

Parishes at war over plans to rip out pews

Archers-style rifts arise as vicars try to create space for concerts and yoga

Caroline Davies

The Observer, Sunday March 16 2008

Vicars wanting to rip out pews to make their churches more like community centres are meeting resistance from parishioners in a series of acrimonious battles raging across the country.

Small communities are bitterly divided as villagers follow the example set by the fictional folk of Ambridge in Radio 4's *The Archers* and fight to retain their church interiors.

In Kildwick, near Skipton, objectors are threatening court action to prevent pews being removed from St Andrew's church, a Grade 1 listed building. 'It has caused a real rift. It's a tragedy,' said Keith Midgley, chairman of Kildwick Parish Council. 'They want to replace them with chairs. Really they want to make it rather like a concert hall.'

At St Edmund's church in Mansfield Woodhouse, Nottinghamshire, the plan to create space for yoga classes and the Women's Institute by removing a third of the pews has provoked fierce objections from the Victorian Society, which is trying to save the church's rare 'poppy head' pew ends. But vicar Allan Scrivener said it was the only way the 700-year-old church could move back to the centre of the community.

The trend for removing pews seems to be 'increasing as more churches get the idea', according to the Victorian Society. Vicars concerned about declining congregations see pew removal as a way of making church space more flexible and relevant to the whole community, not just the worshippers.

Each year, up to 60 of the more controversial cases of church 're-ordering' are referred to the Church of England's Cathedral and Church Buildings Division, while hundreds more are decided locally. Stephen Bowler, who sits on the Church of England advisory committee dealing with 're-ordering', said it was getting harder for churches to remove pews without putting forward a comprehensive argument.

Public opinion seems to be in the pews' favour. In an online poll after *The Archers* aired the issue, 61 per cent of listeners voted against fictional vicar Alan Franks's proposals to rip out pews.

Sir Roy Strong, the eminent art and cultural historian and former director of the V&A, weighed into the debate last year with an impassioned plea for country churches to put themselves back at the heart of the community, if need be by burning their pews. He told *The Observer*: 'Of course people go bananas with "Oh Aunt Maud made the hassock and granny sat there", but church interiors have always changed.

But in rural communities everything has gone - the shop, school, post

office - and all that is left is this big old building in the middle. It can't go on just so that eight little old ladies can have communion once a month.'

For the Rev Roger Powell, vicar at the tiny, Grade 1 listed Norman church of St Andrew in Ogbourne, Wiltshire, applying to remove the fixed-box pews is a difficult solution to his modern problem.

'It's the only public building in the village,' he said. 'With falling numbers, there is a service here each week, and we don't always get double figures. So we have got this beautiful, ancient building only being used by a very small number of people for one hour a week.' He wants to make room for a youth club, concerts and art exhibitions. The Victorian Society is vehemently opposed.

'It's tough. In 50 years' time I don't want people blaming us for destroying the church. It's heart-wrenching, and we are torn over what is the right thing. It's a sticky road for us all,' he said.

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2008