

Looking at a Church Building – the Key Features

- **Ground plan.** The ground plan of a church is often in the shape of a cross, reminding us of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Another shape used occasionally is the circle, which is a sign of the everlasting nature of God, without beginning or end. Rectangular churches (often originally with a rounded end or apse) take their form from the Roman law courts, as these were the early Christians' model of what a public building should look like. In the law court there was a raised throne for the judge – churches likewise have a raised area (the chancel) for the altar and priests. The chancel may still be divided from the main body of the church (nave) by a traditional wooden or stone screen – if the screen has a cross on the top it is a rood screen.
- **Orientation.** Churches normally face East – the direction of Jerusalem and the place of the resurrection. This is true whether or not Jerusalem is actually east of the church's site. East is also the direction of the rising sun – a symbol of Christ's resurrection. This means that worshippers will normally enter the church at the west end (although the door may be on the north or south side of the building) as they enter from the world and make their spiritual journey eastward.
- **Altar.** The altar or communion table is the focal point of an Anglican church because of the importance of the Eucharist in worship. It is usually at the far east end of the church, but many churches now also have portable nave altars, which is a way of breaking down the great symbolic gulf between clergy and laity. These holy tables are usually now wood, representing the table of the Last Supper (medieval ones were stone). Side chapels will also have their own altars. The easternmost altar is always known as the High Altar, even if other altars are used more frequently. The area immediately around an altar is known as a sanctuary (from "sanctus" – "holy") and will be marked off with altar rails which prevent the laity straying into the holy place. The rails are now where worshippers kneel or stand to take their communion. Look also at the symbolic colours of the altar cloths (frontals) which mark the passage of the church year. You may also have a carving behind an altar (reredos) showing the Last Supper. Also look for an aumbry nearby – a wall cupboard in which the consecrated bread left from the Eucharist is kept. If a light is burning in front of the aumbry there is something inside.
- **Pulpit.** Pulpit literally means "platform". Traditionally this is on the north side of a church so that when viewed from that altar the preacher is literally "on the right hand of God" i.e. in a position of authority and sharing God's message. Generally medieval pulpits were wooden, and post Reformation ones stone. The height of the pulpit is both practical and symbolic – it demonstrates the importance of God's Word. In many non-conformist churches the pulpit will be the central focus of the building rather than the altar, and this demonstrates that preaching the Word of God is seen as more important than the communion.
- **Lectern.** On the opposite side of the church from the pulpit. This is a moveable stand the Bible and may be in the shape of an eagle. The eagle represents the way the Word of God wings its way around the world. (The eagle is also the symbol of St John.)
- **Font.** Usually the font is a stone basin situated at the west end of the church. Near the door. Its position is significant, as the water used in baptism symbolises the washing away of sin and new birth / entry into the family of the church. Some churches now use a moveable font in the centre of the building, so that the baptised can literally be greeted into the heart of the church family.
- **Nave.** The word comes from the Latin "navis" meaning ship" and nave roofs are often shaped like upturned ships. It is the place of the people and it symbolises how the Church upholds the souls of mankind on the storm waters of the material world.