

ENQUIRE WITHIN

Question: *I have noticed that these days many parishes have an office with an administrator, computers and a reception desk in the church itself, rather than in the Vicarage or Rectory.*

Do you think that a more professional approach, such as a parish office, would be a more efficient vehicle for your work, Neil?

Answer: Professional approach? Possibly! But, don't forget, appearances can be deceptive. Remember the old computer maxim – "rubbish in, rubbish out!"

However, there is something to be said for creating a parish office and for some 20 years now, thinking about how best to use the New Church contained suggestions for a change to the interior to make that possible.

The idea has been mooted to move the panelling under the organ gallery back into the church space until it is flush with the end of the gallery. This would reduce the space in the church but increase the narthex area and create possibilities for several activities without the need for opening the main church up. It would be cheaper to heat and a space with more human dimensions than the huge New Church nave. It would, in effect, create another parish room area at the other end of the building.

Included in these activities could be a whole variety of things. Some of the suggestions include a coffee bar space for drop-in activities, a meeting room, perhaps a bit of much-needed storage and also the provision of a reception desk and office space.

Why didn't it happen? Well several things stand in the way of this development. First, we would need to gain the agreement of the congregation and this might prove difficult.

Then the Parochial Church Council would have to vote on the issue and this again might be quite evenly balanced for and against. Then, as the New Church is listed by English Heritage as Grade II*, we are (again) involved in layers of regulatory authority which would be instinctively hostile to the change. As well as English Heritage, we would have the Faculty Jurisdiction to navigate and the horror story would be tedious to relate. If any changes to the exterior appearance were suggested, then the Ealing Borough regulatory systems would also become involved. In fact, changes to the exterior would be almost inevitable as the narthex without the addition of a "storm porch" or similar arrangement would be too cold and the open door would make activities very difficult.



Finally, the impact on the main church area would be to change its shape and reduce the amount of space available for dances, parties and the like. This might prove unpopular.

All that having been said, a determined approach which had the support of the congregation might well succeed.

As far as the "office" approach to Ministry is concerned, I have doubts. One of the things I like about having my "office" in the place where I live is that this emphasises that when people call to arrange baptisms, funerals or weddings, or discuss anything at all, really, the fact that they are coming to a home is a special factor, a personal and welcoming feature of the arrangement. I do not like the approach which says or implies that I am available only during office hours because this work is not just a job but a life-style and a vocation. To reduce ministry to office work is an insult to the vocation and to the people who come looking for help and information. There are limits, of course, but "open all hours" is a much better motto than "open office hours."

Neil Richardson