
Church Textiles

Introduction

The past half-century has seen a dramatic transformation in the design of church textiles. This has helped to enhance the spiritual life of the Christian Church. St. Albans Cathedral has given exemplary leadership to our Diocese in the commissioning of altar frontals, banners and hangings of distinction. Good design is a powerful means of evangelism going far beyond words.

As church buildings are re-ordered to make them more effective settings for the Liturgy there is a renewed desire to enhance the beauty of churches through the work of creative artists. The Church is once again becoming a patron of the arts and the fresh and powerful vision of the artist is seen as a vehicle for the enhancement and renewal of people's spiritual lives. A trained designer is able to visualise the total impact of artwork within a particular church setting and create designs, which not only adorn but also express profoundly spiritual truths. This is achieved through the appropriate use of the right colours and appropriate images and symbols. The following information is intended to assist parishes in thinking about the principles behind the production and use of various forms of ecclesiastical textiles. The suggestions should not be seen as a substitute for enlisting the services of an appropriately trained designer. A list of well-qualified designers is available from the Advisory Secretary.

Frontals

The altar-table is the most important feature in a church, the supreme symbol of the triumph of good over evil. The altar frontal should therefore be designed to seize and hold attention, and not be subsidiary to other parts of the interior. It should be conceived nevertheless as an integral part of the internal composition, and be in harmony, not in conflict with other features, such as stained glass windows, tiles, stonework, woodwork and existing textiles.

It should harmonise especially in colour and design with the whole interior, taking into account those colours and forms which are already in existence.

The design should be such that it arrests the attention both from the back of the nave but also has something of interest to those who are kneeling at the altar rail in its close proximity.

The colours chosen should be equally effective both in daylight and in artificial light. It is suggested that large samples of the proposed fabric should be obtained and tested in both these lighting conditions.

Frontals involve considerable investment both in time and money, and can last for a century or more. It is therefore important to take time at the outset to plan carefully and obtain the best possible textile designer to create the design.

Decide on the theme you wish to present - it is often a good idea to provide the designer with some poetry or a scriptural passage on your chosen theme, something to set the imagination alight.

The frontal should be appropriate in style to the proportion of the altar table. Thus, a long narrow altar table looks best with a flat, hanging fabric panel. A Laudian cover enhances a squarish altar table, with the corners rounded to avoid wear and tripping.

A free-standing altar table can have a coloured panel both at east and west, with a fair linen cloth on top hanging down on north and south to almost touch the floor.

Linen or linen with a synthetic fibre is best, as it is long wearing. Silk does not last very long. John Lewis or Watts, both in London, are good places to start looking. The frontal should have a light interlining and a cotton sateen lining.

White cotton gloves should always be worn when handling frontals, and they should be stored in a hanging position in a well-ventilated cupboard.

Banners

Banners are meant to be carried in procession, so a vigorous and attractive image, which makes an instant yet, lasting impression as it is carried along, should occupy the front surface.

Lettering should generally be confined to the reverse side, on a ground of contrasting colour, to make the text more visible thus enabling it to be read and assimilated as the procession moves along. The characters used, preferably in forms of Italic or Roman alphabets, should be clear, well formed and decorative in arrangement.

The length of the pole crossbar governs the size of the banner. If a new pole is being made, one that takes apart for travelling is useful. Once the width is established, the length can be decided by means of the Golden Section which provides a pleasing proportion. This is 1 to 1.618. An average length is 45" (1.12m). According to the Golden Section a banner of this length should have a width of 28" (0.7m). The banner should be as large as possible, but not too heavy to carry or so large that it obstructs visibility.

For the colour of the banner, several factors should be considered:

- The setting in which it will normally be displayed within the church, i.e. the colour of stonework, carpet, floor tiles, frontals, vestments, stained glass, wall or roof paintings. The situation should be viewed from all parts of the church.
- The emotional effects of the colours on the viewers. Rich and beautiful colour combinations together with variations in tone and texture can exert a profoundly spiritual effect upon the viewer.
- The inspirational value of colour symbolism should also be considered: red (blood) = life, fire; blue = soul, heaven; green = earth, birth; purple = royalty; black = sleep, rest; rose-pink = divine love; etc.

The colour shapes proposed should be cut out of paper, pinned to a background and held in position for viewing and judging in-situ, thus allowing for alterations at an early stage.

A banner involves considerable financial investment and will last for very many years. The design is the most important decision and should be in the idiom of our day.

An embroidered banner on fine silks is prohibitively expensive. However, one conceived on a textured woollen fabric to which a design of broad and simple forms in smooth materials is appliquéd can create a striking effect, not unlike heraldic banners of old. Fussy detail and too much realism should be avoided.

Kneelers

We hope to encourage the production of kneelers that are designed as a group therefore acting in their entirety to enhance the atmosphere of the church interior. Piecemeal designs should be avoided.

Colours used should be subtle, rich and harmonious and should fit in well with the existing carpets, stained glass, and architecture.

Try to use designs featuring the symbols and great themes of the Christian faith. Use designs which are alive to contemporary styles of our own day and do not linger nostalgically in the Victorian age. Kneelers should be recognised as a form of floor covering and should therefore be essentially flat and strong in design.

Parishes are encouraged to move away from trivial and/or secular themes and garish and strident colours, which distract attention away from the central focus, which should be the altar table. Try to avoid the use of subjects too holy to kneel upon (e.g., the chalice or the cross)

When embarking on a kneeler scheme it should be noted that kneelers make a major contribution to a church interior. The cost in wool, canvas, stretchers, filling and making up is likely to be considerable and the production will involve many hours of unpaid work contributed by the needle-workers. The life of kneelers can be 50 years or more.

The design for the kneelers is a major consideration. It should not be chosen in haste or skimmed financially. An appropriate proportion of the budget should be assigned to obtaining a design of excellence. Ideally designs should be commissioned from a professional textile designer, someone with a professional Art School training and wide experience of canvas work. An outsider usually finds it easier to view the whole project in its context with objectivity. The church architect should also be involved.

Consideration also needs to be given at an early stage to how the finished kneelers will be stored. This will vary from church to church and may mean hanging the kneelers on one or more rings and hooks, leaving them loose on pew seats or housing them on a shelf under the seats. If hooks are to be used, it is important to experiment with internal strengthening at an early stage, e.g. using a length of bamboo to prevent the kneelers becoming misshapen from the strain of the ring.

Further Ideas

Beryl Dean, artist, needlewoman and author, has devoted her life to raising standards in church. Before proceeding on any projects of this kind, parishes are warmly encouraged to consult her latest book: - *Designing Ecclesiastical Stitched Textiles* (Search Press, 1993 - ISBN 0855327529). Detailed instructions on how to make a banner are given, with diagrams, in her book *Church Needlework* (Batsford, 1990), pp 89-94. Another of her books, *Ideas for Church Embroidery* (Batsford, 1968) includes a chapter on "Creative ideas for banners," (PP 161-174). Although the later two books are now out of print, they may be consulted in the DAC section at the Hudson Memorial Library, St. Albans Abbey.

Additional information and advice is available from the DAC team:

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