
Commissioning Stained Glass

Introduction

In the Jewish tradition light has long had a spiritual quality. Building on this inheritance, the Christian church which first used coloured light in the form of stained glass windows to convey spiritual truths. Stained glass, like all good art, has the potential to evoke a sense of wonder and assist people's experience of the mystical.

The primary purpose of the stained glass in a church is to convey the timeless spiritual truths of the Christian faith. The windows should help to strengthen and teach the faith; enhance the liturgy and complement the architectural setting in which they are placed. It is vital that these fundamental principles are borne in mind when commissioning stained glass for churches. The windows should not be seen as merely decorative items to make a building look pretty; neither is their role simply to commemorate people or events.

The key to a successful Stained-glass Commission is to arrive at a good design based on the principles outlined above. The purpose of this leaflet is to help parishes through the process of achieving a suitable design.

The Commissioning Process step by step

1. Form a committee

- Consisting of 5-10 members

Including professional adviser (architect or surveyor), member of clergy, ideally with artistic interests, someone with authority to make decisions for church, someone experienced in fund-raising, one good at publicity, and a range of congregation members

- Select a chairman
- Make a brief statement about the window
 - i.e. why it is wanted, what is its purpose, what it will mean to the parish*
- Obtain the measurements of the window and its area (from professional adviser)
- Set schedule and budget parameters

Remember, you get what you pay for. Handmade (antique) glass costs 5 times as much as machine made glass but looks immeasurably better. Hand processes like painting, etching and silver staining add to the beauty but also to the cost. Approach various studios and ask what they charge per square foot for a church window.

- Decide how decisions will be communicated to the congregation

for example by church magazine articles, pulpit announcements, parish meetings

- Determine the relationship of donors to the decision-making process and how their contribution will be acknowledged.

The spiritual contribution of the window to parish life long term, and the enhancement of the architectural space, must remain paramount. The committee, not the donor, should decide the subject matter, and convey this diplomatically. If a donor insists on dictating the subject, their donation may have to be rejected. This applies also to memorial windows; the mission of the parish must determine the subject, not the personal interests or achievements of the deceased.

- Decide the style of window appropriate to the church building.
 - *Study any stained glass windows in the building and decide how the proposed window will complement the existing windows in terms of colour, tone, texture and theme. Be aware of the architectural style, age and history of the building.*
 - *Create a list of characteristics that would enhance the space and reflect the values and spiritual journey of the congregation. This gives a starting point and a sense of direction both for the committee and the artist.*
 - *Define the role of the window (to block or attenuate light, divert attention from an uninspiring view, convey a message)*
 - *Direction from the committee is useful, but room must be left for inspiration. It is not necessary or even helpful for details of the window to be decided by the committee. That is the artist's responsibility.*

2. Choose an Artist

- Research the available artists or studios. Create a list of artists to be contacted.

Consult the Diocesan Advisory Committee who can supply a list; visit the Council for the Care of Churches and consult their files; examine the journal Stained Glass to see the work of modern designers.

Very often an artist in the locality seems desirable, but remember that advances in modern communications open up a much wider field.

- Create a list of questions for stained glass artists, e.g.
 - *What is your mission as a stained glass artist?*
 - *How do you see the committee having input into the design?*
 - *What is your current work schedule like?*
- Send out letters to artists with possible interview times.
- Interview artists.
 - *The artist will usually present slides of previous work, describe his/her approach to design and answer the committee's questions. The artist will describe his/her training, techniques and work processes.*
 - *The Committee will convey the desired characteristics of the work, timetable, budget limitations and the vision of the wider community.*
 - *The committee may not see any window that is just what they want, for each window is particular to its own situation. Observe if the windows respond well to the setting and fulfil the client's requirements. Look for the talent that will produce good work, and the sensitivity and flexibility to produce what suits the particular church and situation.*

- *It is not essential for the artist to be of the same faith as the congregation as long as he or she responds sensitively to the liturgical tradition of the church.*
- *The committee is looking for an artist whose work they appreciate and with whom they want to work.*
- Send written confirmation to the chosen artist and letters of thanks to the others, returning their materials.
- Inform the wider community.
 - *The artist could make a public presentation describing the nature of light and colour, the medium of stained glass, introducing the work processes, showing slides of previous work and describing the techniques used. This generates interest and should be open to all.*
 - *If some parishioners are hostile and say they want something else, the committee members must stress they cannot please everybody but must have a window which suits the building, creates a suitable setting for the liturgy and addresses the spiritual life of the parish. They must take a broader, long-term view.*

3. Competitions and alternative designs

Requesting free preliminary designs: the design is the hardest and most undervalued part of the work and takes time to produce, so the committee should expect to pay for any designs it commissions.

Holding a professional competition is not really suitable in the parish church context, as the fees payable to each entrant (perhaps £500) make it prohibitively expensive. A local, amateur competition is also to be avoided as stained glass design requires thorough training as well as exceptional talent.

4. Design and Fabrication

- Once the artist has been chosen, the role of the committee changes. The chairman will liaise with the artist, while the clergy member can advise on theological aspects if appropriate.
 - *Avoid giving the artist pictures of what you want, or giving detailed descriptions of what you want in the window. However, the committee can provide a theme for the window, perhaps in the form of a plan of iconography.*
 - *The donor's favourite subject, image or saint does not establish meaningful content in a stained glass window.*
 - *It is unethical for a committee to take an artist's design to another studio in order to obtain a better price.*
- The artist will need to liaise with the professional adviser to obtain drawings and dimensions and later to consult on framing and installation specifications.
- The artist will take into account the style of architecture, how the light works in the building, and the materials, colours and textures in the surroundings. The needs of the liturgy are also considered.
- If the window may be vulnerable to vandalism or malicious damage, appropriate protective glazing or external guards should be installed at the same time as the window. Plan and budget for this now.

- As the design process nears completion, the artist will try to create on paper the final effect, almost impossible since light through glass is quite unique. The inclusion of glass samples with the drawing will help convey the final impression. The design should indicate the nature of the construction and the position of ferramenta or of physical support of a screen.
- **At this stage the whole proposal, including the original brief and supporting material as well as the design itself, should be presented to the Diocesan Advisory Committee for its advice in connection with the faculty application.**
- The design generally costs 10-15% of the finished window.
- The artist generally accompanies the design with a written proposal.
- The artist will need to provide a colour copy of the final window design to accompany the faculty petition. This will be stored with faculty archives and cannot be returned.
- The parish should have a contract with the artist, which should include the following:
 - *concepts,*
 - *themes and design approaches,*
 - *location and dimensions,*
 - *techniques and materials,*
 - *work and fee schedules,*
 - *framing specifications,*
 - *installation requirements,*
 - *lighting and maintenance requirements*
- Asking for changes to the design should be avoided or kept to the absolute minimum as this could throw out the total balance of the whole. The artist, however, may change certain things as the window takes shape as he or she finds it necessary to do so.
- The committee might find it enjoyable to visit the studio while the window is being made, if the artist is agreeable.

5. Installation and Celebration

- Find out when the installation of the window will be complete. Ensure all involved understand and agree the following:
 - The artist is responsible for the delivery of the window to the church. The artist, in consultation with the professional adviser, is responsible for the installation.
 - There should be a 1" space between the window and any outer protective layer. Adequate ventilation should be provided between the two.
 - The client pays for scaffolding; this should be included in the contract.
 - The artist pays for insurance while the window is in the studio and being transported. At the site, it is the responsibility of the client to insure. You may need to contact your insurers for indemnity.
 - The client should arrange to have the glass cleaned inside and out before installation.
 - The artist should approve the framing system before a warranty is given.
 - The artist owns the copyright. If the parish wishes to make cards or posters of the window, the permission of the artist must be obtained.
 - The new window should be photographed in case of future accidental or deliberate damage or loss.
 - Window guards, if specified, should be installed at this time.
- The window will normally be dedicated in the context of a service at which the artist should be present, as well as donors and committee members whose contribution will be acknowledged.
- Consider the following publicity and records:
 - making a guide book or pamphlet to the window. Ask permission of the artist to include a drawing.
 - having the artist come and speak to the congregation.
 - contacting the local media to publicise the window. This will help with fund-raising.
 - how to archive all materials relating to the project.

Further reading

The Color of Light: Commissioning Stained Glass for a Church Sarah Hall, Liturgy Training Publications, 1999 [from which the central section of this leaflet has been extracted, with certain additions]

Stained Glass Work: a text-book for students and workers in glass Christopher Whall (Bristol, 1999)

Note: These and other books including many on stained glass design are available for reference purposes in the Hudson Memorial Library at St. Albans Cathedral. Details of opening hours are contained in the Diocesan Directory.

Additional information and advice is available from:

British Society of Master Glass Painters:

PO Box 15,
Minehead,
Somerset,
TA24 8ZX
Tel: 01643 862807
<http://www.bsmgp.org.uk/>

Church Buildings Council:

Church House,
Great Smith Street,
London SW1P 3NZ
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