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Discarded Art and Furnishings, Part 2: Respectful Disposal

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“Ask the Archivist” Column, Summer 2018

Paul A. Daniels, Archivist, ELCA Region 3; Archivist/Curator, Luther Seminary

Question: What should we do with our discarded sanctuary art and furnishings?

Response 2: Options for the respectful disposal of objects.

It can be very difficult to dispose of objects of religious and sentimental significance that have been a part of our shared congregational life for many years. This is the case with objects used in daily, weekly and seasonal worship. It's natural that we attach great meaning to those objects used in our children's baptisms, our parent's funeral or in the rich rhythm of weekly communion and the preached word.

Even so, the time may come when it is necessary to dispose of altars, fonts, pulpits, candlesticks, paraments and other chancel furnishings. While one response is to “re-purpose” the furnishings within the church building, another is to offer them to the families who donated the pieces. But what if neither of these is an option? What if the church is closing and the objects need to be disposed of in a final way?

One option is to work with your synod office to locate another church, camp or nursing home that might be able to use the pieces. Sometimes, new mission settings are anxious for chancel furnishings for their new spaces. For the church disposing of these pieces, it can be satisfying to assist one of these churches in a direct, practical way, while also honoring the legacy of the donor church.

Another option that some churches employ is to work with their local historical society to display and interpret chancel furnishings in a museum setting. Many historical societies view materials from religious buildings to be part of the larger cultural history of the area. This could be a good opportunity to tell the closed congregation's story within the local context of the town and county where it had served for many years.

Finally, when other options have been explored and there may be no other alternative, some churches use an auction company to sell the remaining church objects. While this can be a sad, painful approach it might be the best way forward. Church members I have spoken to who have used an auction house indicated that it was a difficult but necessary approach. Still, most of them stayed away from the auction itself – an understandable response.

Here, though, it is important to consider the “de-commissioning” of these religious objects. If donation to an historical society or disposal by auction is used, it is important to acknowledge the change in function of these objects. Thankfully, there are several fine liturgies that serve this purpose effectively.

If you are interested in these liturgies, or have questions related to issues raised by this column please contact Paul Daniels, ELCA Region 3 Archives at pdaniels@luthersem.edu or 651.641.3205. I will be happy to respond.