



General Trustees

The General Trustees are the property-holding corporation of the Church of Scotland and were established by the Church of Scotland (General Trustees) Order Confirmation Act of 1921. The specific purpose of the legislation was to provide the legal framework for properties to vest in this new corporation, i.e. the heritable properties (buildings) and investments, held by the different sets of Trustees on behalf of the then Committees of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.



There followed a more comprehensive Act in 1925 dealing with the bulk of the church buildings, manses and glebes. However, the day to day responsibilities for maintaining, heating, refurbishing and developing ecclesiastical buildings remains a local one, and it is recognised that these can be a burden to congregations.

The General Trustees provide support both by way of advice and information, and financially. Contact with congregations is arranged through the offices of the Secretary and Clerk and his staff on the first floor of the Church of Scotland National offices (121 George Street, Edinburgh). The Trustees themselves are all volunteers drawn from a wide spectrum of church life and include ministers, architects, surveyors, quantity surveyors, accountants and, yes, lawyers! With prior arrangement, the Trustees themselves are happy to visit church buildings and manses to allow the opportunity to give 'on the spot' advice, encouragement and guidance, particularly where congregations are considering embarking on major repairs, refurbishment, redevelopment and even construction of new places of worship. The Trustees have wide experience of dealing both the nitty gritty of fabric repairs but also the envisioning process for taking a fresh look at buildings.

Advice is available from the Secretary and Clerk's staff on obtaining financial assistance from the General Trustees through the Central Fabric Fund or the various Bequest Funds and how to set about a major project. There is guidance available on the Church of Scotland website and staff can provide a guide on the processes to be followed. The General Trustees are aware of what it proposed, how it is to be funded and the various permissions which are necessary to see a project through to fruition.

It is a constant issue for congregations to face up to the buildings they have inherited - there is a multiplicity of different buildings styles, both in design and construction, and an even bigger variation in age, materials, previous repairs, additions (and sometimes subtractions) to buildings. The General Trustees own more listed buildings in Scotland than any other property owners; sometimes the sheer



scale, antiquity and complexity of a listed building can seem an overwhelming task for a Fabric Convener or property team; it is indeed essential nowadays to have a property team so that tasks and problems can be shared rather than having too great a burden placed upon an individual.

Fabric and Property Conveners will be familiar with the system of Quinquennial Reports (Professional Reports carried out every ten years and not five!). This system of property reports was instituted by the General Assembly to ensure a regular inspection and reporting mechanism on the condition of ecclesiastical buildings. This should allow every Fabric Convener and property team to have guidance as to what work must be carried out over the next few years and how best to organise a programme of work. It is vitally important that a Quinquennial Report does not end up on a shelf or is otherwise ignored. Observing the advice of a few words in the Urgent column of a Quinquennial Report and spending a few thousand pounds can avoid spending ten times that amount four or five years later.

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.”
(Psalm 127.1)

Churches are built to the Glory of God, but some forms of construction can cause great difficulty once the ravages of time and weather are brought to bear. Churches built in the 1950s and 60s can, and often do, cause more problems to their Fabric Conveners and General Trustees than those built in the 1860s or earlier. However, earlier buildings often require advice from conservation accredited architects and professional building skills, which come at a great expense to congregations. The office staff at the national office can give guidance on the type of professional skills required and arrange visits by the Trustees where this might be necessary.

It can be very intimidating for a new Fabric or Property Convener when taking over the reins of responsibility for the maintenance of a church, hall or manse - the very size of a church or manse can present a challenge and there is a temptation often to grab a ladder and climb up to do basic maintenance work. That approach must now be examined in the light of health and safety legislation. Health and safety issues permeate our whole society in a way we are unused to and often resent. Common sense once prevailed. However, it is now mandatory to take precautions, not just of a basic nature, but to comply with legislative requirements particularly where significant work or work at high level is being carried out to a building. DO NOT ignore health and safety requirements; if in doubt get in touch with the Law Department at the national office.

The General Trustees are mindful of the need for congregations to examine their buildings from the point of view of having assets, which are (i) comfortable and attractive to user groups and (ii) used for more than one day a week. The Trustees are, therefore, prepared to offer grants for the cost of professional fees to enable congregations with limited income to employ an architect to consider, for instance, how to develop a multi-use sanctuary which would then allow possible disposal of a hall. The Trustees are also mindful of the requirements of the Equality Act (which replaced the original Disability Discrimination Act) and places duties on congregations to ensure their churches and halls are accessible and welcoming to those who are less able.



Further reading and resources

Building and property resources –

www.churchofscotland.org.uk/resources/subjects/building_and_property_resources

www.maintainyourchurch.org - a concise guide to property matters

The *Letting it Happen* publication (available from the Secretary's Department) - a useful basic guide to running and maintaining churches and halls.