

PROPERTY

Church Councils as Managing Trustees have a responsibility for the maintenance and repair of church property; Circuit Meetings, similarly, have a responsibility for Manses and other Circuit property. Definitions and explanations are given in Part 9 of Standing Orders.

It is the Church Council who (usually with their Property Stewards, if appointed) undertake the annual inspection of the property, the completion of Schedule A for the autumn Church Council and arrange for all other reports, inspections and the like to ensure compliance with current legislation. In this respect, the Methodist Church website www.methodist.org.uk has a range of Technical Guidance notes to assist the Church Council members.

The Methodist Church requires the regular inspection of all Model Trust property on a five yearly (hence 'quinquennial') basis. The object of the inspection is to ensure the early detection of deterioration or defects so that prompt action can be taken, thus avoiding later and more costly expense, eg replacing timbers affected by dry rot, or much more drastically, total demolition. A brief inspection, particularly if carried out by someone without adequate training and experience, may mean that the very defects that the scheme ought to establish in fact go undetected. Many church buildings constitute a significant part of the country's heritage. Some are "listed" or in conservation areas and many more have architectural or historic merit. Many new churches are innovative and significant, both architecturally and theologically. It is important that these buildings are properly maintained for future generations. The inspection represents a valuable contribution to the care of a building and a continuing record of the condition of the building, the importance of which should not be minimised.

Churches are special buildings and therefore Quinquennial inspections need to be undertaken by professionally qualified persons who are expert in the care of church buildings, and who have a good working knowledge of construction and repair techniques. They need to have a sensitivity, understanding and appreciation of the qualities of design for all periods of art and architecture.

The enormous value of voluntary property work carried out by church members is recognised. In such instances, volunteers are acting on behalf of the managing trustees and should be covered by the church's normal insurance policy. It is, however, always worth checking the policy wording, and if necessary obtaining additional cover - Methodist Insurance (tel 0161 833 9696) are always prepared to discuss the situation.

Clearly, it is always unwise for church members to undertake anything other than simple, straightforward work unless they have suitable training. For instance, work above ceilings, at high level, from a tall ladder or scaffold or on roofs, requires specialist training and expertise. Do remember that it is also a legal requirement to have a suitable risk assessment in place.

It is important to note that local Church Councils do not "own" their church; it is not theirs to do with what they wish. They act as Managing Trustees on behalf of the Connexion and the Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes (TMCP) in Manchester act as Custodian Trustees.

Work to churches and manses, other than routine repairs, requires the consent of appropriate bodies as specified, specifically as detailed in Section 93 of Standing Orders.

FOUR MAIN PRINCIPLES FOR PROPERTY

1. Whatever we do to or with property should be in support of the MISSION STRATEGY of the Church, Circuit or District. In this context we are referring to alterations, new build or sales and purchases, leases, lettings and licenses but this principle is just as true for maintenance, repairs and replacements;
2. The District is the only DECISION POINT beyond the Circuit Meeting, to give permission to proceed with a property related project;
3. Decisions will be made by the District which will give CONSENT; and
4. At all stages responsibility for a scheme rests with the local Church Council as Managing Trustees.

Churches and circuits must demonstrate:

1. That they have clear and specific plans for mission (under at least one of the 'Our Calling' headings) that will be carried forward if this scheme is implemented;
2. That the proposals are likely to help achieve these plans;
3. That the possibility of partnership with ecumenical or other community organisations has been fully explored;
4. If there are other factors to be taken into consideration e.g. demographic, social, and economic, in developing the scheme;
5. If this scheme enables the development of on-going existing work that is critical to the mission of the circuit or of the district;
6. That the scheme is financially realistic, given membership and other relevant factors. Consent will normally only be given when all grant applications have been approved in writing, 50% of locally raised new monies is in place and there is clear evidence that cash flow will be able to be met; and
7. That appropriate consideration has been given to the environmental impact of the scheme and the district's policy of moving towards zero carbon buildings.

Note that in some circumstances the District will not be able to give consent until Connexional Officers or Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes (TMCP) have confirmed their satisfaction about certain aspects of the Project. For example:

- If the building is listed or in a conservation area then Listed Buildings consent will be required from the Connexional Conservation Officer; and
- If legal documents are involved e.g. sale, lease or purchase, TMCP's legal officers must check the documents.

THE DISTRICT PROPERTY CONSENTS PANEL

1. Chair of District
2. District Property Secretary
3. District Grants Officer
4. District Development Enabler
5. One representative from each of the 4 area consultations

Roles

The property panel will scrutinise schemes coming from the Circuits with two questions in mind:

- Is this a project that fits with the Circuit and District's Mission policy?
- Will the project be implemented in line with appropriate professional advice and with appropriate professional involvement? Have the Managing Trustees the combined expertise and experience to see the project through to a satisfactory completion?

The Property Consents Panel will also consider guidance given by Connexional Officers about technical and conservation issues or grants and external funds being raised, and guidance from TMCP Legal Officers on legal requirements.

Where possible consultation will be done electronically and consent of each panel member given electronically.

If the District Property Secretary, in consultation with the District Chair, decides that a proposal is sufficiently straight forward and or is of sufficient urgency that it does not need the scrutiny of the full panel then consent may be given by the officers 1 – 4 above.

In the light of all relevant information available the District will then decide whether or not to give consent. The District will not normally give consent to a scheme after work has commenced. Commencing work before consent is given will mean that District funding will not be available for the scheme or for future phases of the scheme. However, that does not preclude the possibility of a new scheme gaining District consent and funding.

THE CONSENTS GIVING PROCESS

1. Local Church

- Responsibility for the project rests at all times with the Managing Trustees but the Circuit, District and, in appropriate cases, Connexional officers must consider and give consent to the scheme progressing;
- Consideration of a scheme;
- Early contact with the District Property Secretary over technical guidance, funding, grant assistance and legal matters; and
- Appointment of 'authorised user' of the consents website and input of information.

Please note that the web site does not have a facility for drawings and legal documents to be input – local churches are encouraged to send hard copies or scanned copies to the District Property Secretary.

At this stage the District Property Secretary will be alerted to the scheme by e-mail and will contact the local Church to offer additional guidance, if required.

2. The Circuit

- Consideration of the church's scheme and its compliance with Circuit Mission Policy;
- Consideration of any circuit funding; and
- Consent given by the circuit 'authorised user' of the consents web-site.

3. The District

All correspondence between the church/circuit and District will normally be conducted through the District Property Secretary unless it specifically relates to one of the areas of expertise that the officers deal with. (See below)

- The officers of the consents giving team will be alerted by e-mail to the proposed scheme;
- DPS and District Chair decide if the scheme needs consideration by the full panel or by the officers alone;
- District Property Secretary looks at technical issues, drawings, completeness of information etc;
- District Grants Officer looks at funding issues, including any feedback from the Connexional Funding office;
- District Development Enabler looks at Mission issues and suitability of scheme in relation to District Mission Policy; and
- District Chair, taking advice from the above officers, considers the scheme overall.

District consent will be given after all of the above officers (and the full panel where necessary) have given their consent to the scheme. Consent will be given on the consents giving web site by one of the District 'authorised users' (normally the District Property Secretary). *It is only when this consent has been given that the scheme is authorised to go ahead and Managing Trustees may enter into legally binding contracts.*

It is important to remember that "Consent is to the substance of the transaction. It does not exempt the Managing Trustees from complying with any proper requirements as to form of procedure imposed by the law or TMCP, or arising under other Standing Orders of Model Trusts, whether those requirements arise before or after consent is given under this Standing Order". (SO 930(3))