

Church Flooring Basics

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Technological advances in the chemical world have dramatically changed the flooring options that are available and trying to discern what is best for your church is never easy. There are many factors to consider when choosing the best product for your application.

The type of floor you use should first be dictated by where we are talking about putting it. Because there are so many possibilities, I want to stay focused on the sanctuary area of the church complex. There are four main areas in a church; the altar/platform area, the aisles, the entry way and the area under the seating. Let's handle each area separately.

The Altar/Platform Area

This space would include the ramps and steps that lead up from the main floor. Depending on the denomination of the church, the look and feel that is trying to be achieved is significantly different. Typically in a liturgical church, ie Catholic or Episcopal, you are more likely to use stone or tile to give the space a more "Old World" feel. This would include marble, sandstone, terrazzo and a broad range of tile styles that will typically replicate the stone look. Most of these materials are relatively easy to maintain, like a soap and water solution, and are also easy to clean up spills like juice/wine and water from flowers and plants. As you move away from the liturgical setting the flooring is either hardwood or carpet. Usually the easy answer as to which you use is based on how much choir and musical instruments are located in this area. The more there is, the more you should be looking at the hard surfaces to help with sound reflection. If there isn't much, then it is usually not as necessary to install the hard surface and carpet is usually selected. While wood flooring and carpeting can vary drastically in price based on many factors, carpeting is usually the least expensive route.

The Aisles

This is an area that you truly can use many different materials based on what is most important to the church. Wood floors can be beautiful but expensive and will require a lot of work to maintain as they wear down and scratch. Carpeting the aisles area is one of the least expensive ways to cover this space and offers many options in color, pattern and textures. Cement, tile, and stone are also used frequently but are

some the most expensive options. Here are some of the drawbacks/advantages to all these materials in this application:

- Any hard surface will help to reflect sound. This may be a good thing if the room is a little “dead” acoustically. It will also reflect the sound of people and their heels as they “click” down the aisle.
- Hard surfaces are not necessarily easier to clean. At first glance you may think so, but many require scrubbing or grinding periodically. Usually the material that is used to do regular cleaning is wet and not the best thing to slop up against wood pews if you have them.
- Soft surfaces can deaden the space more. You have to decide if that is preferable. Selection of the carpet’s color, pattern and texture can be a difficult thing for a church to build a consensus on and usually best left to design professional with extensive church design experience

The Entry Way

The most important thing that has to be understood about this area, is that for most churches this is the area that needs to collect most of the dirt, debris, moisture, stones, salt, etc. before it can make it to the sanctuary. Recovery mats are what is important here and long enough to catch the average persons feet twice. This is usually in the range of 10’ in length. The material that these mats sit on is largely up to the church with one exception. In areas or the country where there is a lot of sand, carpet is not recommended. This is because the sand will work its way down to the base of the carpet and overtime start to cut the fibers of the carpet as people walk on it. The best of vacuums have great difficulty removing sand from the base and never do a totally thorough job

Under the Seating

This is usually the most controversial area when working with churches. For decades churches have been told that they should put hard surfaces under their seating because it is suppose to be easier to clean and last longer. Well, we have found that simply not to be true for many reasons. The first is, cleaning under pews is almost impossible and if you have kneelers it is even worse. You simply cannot get in and around all of the legs very well. Our experience comes from talking to the church maintenance people who try to take care of these spaces. Frequently dirty rings are left around the legs. The water that is used on the floor gets soaked up by the pew legs and

has either started to create splits at the base of them or the finish's adhesion to the wood is starting to fail. Carpeting solves the cleaning problem and more.

Carpet under pews or some other fixed seating is much easier to clean with the right TYPE of vacuum cleaner. They make a backpack style vacuum with a hose and extension that works great to in between the pews. Also, if the carpet isn't completely clean, it doesn't show. And with the right colors, textures and patterns things like dirt, stains, wear patterns and other imperfections don't show either. Finally, remember that carpet is a sound absorber. The shuffling of the feet, the dropping of the books or kneelers are not the sounds you want to reflect. Carpet under the seating has almost no effect on the spoken word, the music or the congregants singing.

Warranties on flooring can also be drastically different. From carpet that is guaranteed for life not to stain or delaminate to concrete that will never wear out finding the right fit for your church is a complicated decision. For more answers to your questions, be sure to contact an experienced church designer with lots of experience in understanding the full range of issues when selecting floor for your church.

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