

Re St John the Baptist, Tidebrook

Judgment

1. By a petition dated 10 November 2001, the incumbent and churchwardens of St John the Baptist, Tidebrook, as petitioners, seek a faculty for the removal of the front three pews on the north side of the nave of the church. The proposed works include the reinstatement of floor finishes, radiators and related pipework and the repositioning of the existing pew front to make it symmetrical with that on the south side.
2. Public notice was effected in February 2002 which resulted in a letter of objection being submitted to the registry by Mrs Margaret Walsh-Atkins. By letter dated 27 March 2002, the diocesan registrar wrote to Mrs Walsh-Atkins in accordance with rule 16 of the Faculty Jurisdiction Rules 2000. He invited her either to submit formal particulars of objection and become a party in the proceedings or to elect for her letter of objection to be taken into account by me in reaching a decision. In the absence of any reply to this letter, I am required to determine the petition taking the content of Mrs Walsh-Atkins' letter into account. I have had the benefit of reading a letter dated 26 June 2002 from the incumbent and Mr Stephen Stordy, one of the churchwardens. This letter addresses the substantive objections raised by Mrs Walsh-Atkins. In addition I made a private visit to the church on 9 July 2002.
3. The proposal is modest. It comprises a drawing back from the pulpit of the front three pews to the north of the aisle bringing them directly into line with those on the south. It will create space beneath the pulpit to counterbalance the area to the south where the font is situated. Mrs Walsh-Atkins asserts:

'the removal of 3 front pews will leave a large portion of the nave empty. There is already empty space at the back of the Church and the proposal would leave a not very large area in the middle of the church occupied by the pews remaining, and the whole proportion of the Church interior altered for the worse.'

It was immediately obvious on my visit to the church that this is a gross exaggeration and simply not the case. The removal of the front three pews would leave ten remaining (the same number as on the south) which would continue to dignify the nave. Far from altering the interior for the worse, the proposal would add integrity and balance to the nave and relieve those in the front pews of the strain of looking up to the pulpit or the overhead projector screen.
4. I do not accept Mrs Walsh-Atkins' assertion that the proposal would spoil the appearance of a pleasing and welcoming building. On the contrary, I consider that

the removal of the pews would enhance both the pleasing appearance and the feeling of welcome. At worst, the effect would be neutral.

5. Secondly, on what she styles 'spiritual grounds', Mrs Walsh-Atkins objects to the placing of a communion table in the area at the foot of the chancel steps for occasional use. Liturgical experiment is now very much the norm, particularly with the widespread use of Common Worship. I am confident that if this is to take place at St John the Baptist, Tidebrook then it will be after full consultation and, doubtless, Mrs Walsh-Atkins will make her views plain at that stage. I do not regard the possibility of such use in the future as relevant to the issue of whether or not the pews should be removed at this time.
6. The third objection, expressed in terms of practicality, seems equally lacking in merit. In the unlikely event that additional seating is required I am likewise confident that appropriate provision will be made. The advantages in having an open space at the front of the nave for flexible use for the teaching of children, for musicians, and for small informal meetings more than outweigh this objection.
7. I take into account that the proposal has been recommended by the Diocesan Advisory Committee, whose members have a vast collective knowledge and experience of church furnishings and the liturgical use of sacred buildings. I further note that although there was one abstention when this matter was considered by the PCC, no-one voted against the proposal which clearly has widespread support.
8. I do not doubt Mrs Walsh-Atkins' sincerity. She does not, however, advance her cause by overstating her case in the way she has. I have given full consideration to her objections but can discern no merit in any of them. Accordingly I order that a faculty will pass the seal on condition:
 - i. that the works are executed under the direction of Mr Neil Macfadyen;
 - ii. that the area beneath that part of the wooden pew platform which is to be removed is tiled to match the existing floor covering;
 - iii. that the three pews are to be safely and securely stored and not disposed of save with my prior written consent.
 - iv. that the works are completed within four months, subject to any extension of time for which the parish might apply.
9. As a result of the objection of Mrs Walsh-Atkins, there has been a delay in determining this application and the costs of the faculty (which must inevitably be borne by the parish) have increased. This is regrettable. However I propose to make no charge in relation to my attendance, as I was required to be in the area in any event. The court costs are to be discharged by the parish before any work commences.

Mark Hill
Chancellor

16 July 2002