

St John the Evangelist in the Parish of Killingworth.

Judgement.

1. This is a petition for a faculty, by Revd. David Gray, Mrs Christine Walker and Mr Glenn Fabian, respectively Vicar and Churchwardens of the Church of St John the Evangelist, in the Parish of Killingworth, Tyne and Wear to authorise the removal of all of the pews from the Chancel and Nave and introduce 120 wooden upholstered chairs in their place.
2. The church is Grade II listed and was built in 1869 to a design by Basset Keeling in order to serve the then mining communities in the immediate area. There is a hall, also Grade II, relatively close by on the same site which is heavily used by a variety of groups.
3. The origins of the petition date back to February 2015 when the church was visited by Revd Richard Giles, former Dean of Philadelphia who has recognised expertise in the use of liturgical space and who now lives locally, and who worked with the incumbent and congregation on re-imagining the use of the church building. A small altar was placed in the middle of the North wall of the church and the pews were re-arranged in a horse shoe shape, the altar was flanked by a lectern for Bible readings and the sermon. On a later visit the then Assistant Bishop, Frank White, expressed his view that that layout was a better model for the worshipping community. The petitioners say that, inevitably, there was a mixed reaction to the arrangement but most considered the arrangement an improvement which enhanced their worship.

4. It seems clear that discussions and plans in relation to the possible replacing of the pews with chairs continued, which involved some visits to other churches in the area, which had had the pews removed and replaced with chairs. On 4 October 2016 the PCC passed, by 9 to 1 with 1 abstention, a motion that requests for donations towards the cost of chairs be permitted and fundraising begin. The money was to be placed in a designated fund and, once the majority of the money (estimated at £11,606.28) was raised, then a faculty was to be applied for. Those funds were raised entirely by the congregation within a three month period.

5. Pre-application advice was sought in March 2017 and the DAC became involved, with a visit to the church on 28 March 2017 by 4 members of the DAC (one of whom was the Archdeacon of Northumberland) and the DAC secretary. Advice was given in a written response, which is before me. At about the same time Historic England and the Victorian Society were contacted to seek their views. The response of Historic England, with some comments made, was that they were "broadly content with the application" subject to addressing those comments. The Victorian Society, in a letter addressed to the DAC secretary, responded commenting negatively on the presence of carpet in the church, the rust coloured paint on the walls, arguing that the pews and choir stalls were an integral part of the church and that as the proposals involved a comprehensive re-ordering this would be an ideal time for the parish to correct previous insensitive alterations, such as the carpet. It was said that the removal of some of the pews to benefit the congregation would not be opposed if "a meaningful and significant block was to be retained in the nave".

The introduction of upholstered chairs was objected to and reference was made to the statutory guidance of the Church Buildings Council. The secretary of the DAC contacted ChurchCare and in an email response, confirmation was given that they would not support the introduction of upholstered seating, and encouraging the parish to take a more holistic view of its needs, with particular reference to the absence of WC facilities.

6. Following receipt of those responses and advice a further submission was sent by Revd Gray to the DAC seeking to address the matters raised stressing the flexibility that the removal of the pews would give, and making the point that several elderly members of the congregation bring cushions in to use on the pews at present.
7. When the matter formally went before the D.A.C. they recommended the removal of the pews and did not object to the proposal for upholstered chairs, explaining that they understood the reasons why upholstered chairs were desired but felt that they could not go against the specific advice of the Church Buildings Council's guidance on seating.
8. Public notice was displayed from 2nd to 30th July 2017 following which the Registrar received 9 letters of objection, 8 of which were from individuals and one of which was joint from a married couple. Inevitably each objection was individual in its nature but a number suggested that there ought to have been fuller consultation with the whole congregation, three suggested that there were more important matters that needed attending to, such as heating, lighting and the provision of lavatory facilities, four objected to the

removal of the pews in the Chancel whilst either agreeing to or acquiescing in the removal of the Nave pews. The joint objection set out a number of arguments in favour of the pews, against chairs and suggesting that the experimental worship had not been successful.

9. In accordance with the provisions of Part 10 Faculty Jurisdiction Rules 2015 each objector was written to informing him/her of the alternative courses of becoming a party opponent in the proceedings or having their letter of objection taken into account by myself and what might follow from each course. None chose to become a party opponent; each asked that I consider his/her letter of objection. Thereafter, in accordance with the approved procedures, the Petitioners were sent copies of the objectors' letters and invited to make comments upon them, which they did by a response dated 6 October 2017.
10. The response of the Petitioners set out that the decision to seek permission to remove the pews took place after lengthy informal consultation with the congregation, the matter was debated within the buildings sub-group, sample chairs were obtained and put at the back of the church for comments and the matter was raised for discussion in the weekly notices. It was during that period of consultation that the removal of the Chancel pews had been suggested by a senior member of the congregation. An outline of the consultation process was set out and it was pointed out that the money for the chairs had been raised by the congregation within three months. It was acknowledged that toilet facilities and a new heating system are

needed but said that these would be a part of the second and major phase of refurbishment but that, at a PCC meeting on 4 October 2017 after consideration of the objections, it was confirmed that the faculty petition was to be proceeded with, as the removal of the pews was considered a vital step forward for the sustainable future of St John's.

11. Having considered all of the material I visited the church and was shown round by Revd Gray, who was careful not to advocate the cause of the petitioners, but merely to allow me access to the church to view it for myself.

12. In petitions of this nature it is virtually inevitable that there will be differences of opinion amongst members of a congregation and that some strong views will be held. Having considered all of the matters raised in the original Statements of Significance and Needs, the objections and the response of the petitioners to those objections I am persuaded that there has been an adequate consultation with the congregation and a proper period of consideration of these matters and reflection after that time. I work on the basis that the PCC have considered the matter with care and taken into account all of the matters raised. It seems to me to be of considerable significance that the not insubstantial amount of money that was required to take this matter forward was raised by the congregation in a fairly short period. That, in my judgement, indicates a general level of support and enthusiasm for the proposals. I consider that the petitioners have made out a good case for the removal of the pews from the Nave, which will allow for much greater flexibility of worship and cater for the use of the

church for a variety of functions. Whilst there is some force in the point made that the lack of lavatory facilities will necessarily be a limiting factor in the uses to which the church can be put, I do not consider that to be an argument for not permitting a proper change if it is shown to be warranted. The pews themselves are not particularly noteworthy, some are not in good repair and the suggestion by the Victorian Society that the pews could be moved to achieve the flexibility desired ignores the reality of the practical difficulties in moving heavy pews. The letter of the Victorian Society poses the question: "Has the parish explored this option?" The answer to that question is "Yes". It is clear from the material before me that that has been thought about and rejected as impracticable.

13. I am thus persuaded that the principal objective behind this petition, to achieve greater flexibility of worship and cater for other activities by the removal of the Nave pews is well argued and justified. However, I am not persuaded that an argument has been made out to justify the removal of the pews/choir stalls in the Chancel. It is clear that this was not part of the original proposal and only became a part of the scheme at a later stage. I find it noteworthy that four of the objections are to that specific element of the proposed scheme and from my own visit I consider that the removal of those pews would not particularly enhance the possibility of more flexible worship or use of the church. The chancel is, obviously, a discrete section of the church and — as has been done in the past according to the material before me — it can itself be used for services when there is a small attendance. The retention of those pews would also, in my view, maintain a proper

degree of formality at that end of the church which might be lost if not only the Nave but also the Chancel pews were removed. The retention of the Chancel pews/choir stalls will not, in my judgement, undermine the principal objective to be achieved by this proposed scheme in the least.

14. I then have to consider the question of the nature of the chairs that it is proposed to replace the pews with and in doing so I bear in mind not only the principal purpose behind this scheme but also the guidance of the Church Buildings Council and the comments made by the members of the DAC on their visit. In that context I have borne in mind that this church is carpeted and, whilst I note the comments of the Victorian Society, I do not consider that the suggestion that they make is a realistic one. The carpet is in good condition and I have seen no evidence of any desire that it should be removed. I have no information as to when the carpet was put down but it clearly would have required a faculty and I work on the basis that there was full consideration of the matter at that time and approval given. When there is a question mark over the heating in the church the removal of the carpet might well be a negative feature in relation to the temperature of the building.

15. The question of the nature of the chairs to replace the pews has given me greater pause for thought than any other aspect of this petition. However, I have considered the response of the petitioners to the comments of the DAC, which highlighted the guidance of the CBC, and I note that the petitioners have involved their architect in relation to the choice of chairs and the colour of

the proposed upholstery, the nature of the chairs has been considered by the congregation in that various models were provided for consideration and there have been visits to five other churches that have upholstered chairs in situ to consider how they have been affected by the change and their appearance and impact. It is of some significance that several members of the congregation have taken to using cushions on the current pews for their comfort, which will be catered for by the provision of upholstered chairs. It seems that the choice of upholstered as opposed to wooden chairs is supported by the congregation and has been given careful consideration. Provision has been made for additional upholstery to cater for any spillages or damage.

16. At the end of my consideration I am persuaded that the arguments that have been put forward carry sufficient weight and my concerns about a possible overly informal atmosphere being created will be adequately met by the retention of the pews in the Chancel and the use of the upholstered chairs in the Nave only.

17. I am therefore prepared to grant a faculty as prayed, subject to the retention of the pews in the Chancel and the removal only of the Nave pews.

Euan Duff
Chancellor
1 December 2017.