



## Symbolic Form in Church Architecture: A Case Study of Anglican Church Imota, Ikorodu, Lagos State.

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### ABSTRACT

A building is nothing less than the symbolic representation of the tradition, values, culture and creativity levels of the special territory in which it stands. Each type of church architecture may have different symbolic qualities, but relatively, every church building transmits some symbolic messages. Human beings provide meanings to the images that are received from objects by their symbolic minds. The study examines Architectural spaces in Saint John's Anglican Church Imota, in Ikorodu Division of Lagos State Nigeria. Enacting from the perspective of indigenous form, art and symbols. It demonstrates the integration of how cultural heritage, traditional forms, material availability, arts and symbols transcend into the architecture of Anglican Church. However the study is an historical, explanatory, qualitative using the methods of observation and focused interviews. The church illustrates how influences from indigenous and local forms and symbols have been incorporated in sacred spaces in the Anglican Church under study.

**Keywords;** Symbols, culture, church & architecture..

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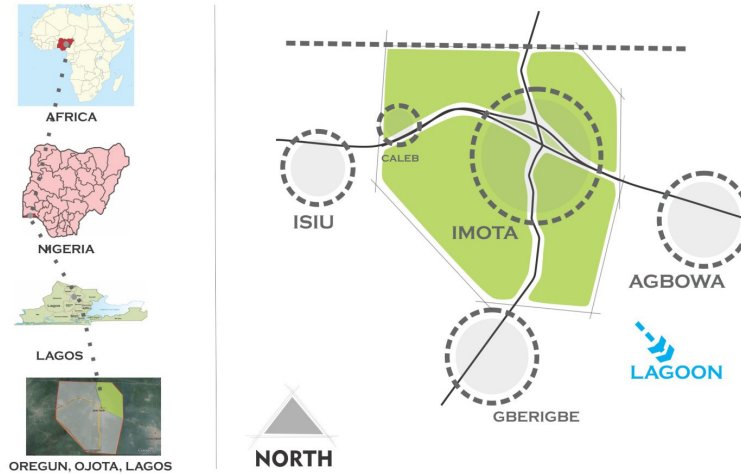
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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Church buildings have been part of our environment that familiarity with them make us take very little thought of their several existence and careful appraisal. We actually wonder sometimes how they get to their present location. But how did they get here? Churches are of different sizes and configurations and vary greatly in size and their architectural styles are diverse. Church buildings equally express their own unique tradition within the spectrum of their liturgy, traditions and costume. They vary from Anglican to the Catholics and even the Pentecostals. Notwithstanding this diversity most churches share similar interior configurations in planning. In this study we explore the symbols and the meanings of architecture of Anglican Church Imota sacred space. Imota is a town in the outskirts of Lagos. It is a suburb of Ikorodu town in Ikorodu Division of Lagos state. The Anglican Church, Saint Peters was the first church to be founded in Imota. It was founded in 1898 and has since been transformed in size and outlook to its present site and size at 33 Ayayo road Imota.



The structure of the church is a double volume interior with the central part higher than the two wings at the other sides. It has a gallery at the back entrance. The interior of the church is raised up by columns which are spaced to avoid serious visual obstructions to the worshippers. The two lower wings are positioned to afford side lightings coming from spaced clestory windows. The windows are of glazed casement.



**Field 1: Map of Imota.**  
Source: Authors field report.

The doors are made of wood with carvings and symbolic inscriptions on them. The front elevation bears insignia of a cross standing at the peak of the building announcing to the public that it was a church building. The main entrance doors to the building is made of glass and with a top clestory permanent glazed windows and on top of it is the signage of the church advertising the ecumenical centre.



**Field 2: Front elevation of Anglican Church**  
Source: Authors field work.



## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW.

The name Church is derived from ecclesia meaning people, the community of faith. The sacred house call a church is intended to be reflection of heaven arrayed in signs and symbols. Church building is a metaphor in stone of a people's own spiritual journey. The meaning of architectural symbols or of words may even change, but the process must be both logical and gradual (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2012).

Symbolism originated in France, and was part of a 19th-century movement in which art became infused with mysticism. Adams, (2002), explained that Symbolism is the systematic use of symbols or pictorial conventions to express an allegorical meaning. The symbolic architecture is the manner in which memory stores are related and the set of rules applied to the system postulated by Andrews, (1995). Symbolism is an important element in religious arts and the meanings are important to the worshipping Christians. People express their ideas or qualities in symbolic forms like ceremonial swords, masks and other objects of worship. Symbols are equally important as medium of communication and learning. We consider symbolism as an artistic and poetic movement or style using symbolic images and indirect suggestion to express mystical ideas, emotions, and state of mind. For example, the Africans symbolism is deeper, and more involving. It has value and it is functional.

In looking at the power of religion in architecture and culture it was also observed that religious heritage include the faith and tradition passed down through the generations as well as the magnificent artistic and architectural works that embodied in them. According to Doig, (2008) Churches are standing indices of human activity, and the whole matrix of meaning they present is highly revealing of the larger meaning of ritual performance within and movement through their space. Observing that paintings, relief, and engravings suggested highly organized rituals connected with fertility, the afterlife, and worship of the Mother goddess and hence processions were a feature in the cult temples, particularly during festivals, so free movement was required in liturgy and religious tradition through and around the church sanctuary to influence its architectural form. This makes theology to be the ultimate expression in the church design.

Church architecture has always been of significant symbols in the society. Adebeye, (2015) observed that the great buildings of Egypt were temples; the great buildings of the Middle Ages were cathedrals. The most beautiful buildings in Nigeria even in colonial days were churches. Theological meaning which was predominant found expression in architecture. It is observed that religion in Australia cried for symbols which were to express theology in ecclesiastical architecture in form of being full of life, joy, peace and power. The architecture of a Church should therefore, never be merely traditional but it must express the reality of God as expressed in the theology and liturgy. Adoh and Olufemi, (2014) stated that the first type of artwork created for Christians religious worship in Yorubaland by the missionaries was church architecture. Barrie (2001) identified that all buildings, both secular and religious, are powerful meaningful cultural artifacts that embody a society's values and beliefs noting how mythologies, beliefs, and rituals are intertwined with religious architectural expression

Adebeye, (2015) stated that through form, surface, space, and ritual sacred architecture occupied an intermediate position in the world that is both physical and symbolic. Theology expresses that sacred architecture that mediates between the earth and heaven since architecture is a potent symbolic vehicle for personal exploration. The Catholic Encyclopedia (2005) noted too that spaces have theological symbolic meanings citing the architecture of some traditions where roof was believed to symbolize charity, which covers a multitude of sins; the floor symbolized the foundation of faith and the humility of the poor. The theology of any space could define the functional requirement and the requirement in turn determines the function as in what makes nave different from lectern, alter or narthex, for example, is simply theology.

VanDoodewaard (2012) too observed that architecture could help God's people by creating an environment that encourages and facilitates true worship as it is an expression of theology and the theology will direct the church. The symbols created in the church and the symbolic spaces are the functions that dictate the activities in the church.



Dempsey (2015) noted that architecture, painting, sculpture, and decoration all worked together in the Baroque style to create a unified emotional expression meant to impress. According to Liliya et al, (2016) there is a process of returning to the roots, to traditions: not only Orthodox churches, but also Catholic and Anglican each temple embodies religious idea in the architecture. Each architectural element comprises a certain symbol. The symbolic in architecture of an Orthodox church is difficult and many-sided. It expresses what directly cannot be represented. It is the terrestrial embodiment of the heavenly. Liliya et al, (2016) also postulated that architecture as any other art form, has its own language, the language of architectural forms. The sense and value of architectural forms can be understood, considering the temple in its idea as the house of God, a universe symbol of the terrestrial and sacral worlds touching. It tries to open process of originating and development of the symbolic on wide historical material.

It is considered that symbols as images or signs that represent something else, because of convention, association, or resemblance. No matter what meaning a symbol may take, the fact still remains that symbols are abstracted versions of ideas. They are also indirect means of communication. They bear literal or proverbial meaning in the African context. For example, the linguist bears a staff which has a proverbial symbol at the top. The nature of any symbol also depends on the attitudes and general outlook on the life of the people. Here the role and importance of culture of a people play prominent part. For example, a bird with the head turned backwards picking something from behind. This indicates that there is nothing wrong in returning to fetch something that has been forgotten, left behind or thrown away. We can always correct our mistakes. Another symbol is three human heads carved together, which literally means the ideas of three or more people put together produce better results than one person's ideas. Its proverbial meaning is that one must learn to consult others before taking a decision for a group.

We defined symbol as something such as an idea, object, conventional or non-conventional that is used to represent something else. It could be abstract or not. Abstract symbols are symbols that do not depend on their concrete material substance. These are abstract entities that are capable of abstracting themselves, freeing themselves, purifying themselves from their possible concrete substance. This implies that an object can be described as a symbol of something else if it seems to represent it because it is connected with it in a lot of people's mind. For example, indigenous Nigerian pottery is made in particular forms that communicate specific messages. A pot in a globular form is a symbol of purity. It signifies all things that are sacred and pertain to God. The choice of symbol does not matter. The art of communicating with names may be approached from two sides, that is, in concrete or abstract. The real name of a person can be replaced at any time rendering it abstract. It ceases to be abstract, however, when the link between the reference and the referent, between the name and the person makes it impossible to change it once it has been given.

Although it is possible to recognise a number of external features that tell us from the outside that a building is a church for example, the steeple, tower, stained glass windows etc, none of these things are actually necessary for a church. A church is simply a place for a Christian community to meet and worship God, and the form it takes can vary tremendously. Most churches within the Anglican tradition have a variety of images, chapels, stained glass, banners, statuary, paintings or icons dedicated to the saints to varying degrees. Memorial plaques commemorating the departed local "saints" of a Christian community adorn many a place within a local church. All these images remind us that our journey to God is not made alone.

Saint John's Anglican Church Imota was founded in 1898. The church is located at the strategic road leading to the heart of Imota town. It occupies about an acre of land and the site falls in a relatively gentle slope. Its drainage is enhanced. The church is the headquarters of Imota Archdeaconry. The population of the worshippers is about five hundred. The church is replete with all the characteristics symbols of an Anglican setting. These are seeing in the built form of the church. The exterior of the church portrays a toned down gothic architecture with most of the windows in the traditional triangular apex shaped.. The interior is where a lot of symbols are displayed.



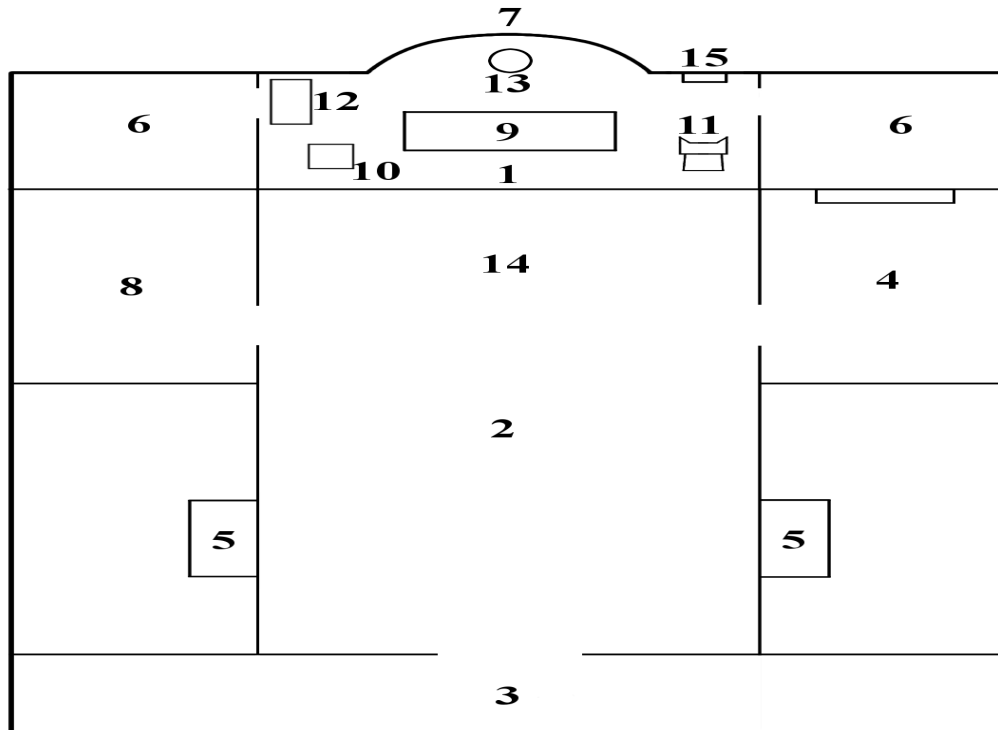
**Field 3: Interior of the church.**  
Source: Authors field report.



**Field 4: Front elevation of the church.**  
Source: Authors field report.

### **2.1 Church History.**

The earliest Christians did not use existing Roman temples as churches, but instead they used a form of building that was used for markets and law courts the BASILICA. There were two reasons for this. First they did not want to use a building that was associated with non-Christian worship. Second, and more importantly, they needed a space that was big enough to meet as a community in order to worship.



- |                             |                      |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Sanctuary                | 9. Altar             |
| 2. Nave                     | 10. Ambo             |
| 3. Narthex                  | 11. Presider's Chair |
| 4. Blessed Sacrament Chapel | 12. Credence Table   |
| 5. Confessional             | 13. Tabernacle       |
| 6. Sacristy                 | 14. Pews             |
| 7. Apse                     | 15. Ambry            |
| 8. Cry Room                 |                      |

**Field 5: Typical church configuration**

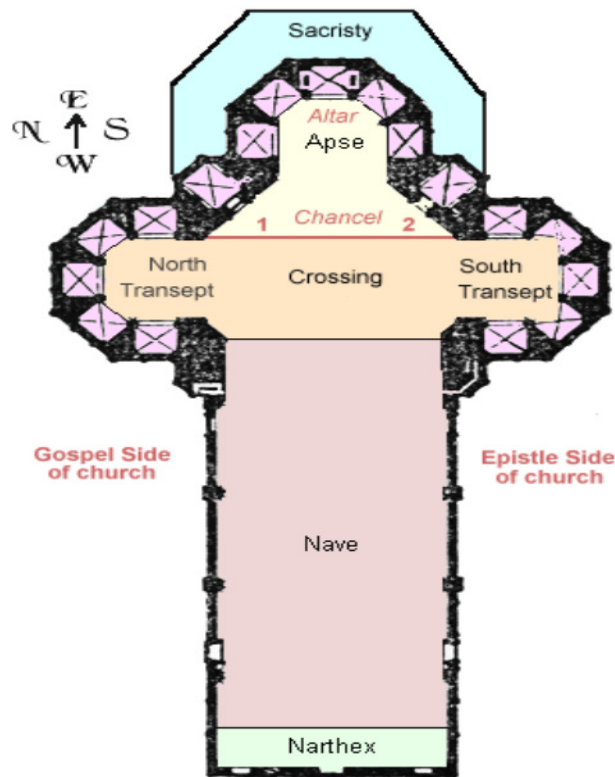
Source: Authors field report.

Over the centuries church buildings evolved, incorporating many special features, the role of which was to support people's understanding of the Christian faith and the worship that was taking place. It was intended that the church was a building to be interpreted, or 'read' and understood by those who came to worship. Throughout the Christian world (Christendom) a uniformity of design and decoration of these special features was introduced. This sketch plan considers the traditional elements found in a Christian church in both the Anglican and the Roman Catholic traditions. It helps the reader understand how the belief of the worshipping community is reflected in the material things found in a church, from the design and layout, the fixtures and fittings to the wealth of symbolic representation of every aspect of Christian belief.



### 3. THE MAIN PARTS OF A CHURCH.

Christian churches are most often built in a cruciform shape (cross-shaped), with the altar at the eastern end. Traditional churches consist of a large rectangular space in which to seat a large number of people. This is called the NAVE. The main focal point of the building is the APSE - this is where the judge would have sat in a Roman BASILICA and where we usually find the priests, the High Altar and the Tabernacle. The TRANSEPT separates the NAVE from the CHANCEL and APSE and symbolises a similar sort of transition as the NARTHEX, only here it separates the clergy from the congregation.



**Field 6: Typical church configuration**

Source: Authors field report.

Symbolic meaning is attached to all parts of a church. In the church the roof symbolises charity; the floor symbolises the foundation of faith and the humility of the poor; the columns represent the Apostles, Bishops, the vaulting represents the preachers who bear up the dead weight of man's infirmity heavenwards; and the beams represent the champions of ecclesiastical right who defend it with the sword. The Nave symbolises Noah's Ark. The direction of the East represents the Heavenly Jerusalem, and the direction whence the Messiah will return in glory; West represents death. (Catholic Encyclopaedia) If church is taking as a human form the narthex is the feet, the nave is the body, the transepts are the arms and the apse is the head the most important part and the reasons why priests and bishops are sited there.



### **The Direction of a Church**

Traditionally all Christian churches were built from East to West. For Christians, of all the points of the compass, the most sacred is East, pointing in the direction of the holy city of Jerusalem. The high altar is always placed at the East end of the church, side altars are also placed on East walls and the congregation faces East to pray. As well as being oriented towards Jerusalem, Christian churches were traditionally built from East to West because the sun rises in the East and sets in the West. The sun rising in the East was associated with dawn on Easter Day, when Christ rose from the dead. The East and West windows in a church are the most important; the East because they let in the morning sun, which symbolises God as the Light of the World, and the West because the dying sun reminds us of the Day of Judgment.

The North side of the church is dark and traditionally represented the devil, and the South side is sunny, representing the Holy Spirit. Burial grounds and graveyards were traditionally on the South side of the church. **THE NARTHEX OR PORCH:** In the first churches the NARTHEX was a separate area within a church for those people who had not yet become full members. From the NARTHEX they could watch and listen without being able to fully take part in the Mass. They were preparing to enter the church as Christians. Over time, the role of the NARTHEX has changed a bit, but it remains a place of transition, a place for people as they pass from the outside world into a spiritual place.



**Field 7: Entrance gallery**  
Source: Authors field report.

A true NARTHEX is either an outside, covered porch-like structure or an inside area separated from the nave the "body" of the church by a screen, but over time this word has also come to mean "entry" or "foyer." It is always at the West end of the church. The NARTHEX is a place of setting aside. We are ready to enter a different place, a new space, a consecrated place set aside for the worship of God. A church is a place for reflection, a place of stillness and the place for gathering of the whole community. It is a spiritual house. It is by passing through the NARTHEX that we move from secular into sacred space.





### **The Baptistry**

The BAPTISTRY, like the NARTHEX, is a separate, transitional space with both being used by those who are not yet members of the church. Baptism in the early church usually involved full immersion so that churches had a little pool for baptism; indeed some Christian churches still use pools. The earliest of these were round so most later BAPTISTRIES were either round or octagonal. When the original pools were replaced with FONTS, this traditional shape was kept. In most churches there is no separate BAPTISTRY, but just a font that is often located near the NARTHEX. It is at the West end of the church to symbolise the beginning of the Christian journey.



**Field 8: Baptistry**

Source: Authors field report.

### **The Font**

The word FONT comes from the Latin word fons meaning 'fountain' or source of living water. The FONT has holy water in it, water which has been blessed by a priest. The Christian life begins with Baptism, and the holy water which is used symbolises cleansing from sin and rebirth to a new life in Christ – it is the beginning of a Christian's journey or pilgrimage through life. In just the same way that we wash every day to get ourselves clean and ready for a new day, at Baptism a person 'washes away' their old life and promises to start a fresh, new life as a Christian. In Anglican churches, there are Holy Water stoops inside the church near the doors. As worshippers enter the church they dip their hands into the Holy water and make the sign of the cross, a continual reminder of their baptism.



**Field 9: Baptistry Font**

Source: Authors field report.

#### **The Paschal Candle**

Another word for PASCHAL CANDLE is EASTER CANDLE. For the 50 days of Easter from the Easter Vigil until the feast of Pentecost this candle stands within the SANCTUARY. For the rest of the year it finds its home by the FONT in the BAPTISTRY.



**Field 9: Candle**

Source: Authors field report.

The PASCHAL CANDLE is a very large candle placed in a stand. It is one of the key elements of the Easter Vigil, one of the most important liturgical celebrations of the year, on Holy Saturday Night. The service starts in complete darkness and the PASCHAL CANDLE is brought into the church. From this candle smaller ones are lit, each held by a member of the congregation, and soon the church is alive with candlelight representing Christ, the Light of the World shining through. Other symbols seen in the church include: Alpha and Omega – the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. They symbolise God who is the beginning and the end of creation.

#### **The Nave**



**Field 10: Church Nave**  
Source: Authors field report.

The NAVE is the western end of a church and is the place where the people or 'congregation' sit. The Latin NAVIS, meaning 'a ship', and symbolises the passage of the Christian through the stormy waters of life.



**Field 11: Interior view of the sanctuary**  
Source: Authors field report.

This image was inspired by the story of Noah saving humans and animals from the flood. The Nave is like an upside down boat. Pews are a very late addition to



### Field 12: Church Pews

Source: Authors field report.

The NAVE area, and, even today, parishioners stand during the liturgy in many Eastern Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Churches had a stone bench set into the side walls so that old and infirm people could sit down.

### Pews and Kneeler .

This is where the saying 'the weakest go to the wall' comes from. Pews were introduced into churches after the Reformation when the preaching of very long sermons became a major part of the services and people needed to be able to sit down. In Gothic architecture, the NAVE had an aisle (or two) on both sides.



### Field 13: Church Pews and kneeler

Source: Authors field report.



### 3.7 The Crossing

This is the place where the NAVE, CHANCEL and TRANSEPTS intersect. This area is often domed or has a central tower above. THE TRANSEPTS The transverse arm of a cruciform church is called the TRANSEPT. Because the liturgy is supposed to be celebrated facing East the left side of the TRANSEPT is called the North transept and the right side of the TRANSEPT is called the South transept. (CHANCEL)



**Field 14: Altar**

Source: Authors field report.

### The Sanctuary

The SANCTUARY is the most holy part of a church. Its name comes from the Latin word sanctus meaning 'holy'. It is at the east end of a church. The word CHANCEL comes from the word cancelli, meaning "lattice work," which was once used to rail off the QUIRE from the The CHANCEL



**Field 15: Lay readers chair**

Source: Authors field report.



This is where the priests would sit on long benches to sing the responses at Mass and chant the Divine Office? Medieval churches often had rood screens separating the SANCTUARY and choir from the body of the NAVE. This screen totally separated the SANCTUARY from the place where the people sat so that the sanctuary was truly treated as the Holy of Holies. The SANCTUARY was, instead, separated from the NAVE by altar rails at which the communicants knelt to receive the Holy Communion. As well as being the place where the ALTAR is sited, the SANCTUARY is the place where the TABERNACLE, which holds the Blessed Sacrament, is kept and over which there should always be burning a tabernacle light or SANCTUARY LAMP.

### The Altar

The altar is the work of art(table) or structure on which the church's sacred meal is celebrated. This sacred meal makes present the sacrifice Jesus made by dying on the Cross and it is a thanksgiving meal where thanks to God is given for sending the person of Jesus to show the ways. The altar is the table that the community gathers around under the leadership of the Priest to remember God's love and give thanks for the living memory of Jesus. The above mentioned altar is made of fine mahogany wood. Its design is such that it represents the importance of unity as a source of strength. There is power in unity or numbers. It also signifies that all who participate in the celebration of the sacred meal are all united to the one person of Christ.



### Field 16: Sanctuary

Source: Authors field report.

In most Anglican churches an ALTAR is generally made from wood and is often referred to as the COMMUNION TABLE. THE LECTERN



**Field 17: Lectern**

Source: Authors field report.

The LECTERN is a reading stand on the right side of the church as you face the Altar the "Epistle side" from where the Epistles or Letters are read. Not all churches have both a LECTERN and a PULPIT; some just have one single speaker's podium called an AMBO. In many Anglican churches the LECTERN:



**Field 18: Lectern**

Source: Authors field report.



LECTERN is in the form of an eagle with wings outstretched. The Eagle is a symbol of St John the Evangelist who wrote one of the Gospels. Eagles are big, strong birds with a huge wing-span and can soar higher than most other birds. It was believed that an Eagle would carry God's word not only through the whole building but also out into the world beyond. The Eagle would always be standing on a sphere, which represented the world.

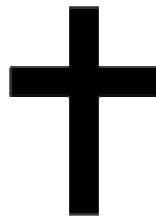


**Field 19: The pulpit**  
Source: Authors field report.

### **The Pulpit**

The PULPIT is on the left side of the church as you face the Altar the "Gospel side", from where the Gospel is read. Because of this PULPITS became much larger. In some churches a high triple-decker PULPIT was put in, with the minister standing at the very top where he could be both seen and heard. These were often located in the centre of the church so that most of the congregation had their back to the altar, signifying the predominance of the word over the sacraments.

### **The Cross**



**Field 20: The cross**  
Source: Authors field report.

The CROSS is the symbol of Christianity. This reminds us of the cross on which Jesus gave up his own life in order to pay for the sins of the world. The empty cross also symbolises the risen Christ. It represents an instrument of torture that has been defeated from which the victim has walked away. It is therefore an image of God's power and of hope. A plain cross is more likely to be found in an Anglican church. McGrath (2006), the Christian cross is seen as a representation of the instrument of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It is the best-known religious symbol of Christianity .It is related to the crucifix a cross that includes a usually three-dimensional representation of Jesus' body and to the more general family of cross symbol. The cross also reminds Christians of Jesus' victory over sin and death, since it is believed that through His death and resurrection He conquered death itself.





### **The Crucifix**

The word CRUCIFIX comes from the Latin meaning fixed to the cross. The figure of Jesus is attached to the cross. The letters INRI are often at the top of the crucifix. The letters INRI stand for 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews' from the Latin IESUS NAZARENUS REX IUDAEORUM. The CRUCIFIX symbolises the sufferings of Jesus, and the sufferings that people experience in life can be associated with the sufferings Christ endured.

**Doors** The doors to the church have significant meanings. The saint Johns door s are inscribed with the carving depicting the image of Jesus Christ. The door depicts entrance to Gods presence.



**Field 21: The south door**

Source: Authors field report.

### **The Decorative Stain Glass**

This is found at the eastern end of the church depicting symbols of angels and the saints. It is decorative and throws arrays of diffused light into the sanctuary making the sacredness of spaces more unique.



**Field 22: Stained glass window**

Source: Authors field report.



#### 4. CONCLUSION.

Metaphorically speaking, espoused Christians are called from the outside to enter and journey on a narrow path that leads to sanctuary - "holy ground". They enter through the doors by the waters of baptism. They board a ship with other fellow travellers - saints, sinners, the wise and the befuddled alike join as travel ahead. Together they try to keep the ship afloat and on course. they rejoice and sing with the angels and saints along the way until they reach safe harbour and final home in the sanctuary of God's presence. That is the journey and the mission of Saint John Anglican Church Imota.

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