

DALRY TO MORNINGSIDE VIA THE SOUTH SIDE

An Ecumenical Pilgrimage

The relationship between ecclesiastical architecture and worship has not, up to the present, been reflected to any noticeable extent in the contributions arriving on our editorial desk. In a forthcoming issue it is hoped to rectify this omission through the publication of a commissioned article from a professional architect with considerable experience of alterations to church interiors, but in the meantime I offer a more amateur report of visits to three Edinburgh buildings, all of denominations other than the Church of Scotland, where major alterations have been made.

My first call was to the new ST MARTIN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH in Dalry Road. Previously the congregation worshipped in a fairly ornate red sandstone building at the foot of Ardmillan Terrace, but rampant dry rot became a massive problem, and the purchase of a nearby Baptist church, whose congregation had resolved to transport themselves to one of the peripheral housing schemes, afforded an avenue of escape from financial disaster. The Rev Bill Brockie, the Rector, was my enthusiastic guide.

Previously the church had been dominated by a massive central pulpit set in a shallow apse. The square chancel area was surrounded by a rail, within which were squeezed the table, an electronic organ, and a number of chairs. The baptistry (which still remains) was beneath the floorboards of one of the shallow transepts. Two aisles divided the pews into three blocks.

A remarkable metamorphosis has been achieved, reflecting the eucharistic orientation of the worship. There is no pulpit at all, and the back wall of the apse is draped with a long, grey curtain. Along the wall beneath, spanning the breadth of the apse, is a plain pew sufficient to accommodate about seven participants in the worship. There is a deliberately rough-hewn quality about the new furnishings, notably the table, which occupies the centre of the chancel platform, and a large empty cross, constructed out of floor joists, which is suspended directly above. At the left front corner of the chancel, looking from the congregation, there is a brass eagle lectern, and at the right a wooden font. The unrailled chancel is approached down a broad central aisle, the pews have been spaced much wider apart to facilitate kneeling and movement, and there is a good open space behind the seating area where the congregation can meet informally over tea after the service. The pipe organ from the old church has been installed in the front of the gallery, with a choir vestry behind. A wheelchair ramp is provided at one of the entrance doors. The elaborate

reredos which adorned the wall behind the altar in the old church has had its three central panels cut out (in a rough-hewn manner), and these are now fixed to the back wall beneath the gallery.

The previous colour scheme was a somewhat garish mixture of blue and yellow, and has been replaced by more light and neutral shades. It is hoped eventually to have several apse curtains of varying liturgical hue, which should help to offset the somewhat vacuous effect of the present grey one. The Rector explained that the aim of the alterations was to provide dignity combined with a lack of clutter, and to make the building suitable for lay participation. The central service is Family Communion, reflecting the strong family-church ethos which is being fostered. This is the primary reason for the absence of an altar rail, but a secondary would be the way in which this facilitates drama and music. The work has been undertaken, as funds and voluntary help were forthcoming, over a period of time, and the building still bears numerous traces of the upheaval it has passed through. Nevertheless, the overall effect is remarkably congenial to the style of worship for which it has been adapted. The congregation aims to be neither 'high' nor 'low'. The services are a deliberate mixture of traditional and modern, operating on a three-week cycle, and the congregation have had some success in attracting residents in the area who have not previously had any Episcopalian connections.

BUCCLEUGH AND GREYFRIARS FREE CHURCH is situated in West Crosscauseway. This 'B' listed building has suffered badly from external erosion, and the truncated spire is a displeasing blot on the South Side skyline. (But the Minister, the Rev Alastair G Ross, who conducted me round, is hopeful that, with local authority assistance, this feature shall be restored.) The somewhat decaying exterior leaves one totally unprepared for the grandeur which remains of the original interior, and the solid and tasteful quality of the massive modifications which have been effected. The superb hammer-beam roof, and the delicately carved chancel furnishings, have evoked great admiration on the part of the Historic Buildings Council, in consultation with whom the whole work has been undertaken.

The church had been handicapped with inadequate ancillary accommodation, and this has been provided by the removal of the existing gallery, substituting in its place a flat, false gallery which extends over half way down to the front, and beneath which have been provided a kitchen, toilets and a meeting-hall, the latter being insulated for sound from the residual worship space by means of double doors. The view from the pulpit

(unusually, for the Free Church, one which can accommodate only one person) is strange, but not incongruous. The pews are grouped round the central pulpit and table (which have been left undisturbed) in an intimate and homely way, and the much reduced worship space helps to highlight the fine carving already mentioned, which may previously have been dwarfed by the original proportions of the interior. No attempt has been made to partition the worship space between the false gallery and the ceiling, as is common in such modifications. The original gallery front is retained, and the perspective of the hammer-beams retreating towards the large, plain rear window prevents the spacious cavity above the new ancillary area from giving the building the appearance and atmosphere of a half-empty warehouse - which it might have assumed had a job of this nature been placed in the hands of an unskilled architect.

This is an excellent example of what can be achieved within a building which has more worship space than required, and where more ancillary accommodation is desirable. It is to be hoped that if what many agree would be the tragic proposed modification by its new owners of the superb and much less adaptable St Luke's Comely Bank building cannot be prevented, the work will be entrusted to an equally sensitive architect - if one such could be found who would be prepared to be implicated in an act of gross vandalism.

Secularists speak of the proverbial "ill wind", and the more biblically minded sometimes quote (or more often, mis-quote) the Apostle Paul on the subject of all things working together for good. Either truth has a direct applicability to the congregation of MORNINGSIDE BAPTIST CHURCH, who turned up one Sunday morning to find their building belching smoke and flames in an inferno which reduced it to a blackened shell. Already they had resolved to embark upon a project to improve their hall accommodation, and so the opportunity was seized, in the work of restoration, to depart extensively from what had previously existed.

In place of the former gallery, a steeply raked floor was installed in the back portion of the interior, beneath which a hall space was created, partly by excavation. Despite the need for multi-level stairs and connections, access both to the church and to the hall from the street outside is unstepped, and the building received an award in recognition of the way in which this facilitates access for wheelchairs. The only impossibility was a same-level connection between the church and the hall. Wheelchairs must be taken from the one to the other via the street, but this is a small price to pay for what is, by any standards, an imaginative and eminently practical piece of redesigning. Careful attention was paid

to energy conservation, through double glazing and thermal insulation, but this has sometimes led to ventilation difficulties - precisely the converse of the problem faced by the normal congregation! The old front entrance has been sealed off, with the vestibule turned into a lounge, admission now being gained via an attractive glass-fronted extension beside the main building.

Internally, viewed from the congregation, there are choir seats, an electronic organ and a piano to the left, in the centre a low pulpit and table (the latter with a pleasing amount of open space around it), and to the right an open baptistry. As in the new St Martin's, there is here an excellent setting for music and drama within the context of worship. The plain, white expanse of wall above the pulpit might, even in this denomination, have been adorned with a largish cross, but it has proved invaluable where the use of an overhead projector is concerned. Nevertheless, as with the St Martin's curtain, this blank wall imparts a certain emptiness to the chancel.

Holy Communion is celebrated weekly, as an integral part of the main service. This is a welcome departure from the unhappy practice, common in Baptist circles, and often found in the Church of Scotland also, of an optional celebration stuck on at the end of the service, perhaps even while the office-bearers are counting the collection, so that the Lord's Supper is presented as an exception rather than the norm. The Rev Peter Bowes, Minister of the church, shares with many outside (and increasingly within) his own denomination an understanding of the proper three-fold pattern of worship - APPROACH, WORD OF GOD, RESPONSE TO THE WORD - and firmly emphasises the integral place which weekly Communion occupies within this pattern. Clearly, in a denomination which places so much emphasis on preaching, there is an indication here that weekly Communion need not (as many fear it would) lead inevitably to the eclipse of the sermon. But while it is most unlikely that a Church of Scotland congregation would be permitted to dispense with a pulpit altogether (as have St Martin's), the danger of upsetting the balance between WORD and SACRAMENT is ever present, and we must always strive to prevent the one being emphasised at the expense of the other.

My pilgrimage is not yet over, for I have still to visit the UKRAINIAN CATHOLIC CHURCH in Dalmeny Street, Leith, formerly the home of a Church of Scotland congregation. But that will be worth an article all on its own!