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Listed Buildings Advisory Group

General

The Listed Buildings Advisory Group, which normally meets twice a year, is accountable to Mission Council for co-ordinating across the English Synods, and for the time being the National Synod of Wales, a common approach to the application of Ecclesiastical Exemption. Additionally, but no less vitally, its officers and other members provide the link between this Church and other organisations, in particular English Heritage where relationships are positive and cordial. They also maintain contact with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport and relevant representatives of other churches. These links ensure the smooth flow of information, to the benefit of all United Reformed Church congregations.

Disposal of Artefacts and furnishings

Members of the group have continued to discuss the concern raised with Mission Council in May 2011 that the disposal of historic artefacts from churches including listed churches should be suitably recorded.

The identity of individual churches develops over time and is reflected not only by the buildings in which they meet but also the objects they look at and use. Sometimes, when churches move from one building to another, they take with them artefacts which maintain the continuity of experience with earlier members. Furthermore, significance rests not only with portable items but also with windows and memorials.

The disposal of church contents is strictly regulated in the Church of England. The Methodists are developing a policy relating to historical contents of both listed and non-listed buildings. An approach common to the major denominations is desirable, but meanwhile it is even more desirable for our own denomination to consider its position in this area.

The disposal of historic artefacts is a live issue and goes wider than listed buildings. It will become more significant as churches decline and buildings close. While much current United Reformed Church thinking is focusing on identity, it would be ironic if furnishings and objects which have helped to articulate our current identity were casually lost through a lack of awareness of their significance or guidance about how to proceed with their disposal.

Accordingly, the group has developed a checklist of actions desirable when the disposal of church contents is under consideration, designed to provide support and guidance in this area. This should be helpful to churches, and Mission Council is invited to adopt it and commend it to synods and churches.

Other current concerns

In common with other churches, a concern for the Listed Buildings Advisory Group during 2011 has been the theft of lead and other metals from church buildings, a major and increasing problem. The Group has received revised advice from English Heritage, and notes that English Heritage has

Issued new guidance to places of worship: <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/theft-metal-church-buildings/>

Changed grant criteria to include, for example, security systems

Made it possible to change roofing material after a single instance of theft. (Though a change still requires planning, listed buildings consent and a suitable substitution material)

Urged Government to change regulations to stop unidentified persons selling scrap metal for cash.

Some historic churches have raised with the Listed Buildings Advisory Group the question of installing solar panels.

English Heritage has issued new guidance. http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/professional/advice/advice-by-topic/places-of-worship/climate_change_pow/

They advise that although there are examples of successful solar installations on places of worship, there are many considerations to take into account before embarking on an installation. In any case other energy saving options should be examined before solar panels are considered; and a church would need to demonstrate an overall net benefit (in energy terms) in the installation.

Mission Council is invited to:

- receive the annual report of the Listed Buildings Advisory Group
- adopt the Checklist on the care and disposal of artefacts attached at Annex A and commend it to synods and churches

David Figures
17 February 2012

THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

CARE AND DISPOSAL OF CHURCH FURNISHINGS AND CONTENTS

PRINCIPLES AND ACTION CHECKLIST

ACTION CHECKLIST

1.1 Make an inventory of church contents, including fixtures (such as stained glass, memorial plaques, panelling, screens, pulpit, font, pews, musical instruments), and portable objects (furniture, font, lectern, banners, embroideries, communion plate, books, archives, musical instruments, collections of sheet music). Include measurements and photographs. This should be filed with church records. It has several uses, including insurance claims, reporting thefts, information for scholars, local history researchers.

This could be a time-consuming project, especially for a large church, but it is also an opportunity to engage the whole congregation, especially in providing notes on the significance of some objects. It could also be an opportunity to involve a local history group in the church by asking for their help. The National Association of Decorative and Fine Art Societies (NADFAS) do volunteer work of this kind.

1.2 Check church records for information about gifts, purchases, commissions, loans (dates, source of funds, suppliers). This will also clarify legal ownership and whether any persons or organisations (stakeholders) would be affected if disposal were considered. Find out if any donations were given relating to acquisition of objects, e.g. stained glass.

1.3 Assess the historic significance of these objects, to the church, church families, the local community, and maybe wider significance, such as family history studies, local or national history. It would be worth discussing the care of church records with the local county record office.

1.4 Explore the significance of objects in relation to quality, makers, period of creation, rarity. A local museum or antique dealer could help, but discuss any fees first. The more important the object, the more essential to get a professional opinion and valuation. There may well be a fee for a valuation. Museums do not give valuations.

2.1 There is normally a presumption against disposal, but there may be particular circumstances when it is desirable.

2.2 If disposal is contemplated, have clear reasons for disposal, and clear plans for using the funds raised. The plans must be for long-term benefit to church and, where appropriate, public.

2.3 Determine a disposal plan and communications strategy.

2.4 Consult stakeholders (church members, donors, families connected with object) to see if there may be any problems or opportunities.

2.5 Take advice on how to dispose of the object, after collecting information, and list options. Make this public, at least to church members. Disposal could be through gift to another church, sale to a local museum, public sale or auction. This should be influenced by the importance of the object. The decision to dispose should be made by the Church Meeting in consultation with the synod.

2.6 Decisions on how to spend any income should be made by the Church Meeting.

2.7 All decisions should be minuted.