

Questions and Answers Regarding Chairs in the Sanctuary

Do we have to vote now on the chairs?

We, the Corporation, after much discussion and prayer, believe the timing is right.

It will take four to five months for the chairs to be built and delivered. This will give us enough time to remove the pews, refinish the floors, prepare and paint the walls. Given the present restrictions on gatherings, this will be less disruptive than when we have all returned to regular gatherings.

This is also a time during which we need to consider the future of our parish. We alone, as a congregation, can no longer reasonably afford to keep the church to ourselves. On top of that, the future of the church in local communities (not only financially, but simply in terms of relationships¹) depends on making our building a shared and accessible facility to the community. This is especially so in small towns like Port Perry. The pandemic has pushed all of us to adapt to new ways of being, and this, of course, includes the church.

We've already deferred the vote once (having proposed a special vestry in June 2020, which was cancelled due to gathering restrictions).

How much research has been done on these chairs and why do we have to purchase them from the USA?

Unfortunately the Canadian market doesn't support manufacturing firms like the one we are using. Though there are a few Canadian companies that do make chairs, they were not the type we were looking to buy. We would have to place an order through a small furniture manufacturer, custom made, and the price would have been substantially more.

These chairs are handcrafted by Amish furniture makers, New Holland Church furniture. Oak wood and sturdy upholstery fabric are used. Many churches in Ontario and throughout Canada have purchased these chairs from this manufacturing company. They are one of the top suppliers for chairs for public gatherings such as churches and courtrooms. Photos were included in one of January's newsletters. (When the chairs are placed in rows they look like comfortable padded pews.)

A research committee was formed in 2019 and they presented information on at least three chairs, all of which were considered by the corporation.

Also, we wanted to make sure that the investment would last. The chairs from New Holland Church Furniture have a 15 year warranty.

Things to remember as you consider chairs in the sanctuary:

- The idea was first raised by a parishioner and brought to the corporation through the conversations facilitated by Lucy Black in January 2020.
- A substantial amount of time has been spent by various individuals in doing the homework required by this investment. All options were considered. The corporation feels confident that our choice of chair is best suited to our needs and our sanctuary ambience.

¹ See: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/karl-vaters/2017/march/8-reasons-churches-partner-secular-community-groups.html?paging=off>

Won't chairs take away the specialness of our beautiful Church?

We recognize that the majority of us grew up in Anglican churches with pews yet we have seen and adapted to many changes within our Anglican church. Some of you might relate to women having to wear hats and gloves, men were in suits, kneelers were always used, the Book of Common Prayer was the only book, etc.

Yet, changes happen and some due to health. Many people can't physically kneel due to knee/hip replacements. Several parishioners bring their own cushions to Church to be more comfortable.

Oak trimmed, padded chairs would add to the décor of the Church. Individual kneelers for those who wish to kneel, a place under the chair for hymn books, etc., easy passage for returning from the Communion rail, are all benefits of these chairs.

**If chairs were present during COVID restrictions they could have been placed accordingly yet still offer a feel of community. Currently, the pews being masking- taped marked to allow for proper seating takes away the specialness of our Church.*

A very short history of pews

Throughout most of church history, people stood for services. Chairs were not an option. When the reformation happened and more emphasis was placed on preaching, there was a need for people to have a place to "sit and rest". At first, many of these pews were only available to those who could afford to "purchase" them.

This is why, when you visit very old European Cathedrals you don't see pews, but rows of chairs or empty space.

Why don't we return the money from the sale of St. John's Blackstock Church to the Diocese?

We certainly can do this. That said, the church (that is, you!), through the process of a vestry motion, decided to use this money to facilitate and support ministry here in Port Perry through Church of the Ascension. We need to honour that process.

Also, the diocese is currently in a stable place financially. This is due to good money management, the help we were able to receive from the government of Canada through the pandemic, and through the sale of assets. Though the amount of money may seem quite large to us, it is not an amount that is desperately needed at the moment by the diocese. In fact, the diocese is purposely investing, through grants, a tremendous amount of money back to parishes to help them become sustainable.² This is the purpose of our current endeavour here.

Why don't we give the money to those in need? Perhaps a loan to a local business that is struggling, or an organization that is feeding the poor?

This money, which comes from the proceeds of the sale of St. John Blackstock, was originally to return to the diocese as per the canons regarding church property (the Diocese owns all church property). At the time, the Reverend Canon John Anderson lobbied through the Bishop's office to get a good portion of these funds made available to Church of the Ascension so that the newly amalgamated church could put some financial effort and energy into ministry. It was specified at that particular vestry that the money would be used "for the promotion of ministry", however that might unfold, after being agreed upon at a Vestry or Special Vestry meeting. Any unused funds would be returned to the Diocese.

² For example, Reach Grants (which helped us with our purchase of a live-stream camera and computer. See: <https://www.toronto.anglican.ca/parish-life/formation-for-mission/grants/>

The time frame for this process was three years, but was extended due to both the arrival of a new priest and the pandemic. Though there is currently not a deadline prescribed, once church life settles into new rhythms in the next year, such a deadline will be decided by the Bishop's office.

We cannot, as a church, offer out loans (it is not within our mandate, nor can we legally undertake such financial relationships as per our canons). Nor can we "donate" the money to other organizations, according to the stipulations given at the time of the original motion.

That said, it has always been a high priority of the people of Ascension to support the needs of those in our community, especially around food and housing. This initiative will not, in any way, take away from our continued participation with the poverty coalition we are part of with Operation Scugog and North House.

Why do we want to use the Church for rental purposes? Won't we be taking some established groups who use other churches in our community?

The vision for making our space more accessible to outside groups is multi-faceted.

Already, Church of the Ascension, has a relationship with some community groups who use our space from time to time. This happened through Arts at the Ascension, and from our relationship with groups like the Operation Scugog and North House. Those relationships are established and on-going. (Out of the one's mentioned, a Poverty Coalition developed...you never know where things will go.)

Our sanctuary offers something unique in town here - an intimate, cozy, acoustically pleasing environment - for small art offerings and music. Both Carey Nicholson (theatre) and Lynne McDonald (music) have made it very clear that they LOVE using our space - and sharing it.

Though we will benefit financially from making our sanctuary more 'usable' for outside groups, it will not be a sudden change. It will, however, open up all sorts of possibilities. Not just for outside groups, but also for us. Younger people, families, use worship space in a different way. No longer is it expected that small children play silently in the pews or hide away in a nursery with strangers while worship goes on. Prior to the pandemic, we were planning on a Sunday afternoon family service. If this could be done in the round in the sanctuary, with space for small children to move and play, that would be fantastic! It is God's house after all, and Jesus certainly showed us how much God loves the little children!

Also, we can foresee using the whole sanctuary during our Christmas Bazaar, which will allow us to also host a larger lunch gathering. Brits on the Lake will also be easier to plan, accounting for a rain day and indoor space for seating.

For outside groups coming in, it is important to note the following:

1. We will not be soliciting groups that are currently connected with other churches. We have a unique space that some groups prefer to use for some types of events.
2. We have ultimate control on who uses our church space and for what they use it. Any group or artistic event that is in any way in opposition to what we stand for as followers of Christ and as the Anglican Church in Canada, will not be allowed.
3. In fact, it will be our goal and hope that we can partner with outside groups. For example, Carey Nicholson often puts together a play-like reading around Remembrance Day. In the future, we could partner with her and host a lunch to follow to raise money for peace-making in our own community (however we might envision that).

4. We would only allow gatherings that are feasible with our current facility. If we were to update or expand our washroom facilities, that would come down the road and would be done because we as a church felt it wise to do so for ourselves and any on-going community partnerships.
5. All additional expenses to having groups use our facilities are counted into the rental fees. Insurance is looked after by the groups, either through their provider (given our approval) or our carrier.

We are getting older - who will move the chairs, keep them clean etc.?

The chairs we are ordering are very good quality. The material has a 15 year warranty and is made specifically for public use. It is the same chair that is currently used at the Washington Cathedral from which you often see state funerals.

The chairs stack up to four. Once stacked, a cart is used to move them, so no lifting is involved, other than placing one chair on top of another. We do not anticipate moving and stacking the chairs too often. They will be much easier to move than the pews are - which we've had to move for the bazaar in the past.

Practical Matters...

Where will I put my purse? Either beside you or under your chair. Not all the chairs will be filled all the time. You will likely still have space beside you.

Will I have to hold my books in my lap? There is a book holder on the chair in front of you for any books we are using.

I need the pew back in front of me to get up from being seated - how will I do that? We are purposely purchasing chairs with arms for the end of each row to help with this very need. Also, the chair in front of you will be sturdy and can still be used to help you balance. You also have the option of being helped by another person as needed. There will still be space to allow for wheelchairs as needed, and we can now accommodate people even more easily.

What will happen to the pews? Thanks to the good work done by Jim Wakeford in 2020, we have some people who would like to purchase some of the pews. We will also offer them up for sale, possibly to another church community and/or individuals. Some may be purchased and repurposed. We believe the 5 month waiting period will allow us time to make sure the pews find a good home, or some storage for those we cannot place right away.

Won't the person in front of me be too close when I kneel? They will be at the same distance they are now. And when you kneel, it will be more comfortable for you as the kneelers are cushioned to match the seats.

From the Wall Street Journal, "Churches Take a Stand on Pews, Replacing them with Chairs", 2013

Pews have been part of the Western world's religious landscape for centuries, but now a growing number of churches in the U.S. and U.K. (and Canada!) are opting for chairs, sometimes chairs equipped with kneelers.

... churches want to trim remodeling costs, maximize space flexibility with stackable seating, or create a more approachable atmosphere to draw in unchurched young people.

"Lots of people shy away from a formal church setting. It makes them very nervous," says the Rev. Samuel LaCombe, of the Windham church, who is planning to move the new chairs aside to use the sanctuary for community suppers. "Now, what's so scary about beans and hot dogs and yeast rolls? Not much."

The dispute is the latest sticking point between traditionalists and those who believe old-guard churches have to modernize to broaden their appeal. Church Executive Magazine last year called it "Chairs vs. Pews." A blog on Religious Product News dubbed it "the great pew debate."

It doesn't look like church without pews. We probably should rephrase this. *It doesn't look like church without pews TO US.* It is what we are used to. However, for most of history and for most of the church around the world, pews are not the norm. They are not liturgically imperative. In fact, a few of our parishioners, who have dared to speak aloud, tell us of how uncomfortable they are. And some of our parishioners (prior to Covid) could not attend church regularly because the pews were too hard for them to sit in for any length of time.

Chairs actually make our church more inclusive and comfortable for all people.

We certainly appreciate the aesthetic that pews offer. And the emotional reaction to change, especially change from what we have found comforting and familiar. We appreciate that this change is not an easy change for many in our church. None-the-less, we invite everyone to prayerfully consider if this is something that will help us be a better church in our little community.

Won't this be divisive and cause a rift? That is up to us as individuals and as a community. The difficult but very real truth is that change often causes rifts. And in the church, this is especially the case. However, sometimes that change is directed and led by God's Holy Spirit - and it still causes division. This is a difficult part of being human and being in community. We certainly hope this does not cause such a rift. But we understand if the vote goes one way or the other, some will be hurt, angry and find it hard to move forward. In time, and with prayer and understanding and compassion, hopefully we will find ourselves together again - even if it is not as we envisioned. If nothing else, the pandemic has certainly taught us we can be church and community without everything being as we would wish it to be.

Why can't we wait until everyone can gather in person for a Vestry meeting to discuss and vote on this?

As mentioned above, we believe this is a good time to make this happen (and we have outlined the many reasons why). The church as a whole is being advised that full-attendance in church (or for any gathering) is not likely until the summer of 2022. And that is not set in stone - one way or another. Even then, we will continue to use online resources, like Zoom.

We know that not everyone is familiar or comfortable with Zoom. And some do not have access. **This is why phoning into the meeting is possible and encouraged - particularly for this vote.** This information will be made available, and we will have specific people enlisted to help others connect - however they can.

It is also reasonable to note that some people, even when we meet in person, still cannot attend the meeting. It may be due to inclement weather and choosing not to drive. It may be due to health reasons.

Let us believe and trust in the spirit of this community! Let us vote according to where we believe God is leading us! The process is not easy, nor is it perfect. Yet, God still works in our midst and we can rest in that.