

In the matter St Richard, Crowborough

Judgment

1. By a petition dated 21 May 2014, a faculty is sought for the following works:
 - i. removal of timber stage to create more storage space;
 - ii. replacement of exterior sign and notice board;
 - iii. replacement of chairs;
 - iv. fitting of new suspended ceiling;
 - v. replacement of windows with PVCu double glazed units.
2. The DAC issued a Notification of Advice on 16 June 2014 recommending the works in their entirety subject to some minor provisos.
3. Public notice elicited letters from Ms Hilary Mackelden dated 30 June 2014, and Mrs Aimee Bristow also dated 30 June 2014. Neither chose to lodge Particulars of Objection and accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of r 9.5 of the Faculty Jurisdiction Rules 2013, I take the contents of their letters into account in determining this petition, together with a letter in response on behalf of the petitioners dated 9 August 2014.

Background

4. The church of St Richard, Crowborough dates from 1956 and is unlisted. It is a somewhat utilitarian building. It lies within the parish of All Saints, Crowborough (the incumbent of which is a co-petitioner) and serves the Alderbrook council estate and surrounding housing. It was built to be both a chapel and a community hall. It has enjoyed devout lay leadership over the years and is currently led by Captain Graham Bibby, a Church Army Evangelist, together with a Management Committee which reports to the PCC of All Saints.
5. The original brick chapel was added to in 1964 and 1969 and a further extension was completed in 1996. Over the past few years there has been a general refurbishment of the building.
6. Following a mission in 2010, St Richard's has identified as its focus families with young children and men who work from their homes in the locality. In relation to the former, St Richards has established Messy Church. Church attendance on a Sunday is in the order of 50-60, with an emphasis on inclusive welcome, not least through the provision of refreshments. There is a Wednesday lunchtime prayer meeting, and regular home groups and other activities. St Richard's has secured funding for a part-time children and families worker and wishes to operate a nursery.

The objectors' concerns

7. The letters of objection raise a number of issues. Mrs Bristow is very concerned at the proposed removal of the stage. She regularly attends St Richard's to see performances and feels it would be a loss for parents whose children would be denied the opportunity of taking part in plays etc. She considers it would be devastating for amateur dramatics in the locality.

8. Ms Mackelden echoes these concerns, highlighting that there is no similar facility in the neighbourhood. She points to the performance of plays and revues as being significant in the building of community, as well as for raising funds. She hints at bad blood between drama groups and the church management committee, and the need to heal damaged relationships. She believes the traditional role of the stage for story telling during worship will be lost for ever, and nativity plays will no longer be possible in the absence of a stage. Concerts and musical evenings would cease. Assigning space for storage will mean turning people away from popular events, such is the shortage of space. She points to other areas where storage might be provided.

The petitioners' response

9. The petitioners point to the logistical difficulties in using the stage for drama and question that it has been so utilised as often as is suggested. They indicate that temporary staging can be introduced when necessary in the future, on a bespoke basis for each event. They tell me that dramatic sketches during worship have generally been performed at floor level and not on the stage. They do not see any difficulty in accommodating congregations within the body of the hall. Equally, they have considered and rejected storing items outside for reasons of convenience.

Discussion

10. Unusually, perhaps, this is not a case where issues of aesthetics or heritage concerns are raised. This is a building of modern construction which has mixed sacred and secular uses. The level of community engagement is considerable, and the prayerful manner in which the worshipping congregations have engaged with the local community is worthy of praise. The worship and mission of the Church of England is lived out through Christian hospitality in all its forms.
11. In my judgment the petitioners have made out a cogent and compelling case for what is on any account a modest proposal. I am satisfied that the management committee has carefully balanced the competing demands for its space and the activities through which St Richard's lives out the gospel locally. It is not for the consistory court to interfere with decisions made at a local level concerning drama groups, concerts and nurseries. So long as these matters are determined by a properly constituted management committee in good faith, this court will not interfere.

Conclusion

12. In all the circumstances I am satisfied that the works proposed to this unremarkable and utilitarian building are unobjectionable. The petitioners have discharged the burden of demonstrating that the proposals, including the removal of the stage, are desirable if the effective ministry of this small but vibrant church community is to realise its potential. I have no hesitation in ordering that a faculty issue, and I commend the petitioners for their prayer and patience.