and look well-maintained.

The most successful churches that I have encountered enable passers-by to see, from the street, into the church, in much the same way as, over the last hundred years or so, window-shoppers have got used to being able to look into a shop window, and not have to knock on the door to see what happens inside.

Once we had found the front door open, the first disappointment was the dim light and the untidiness and clutter of the Meeting House. As a place to meet-and-greet, it failed.

Once in the sanctuary, the negative impact of the yellow, sodium lighting drained the warmth of the welcome given by the congregation - they were fighting against the flow. For a church with a substantial amount of timber fittings, and so little daylight, pages in books, screen projections, people's complexions, take on a depressing, jaundiced and muddy appearance.

I note that 'the platform party' has the benefit of some white light, and therefore this might not be an issue, or as Margaret has said, "it's not a priority", for the incumbents. But for the congregation, both long-standing, and potential new attendees, it certainly depresses emotional engagement - the sanctuary is the 'shop window' of a church, and its appearance is of pivotal importance.

Apart from the depressing lighting, on alarming-often occasions, we have been distracted during services by some amazingly inappropriate items seemingly stored, or left, in the sanctuary, apparently looking for a home - ladders, kitchen ware, drum-kits, vacuum cleaners, and even ovens seem to be acceptable to SPC.

Adding the permanent presence of the offertory 'counting tables' makes the visitor think that the Church has got things of 'greater' importance in mind other than an uplifting church service.

While many long-established attenders might now not notice, by treating the Church's sanctuary as this extended store-room, a visitor is left thinking that prayer and quiet, undistracted thought is not an ambition in SPC.

If the Church is people, then what sort of people care about their appearance that much? The Church needs a 'window dresser'.

Seating

The pews are past their 'sell-by-date'.

They are uncomfortable and the varnish is deteriorating, making the congregation's clothes sticky - some rows are, in effect, 'no-go' areas for those 'in the know'.

The pews are difficult to access, make people 'hog' the isles, and challenges the infirm or those less mobile. Disabled access, currently unbecoming, via the front of the Church, challenges the Church's legal obligations.

The cushions in many pews, particularly upstairs, come close to being a health hazard.

The pew space is hard to clean - replacing with carpet and chairs would improve access and cleanliness, and provide a degree of flexibility of seating arrangements not known previously in SPC.

Audio / Visual

The audio/visual arrangements are not 'fit for purpose'. Our inept acceptance of the current arrangements leap out to tell the visitor that time has been forgotten in SPC.

I'm given to understand that there is no Church computer, selectively, making current involvement dependent upon whether a volunteer actually owns a computer of their own.

There is no sound desk, where an incumbent might help a service flow, without the distraction and overt and clumsy management of people dashing to corners of the Church during services to maintain 'fulfilment'.

Both projection and sound are not delivered, to all but a minority, upstairs. Admittedly, the four or so people that often choose to sit upstairs each Sunday, have either, despite their persistent complaining about screen clarity, accepted a degree of disengagement, or simply mastered viewing from a particular pew.

Of course, the Church's use of the balcony would not stand the test of a commercial business test were it not for the large 'show-case' services when the balconies are extensively used, such as Remembrance Day or Schools' Services. Given that these are the very occasions when the Church might attempt to 'show-case' itself, showing the Church at its best, the lack of the balcony's maintenance and the sub-standard audio/visual presentation experience, is a missed opportunity in selling the Church to the 'outside world'.

Some successful churches have an alter table, or a cross as the congregation's focal point. SPC has several focal points, but most unimpressive is the rather 'Heath-Robinson' or homemade, statement made to the congregation by the current screen. Whether used or ignored by preacher, it is always there, just beneath a banner which heralds an event nineteen years ago!

Furthermore, a service leader having to turn sideways, or their back on the majority of the congregation to read the screen runs counter to every presentation-skills course that I have encountered in my working life. The body language is not engaging.

The current screen's luminosity is grossly inadequate. The screen projections, bathed in the amber lighting, reduce colours to resemble the colour of mud, constraining the congregation's ability to engage in services.

Larger screen televisions have fallen in price over the years. Their use would enable the 'platform party' to address, 'full on', the congregation, disengage some of their singing from the 'heads down' in books and allow people in the 'remote' parts of the Church, for example, behind pillars or on the balcony, to engage with the service.

Storage Space

I realise that the dowdy, junk-room appearance of SPC is, in part, a consequence of the Church's lack of storage space and its laissez-faire management of this scarce storage resource. The Church must find new, additional storage space to de-clutter what should be storage-sacrosanct, viz., the Church's Sanctuary and Meeting House.

The external 'we-are-not-open-for-business', appearance could be made less obvious if the Church's main door was replaced by a glass door, a ramp added to the steps and bright 'shop-front' lighting.

Hiding the, periodically-occupied, office behind the Church building is a missed 'marketing' opportunity. Designed for meetings, the Meeting Room is a shape which beggars belief. It's use, with a retail outlet-style, external glass-fronted office, which was well-lit and visible from the street, would present a far more inviting appearance, telling the world that something does happen other than one Sunday service each week.

I guess the issue then becomes, is the then-vacated office space used to house a kitchen that actually could deliver 'outreach' meals without causing the current debacle, or whether SPC should simply accept the constraints of the building and simply use the current office as yet more storage space.