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PROPERTY CONSULTANCY

QUINQUENNIAL INSPECTIONS
Information Paper 1

Common Defects in Older Church/Chapel Buildings

This is the first in an occasional series of information papers. Having carried out approximately 150 quinquennial inspections of Methodist and United Reformed churches and chapels in the East Midlands in recent years, I thought it useful to provide general feedback regarding common findings and issues. The issues differ between older churches built 1800's to the early 21st Century, and the more modern churches from the 1950's to date. As expected, the older churches contain a higher proportion of age-related defects and are the main subject of this information paper. I address below common defects in no particular order, and due to the brief nature of this paper I can only cover a few highlights which I hope will help property stewards.

Roofs

- Tiles/slates missing or loose, ridge tiles loose.
- Valley gutters in sloping roofs can be defective and/or blocked.
- Lead flashings on the inner face of parapet walls fail at their junction with roof coverings. An indication of this is damp patches and spoiled plaster to upper levels of inner walls.
- Flat roof coverings are shorter lived than sloping roofs and soon develop surface cracking and gaps around edges where they connect to parapet walls or other structures.

Chimneystacks

- Chimneystacks are very exposed to the elements. Weathering of mortar joints causes them to recede and become porous, and allows bricks to work loose. Apart from being a safety issue, a collapsed chimneystack can cause serious damage to the roof and other building elements it may fall on.
- Mortar cappings and pointing around pots can perish allowing water ingress and loosen pots.

Outer Walls

- Coping stones to parapet walls often have perished mortar joints which allows rainwater to penetrate through to the masonry beneath. An indication of this is damp patches to upper levels of inner walls.
- When re-pointing works are undertaken to brickwork, this should be done by builders with the correct skills. In solid wall buildings a traditional lime-based mortar should be used. Mortar joints should be raked deep and cleaned before re-pointing. Your local council Conservation Officer can

- advise. Where properties are Listed, you should consult your council regarding any proposed repair works as these may require Listed Building consent, and other approvals.
- Ensure external ground levels are at least 150mm below damp proof courses. Where there is no damp proof course or membrane, the exterior ground level should be below the level of the interior floor level. If not, base wall damp may occur.

Roof Voids

- All too frequently, high-level roof voids are not accessible because no ladders are supplied, the access hatch is too small or in a dangerous location. Your surveyor will only bring 3m extendable ladders with him/her. The surveyor needs to inspect the roof void for water ingress, timber rot, structural integrity, beetle attack, presence of water tanks and insulation. (In some cases inspection is only possible as a head and shoulders cursory view). Make sure access hatches are accessible.
- Roofs are expensive to replace if neglected. Damage can occur from water penetration inside the roof void before it is noticeable within the building itself.

Ceilings

- Older ceilings are made from lath and plaster - laths (strips of wood) are nailed to the underside of ceiling joists and plaster is applied. In some cases the ceilings are 150 to 250 years old and the nails are corroded. Similarly, water penetration can rot the wooden laths. Sections of ceilings have been known to fall midway through church services and other productions. Check ceilings for cracking and bowing.

Suspended Timber Floors

- Suspended timber floors are usually supported by low-rise, brickwork walls constructed in honeycomb fashion to allow air flow through the under-floor voids. Exterior walls are fitted with vents at their base to allow outside air to flow under floors to keep hidden timbers (and walls) ventilated against condensation and other forms of damp. Blocked vents and raised external ground levels stop ventilation and this may cause rot, particularly dry rot which is very expensive to remedy. Also, damp timbers attract beetle infestation.
- As with roof voids, suspended timber floors should have access hatches for sample inspection of the timbers below. In larger churches, more than one hatch is recommended. Your surveyor can then check timbers in the vicinity of the hatch.

Note

- With the passage of time, churches will decay if repairs are not kept up. If defects are not acted upon in a timely fashion, the resulting repairs will be more costly. "A stitch in time..."

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