

Caldwell Parish Church
Pro's & Con's or removing pews

When the Board and Session considered the pros and cons of removing the pews at their meeting in July 2021, Rev Alison McBrier provided some examples and thoughts. These were based on her own experience and knowledge of similar projects elsewhere, and on her observations here in Caldwell, along with comments made by church members and others locally.

Advantages

A more accessible worship space.

Currently we can accommodate only two wheelchairs or pushchairs where two pews have been shortened. Even if we were to shorten more pews for this purpose, it still means that wheelchair users, and adults with children in pushchairs or prams, have very limited choice in where to sit. This can be particularly problematic when a wheelchair user is, for example, part of a wedding party or baptismal group.

It will be easier, and more dignified, for people of varying mobilities to choose where to sit, with whom and in a place, which is best for them as an individual.

Families with young children will also have greater freedom in where to sit, and will be able to sit with others who have children of a similar age. This is much more sociable and encourages church friendships. Instead of small children going away to creche, they can stay with their parents/grandparents as we worship.

A more flexible worship space

Our Minister would like to be able to have more movement in our services, and the opportunity for worshippers to be seated differently.

For example, Christingle services require more space than we currently have in order for people to move around and make their Christingles. It is actually not easy to find space for the tables, never mind the people! A Christmas Tree service would be impossible as no space for the trees!

Another example - we would be able to have small Communion Services where we can sit around tables to worship and to share the bread and wine. Or perhaps informal services where we come forward to receive bread and wine, potentially as part of a larger service.

With easily moved chairs, we could rearrange ourselves during worship - perhaps go into small groups of 4 to spend a few minutes chatting about an aspect of the scripture reading, or to share some personal account of faith.

We could adopt a "cafe-church" style - on a Sunday, or on another day of the week. Have people seated at tables, with coffee and cake, to hear a speaker/watch a short film, chat about the issues raised ...

As we can usually anticipate how many will attend regular services, we can have slightly more-than-enough chairs set out, with others close to hand should they be needed.

Having a small number of empty chairs creates a more uplifting look and feel to a service than many empty pews!

A more creative worship space

We'd have space to do things! To move around during worship - to create things during worship!

For example, in previous charges our Minister has given out paper and pens, asked people to draw or write something then come forward and stick that onto a cross, or a box - to create something else. When at Inchinnan she placed a large gazebo in a space created by the removal of pews, kitted it out with fairy lights, cushions and blankets, and used it for story time with the children.

In February 2020, she attended a Church of Scotland seminar, and during the opening worship one person read slowly from the scriptures, while another person took various objects and placed them together at different points in the reading creating a display as a focus for worship and reflection.

We could create prayer stations which people can move around, spend time at, add to, take away from ...

We could make and exhibit different kinds of artwork inspired by scriptures or by a particular theme for worship. We could use display boards, positioned freely around the space, we could hang things on walls or from above.

Our children and teenagers could be involved with this, together with adults of all ages. We could incorporate some Messy Church activities into our Sunday worship and our Caldwell Crew Youth Group have already demonstrated their talents for decorating the sanctuary with their own creative arts and crafts.

When we can have music again, we would have more space for singers and musicians and hopefully could involve musically gifted villagers of all ages.

A younger worship space!

Our Caldwell Kids team held successful Messy Church events in 2019. As our church building does not offer the spaces needed for Messy Church we have had to hire the Mure Hall at a rate of £75 per event. For Messy Church to be successful it is important to have one large space for the different activities - Bible stories, prayer, games and crafts, in addition to separate kitchen and eating areas.

The removal of the Sanctuary pews would allow us to hold our Messy Church events within the church; bringing families into our own building. We share worship with these families throughout our Messy events; how much better to do this within our church Sanctuary - a comfortable, welcoming and most importantly, meaningful environment.

Our Messy Church events are one of a number of ways in which we are getting to know more young people and families better and to encourage their involvement in our church and church life. A pew-less environment provides more opportunities for us to succeed.

The teenagers of our Caldwell Crew Youth Group have been using the space in the Church Hall - either the two rooms upstairs as one room not big enough, or the Hall itself when available. Being able to use the much larger space of the sanctuary would be of great benefit to them, and an encouragement to them to be involved in different aspects of our worship life - including the technical and creative side of things.

A more flexible and multi-purpose community space

Our village and parish are active and community-minded. The space we have available in the Hall (which was originally a Manse and not built as a Church Hall) isn't always adequate, or available. In addition, as the past year has shown us, we need to be flexible and creative in the ways we use all physical space, and having enough space for distancing etc is going to be very valuable as we continue to adapt how we do things as we learn to live with coronavirus.

Removing the pews would give us a large space, which could potentially be available for use by a range of church and community groups, including the Bible Study Group, Seniors Group, possibly also the Shop and the Soup and Sandwich Lunches.

Moveable seating could also work well for large scale community meetings such as those held to discuss the Glasgow Airport flightpath proposals, or for any other community gathering if the Mure Hall were unsuitable or unavailable.

Disadvantages

Emotional attachment to the space as it is and has always been

This is important. Our church building is a special place and for many, the familiarity of the church interior is a tangible reminder of people who are no longer with us, and of key events in their own and their family's lives.

Given the suddenness which with we had to leave the building in March, it would be wise to consider how people could "take their leave" of the pews. Maybe the opportunity to spend time quietly in the sanctuary - on their own, or as part of a meditative service, taking some time to look back and give thanks before moving forward with change.

Pews provide support to those who are unsteady or more frail

For some of our members, being able to hold or lean on the pew in front is important as they stand or move around during a service. The Church of Scotland's General Trustees require that 50% of chairs should have arms, for this reason. In churches where pews have already been replaced the provision of chairs with arms works well for those who need additional support.

Concluding comments

The congregation have, over the years, made a significant financial commitment to ensuring that the church building is wind and watertight, and well cared for. The cost of this project is not insignificant, but this time we are investing in the building and even more so in our present and future congregations. This project is about so much more than simply replacing pews with chairs - it is about opening up our worship space - physically, creatively and spiritually.

The Minister indicated an understanding that this will be a significant change to the appearance and feel of the sanctuary, and that can be daunting. However, we are called to be bold, to be daring, to take risks in Christ's name.

As Christians, responding to Christ's invitation to "follow me", we are called in faith to take risks, give new things a go, and see what happens! This is an exciting project, one which has great potential to reinvigorate and re-energise our congregation and community.