

Redecorating your Church

BEWARE THE D.I.Y. ENTHUSIAST!

Some of the most expensive mistakes made in caring for church buildings are made with the paint brush. The use of the wrong paint can do untold damage. The trouble is that most people decorate their own homes and think that a fresh coat of emulsion on the church walls will do the trick.

Churches, particularly old ones, need to breathe. Because they are heated only one or two days a week, moisture from the atmosphere and the congregation condenses on cold walls and ceilings. If it stays there it begins to do damage. If it can escape through the paintwork and on through the walls, all is well. Good ventilation during the week can reduce condensation problems but never eliminate them. In terms of caring for the fabric, an open window or two may be far more important than turning on the boiler once a week.

Over the centuries, craftsmen have used materials to cover their walls that breathe - lime-wash, a mixture of lime and tallow, and distempers. All these paints are porous allowing water to pass through easily but they are also much softer than modern materials. Emulsion paints and all oil-bound ones act as a membrane preventing water movement and are so strong that if applied over softer paints they will gradually pull them off and flake. Sealing the walls with modern paints may further damage the plaster underneath and cause it to pull away from the brickwork or stonework. If this happens there may be little you can do short of replastering the whole building.

Materials

If you are decorating your church the choice of materials is as important as the choice of colours. Take your architect into your confidence early on, especially if you are thinking of changing the colour scheme. Find out what is on your walls and, whenever possible, stick to it. It should never be assumed that modern paints will last longer than those that have stood the test of time. Good lime-wash will last just as long as an emulsion and there is a type on the market that won't brush off on your clothing.

Lime-wash is still one of the most effective materials for use on old stone walls and plaster. It breathes well, is fairly easy to apply and touch-up, is inexpensive and readily obtainable.

Lime and Tallow is also still available but may need to be brewed up specially to get the right colour for your building. It consists of slaked-lime boiled up with tallow and sometimes colouring material. It is not quite so easy to use as lime-wash and does not touch up well without leaving water-marks.

Distemper is also available from Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in London and locally from good paint suppliers in about five colours. It is a material easy to use and is sympathetic to old walls.

Emulsion paints may be suitable only for churches built during the last fifty years that have damp courses and cavity walls. They have the advantage that they are the materials which people know and use in their homes and are easy to apply and maintain.

Micro-Porous Paints are increasingly finding their way onto the market for both interior and exterior use. They allow water to pass through them and therefore MAY be suitable for some churches. however, they are still much stronger than any of the older forms of wall covering and will flake if applied over softer paints.

Oil Paints should never be used on internal walls

Sadly ...

- ☆ During the last twenty or so years some churches have used modern paints on their walls without permission and there have been a number of cases of churches in deep trouble with flaking paint and crumbling plaster that has, or will, cost them many thousands of pounds to put right. Minor repairs or refurbishment of bell clapper, frames or bearings

Thinking of redecorating?

If you are thinking of redecorating your church, please have a word with your architect as it can have major impact upon the look of your building and the way it looks and feels for worship. Invite members of the Diocesan Advisory Committee to visit and advise; that's what they are there for.

Remember that you can be imaginative about colour and design without necessarily inviting the DAC's disagreement. An all-over white or cream can sometimes be dull: and blue can be cold and forbidding.

- ☆ When you know what you want, apply for a faculty, whether you are changing the colours or not.