

Quick Guide...

Closing a Church

Introduction:

The closure of a church can be a sensitive issue both for the congregation and to others in the local community who may consider it as part of the fabric of the community even if they are not regular church goers. This is particularly the case if it is a historic building which has been in use for many generations.

Process

In the majority of cases closure is a result of a re-adjustment through presbytery planning and responsibility for selling the building falls to the General Trustees.

We recommend that early contact is made with the General Trustees to help you through this period of change.

Although the building and its fixtures and fittings belong to the General Trustees, the furniture and other movable items remain the property of the congregation. In the case of listed buildings once a church ceases to be used for worship the Ecclesiastical Exemption (where the Church of Scotland is not required to apply for listed building consent for alterations to the interior of churches) ceases. This means that, once a church is closed, the removal of items such as pews, organs, bells, memorials etc will require listed building consent. If there is a particular fixed item which is important to the congregation we will consider the feasibility of its removal.

Creation of an Inventory:

The creation of an inventory is the first step to understanding what you have and to consider what should happen to different items. If you are moving into a union with another church it is advisable to do this for both buildings so that you can consider retaining the best from each which can assist in strengthening the union into a new congregation. We recommend that a small number of people start off this process. The easiest way of doing this is to take a systematic photographic record of each item including the fixtures and

fittings such as stained glass windows, pews, pulpit memorials etc, together with photographs of individual pieces of furniture. An Inventory form can be obtained from the General Trustees by emailing gentrustees@churchofscotland.org.uk

In many instances we will visit and provide additional assistance about what items should be retained or disposed of in another way. While not entirely comprehensive the following covers the main issues.

Stained Glass Windows: record the subject matter, any inscription, and artist if known. Removing stained glass windows is expensive and needs to be done by a specialist. Listed building consent is generally required. You will also be expected to replace it with an appropriate window fitted to the standards demanded by the Local Authority.

Memorials: We have a duty to ensure that war memorials are retained in a suitable publicly accessible place. In most cases they need to be relocated to the remaining place of worship. Agreement about a suitable location must be obtained from the General Trustees. Other memorials can be left in place, however they should be recorded in detail and attempts made to contact families of those commemorated if at all possible.

Bibles and hymnbooks: Many older bibles and hymnbooks are of little monetary value and can be recycled through Exchange & Transfer or offered to Oxfam who have a religious book section, although owing to the increased availability this is becoming increasingly difficult. Some pulpit bibles may have some historic interest, details of inscriptions should be checked and recorded.

Communion Ware: Sacramental vessels surplus to requirements must not be sold or donated without the express written agreement of the Communion ware group. As

we have a comprehensive database we will provide you with a list for you to check and any proposals need to be subject to more detailed discussion.

Organs: Pipe organs can in some instances be relocated although this is a time consuming and potentially expensive exercise. Often there is no market for the sale of electronic organs as the technology is quickly out dated.

Church Records: These are deposited with National Records Scotland which is the Church of Scotland official archive. They should be delivered to the church office at 121 George Street as the NRS do a pick up service from here on a regular basis.

Disposal:

While it is preferable to retain the main items of ecclesiastical furniture which are closely associated with your location we recognize that this is not always possible. Offering items to other churches once agreed can be done through Exchange and Transfer <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/resources/exchange-and-transfer>

In some cases it may be appropriate to offer items to members of the congregation for a small donation, or to consider sale through auction etc. Proceeds from any sale can be retained by the congregation and should be used towards projects necessary at the new place of worship. The exception to this is money raised through the sale of communion ware which the General Assembly has resolved must be used for missional purposes.

Further information and guidance on specific circumstances can be obtained by contacting the Sanctuary Development Officer of the General Trustees on email at gentrustees@churchofscotland.org.uk

About the Author

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