

Worship the Lord

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This issue launches a new series on renovation projects. It will feature projects from churches small and large. Often the concepts, goals, and process behind a renovation are most important, not the particulars of design or size. These are transferable and helpful for churches of any size.—Bryan Gerlach

Renovation: Hartford, Wisconsin

By Aaron Steinbrenner

Designing and constructing a brand new church building is an exciting endeavor for a congregation. Consider the average mission start-up. After worshiping for years in a rented facility—setting up and taking down, week after week—it is exhilarating when members get to sit in real pews in a real church they designed and built from the ground up. Every detail of that new construction was carefully weighed and researched. All that meticulous work resulted in a brand new church that stands ready to meet the needs of God's worshiping people.

That's the opportunity for mission start-up congregations which have recently built or eagerly anticipate a new build in the future. They get to start from scratch. However, the vast majority of our churches are well past the start-up phase. The average age of a WELS congregation is 70 years old. If the unique character, design, or size of an aging sanctuary presents challenges to worshipers, starting from scratch and building a brand new church isn't a reasonable option for most congregations. A smart, thoughtful renovation just might be the answer.

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If you've spent time surfing the Internet looking through the residential properties for sale in your community, you've noticed that a huge selling point is to have a recently renovated kitchen or bathroom. Those two rooms are seen as vital assets in a home. Getting those two rooms right makes a huge difference in the real estate world.

What is the most vital space on your entire campus? It's the church sanctuary. Because of the amount of invaluable time members and guests spend within its walls, the sanctuary is *most important*. Because of the divine gifts that God gives us in that sacred place,

the sanctuary is *most important*. Getting this worship space right has always been the goal of our Lutheran congregations, whether starting from scratch, maintaining an established church, or tackling a renovation project to enhance an aging building.

Saving the Best for Last

Peace Lutheran in Hartford, Wisconsin is a large congregation with a large sanctuary. Over the past several decades, substantial improvements have been made to the campus. But the sanctuary itself had undergone only a handful of minor, cosmetic changes. Within recent years our members constructed a large and useful gathering space, added extra bathrooms and a new office wing, expanded our school by building an early childhood addition, made improvements to our athletic fields, and redesigned the parking lot. The majority of our campus was appropriately maintained and kept up-to-date. At the very center stood the sanctuary, the *most important* space. It was functional. But it was outdated. While the congregation was not eager to embark upon another capital improvement project, it would move forward if there were smart and compelling reasons to do so.

We needed to answer the question: What does "outdated" mean? Was it just a matter of replacing some worn carpeting and painting a few walls? Or were there deeper challenges our people faced because of an aging building? Were we just getting tired of the décor or was the design of the building presenting obstacles to our worshipers?

Aaron Steinbrenner serves at Peace in Hartford, Wisconsin and currently is circuit pastor in the Hartford Circuit. He has also served in the South Central District at Redeemer in Edna, Texas.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

It's important for church leaders or renovation committee to communicate clearly and often with the people.

Church renovations can be polarizing endeavors. *What's wrong with our church the way it is? We're not going to change anything, are we? Couldn't we spend this money on something else more necessary than a remodeling project?* These are questions even the most well-intended and connected member may have. They require careful answers.

Renovation committee members aren't church sanctuary experts. But after months of study and countless tours to other churches, they absorb a huge amount of information about liturgical worship and the worship space. What took months to be absorbed by a committee member cannot be shared with others through one or two bulletin inserts.

Find creative ways to relay concepts and ideas. Be visual when possible. Use your website. Offer a Bible study to make church architecture and liturgical symbolism more meaningful to worshipers.

Once the project starts, show pictures of every stage of the process (demolition, construction, flooring, pew installation, arrival of furnishings). If volunteers show up to clean the work area or provide services that defray the overall cost, highlight those efforts.

When the project is complete, consider creating a commemorative booklet that explains the changes and the new furnishings. (Ours is available at worship.welsrc.net in the *Worship the Lord* archive, along with additional photos.)

It was functional. But it was outdated.

It should be noted: Our committee was made up of a cross section of church members. None of us entered this task with any preconceived notions. In fact, to a person, we all loved our church and could be content to keep everything as is. At the same time, we were eager to begin looking at our sanctuary with new, objective eyes.

Problems that Needed Attention

It didn't take us long to realize that we wanted and needed more than new paint and carpeting. Yes, our sanctuary was still beautiful, functional, and well-maintained. But some elements of a 1960s design were not just *out of style* but *in the way*. We knew it would be wise to make some improvements, but it was eye-opening when we started to list all the deficits.

Some elements of a 1960s design were not just out of style but in the way.

- A fifty year-old building meant fifty year-old wiring and light fixtures. Our worship space was dim, making it difficult for some to read or see the minister's face. Because of this, the videos posted to our website and recorded for our shut-ins were poor in quality.
- The majority of the sanctuary was carpeted. This created a comfortable environment, but it also deadened the acoustics.
- The wooden pews were beautiful. However they were starting to show substantial cracking and signs of wear. In addition, the fixed locations meant narrow aisles, little flexibility, and few locations for special needs seating.
- The baptismal font was functional, crafted decades ago by an accomplished carpenter. But it was brittle and worn, even after several attempts to spruce it up.
- Our communion practice required members to navigate steps on the way to the communion rail, to kneel, and then descend the steps afterwards. This was a challenge for many of our senior members.
- We weren't heavily using projection or other technologies in worship. But in order to make that a viable option, we'd need some thoughtful improvements.
- There were some visual distractions: When big giant speakers were *en vogue*, we installed two. They sounded great, but they hung right over our chancel—two big, bright white speakers that caught the eye when we really wanted the cross to catch the eye. We also had several sprinkler pipes that wrapped around our gorgeous wooden beams, causing an out-of-place industrial look.

These were some of the challenges and obstacles we hoped our renovation project would tackle and solve. Right from the start we realized this was more than a makeover. We weren't



BEFORE

just redecorating for a fresher look, scratching the itch of *newer is better*. Instead, we were making improvements that would improve the worship experience. Certainly we wanted the sanctuary to be visually appealing, but above all we wanted any and every change to help worshipers to see God's Word better, to hear the proclamation of God's Word more clearly, to receive the sacrament more easily, and to focus on Jesus more centrally.

We believe we have accomplished these goals.

A Warmer Well-Lit Space

With the help of a lighting engineer, we vastly improved our lighting in ways that were practical, aesthetic, and dramatic.

Directional lighting in the chancel now draws attention toward the font, the cross, the altar, and the ambo. The gospel in Word and sacrament are literally in the spotlight! Improved lighting up front helps people to see better the preacher's facial expressions, which also come across nicely on our video feed that is sent to the parent's room and eventually to our website.

With a combination of dimmable direct and indirect lighting in the nave, the space is now a brighter environment that conveys warmth, energy, and vitality. Plain and simple: light helps people see, it draws attention to important things, it provides warmth and vibrancy, and it can even add a bit of drama. Imagine the options for a candlelight, Tenebrae, or sunrise service.

In addition to the aforementioned benefits, we see a cost savings in utilities as a result of new fixtures and energy efficient bulbs.

Helping Others to Hear and Be Heard

Verbal communication, whether spoken or sung, is crucial in our Lutheran worship.

- God speaks to us through his Word and through his called servants.
- We speak to God with our prayers and praises.



- We speak to and encourage each other as we join our voices in word and song.

It is vitally important that all these channels are clearly heard by all. Three areas offered big gains for us in the sound department.

Flooring: We went from predominantly carpet that gobbled up sound to a solid surface throughout—a mixture of ceramic tile and “luxury vinyl”¹. In the planning stage there was concern that the hard surface would give a sterile, institutional feel and create an echo chamber of clippity-cloppity sounds from shoes and high heels. I am happy to report that neither concern was legitimate.

Technology: We eagerly traded in our refrigerator-sized speakers and installed a pair of low profile speakers, our pastoral staff shifted from the lapel microphone to a head-worn mic, and our sound system was completely overhauled. An Audio Induction Loop System was installed under our flooring tile. This allows people with T-coil equipped hearing aids and cochlear implants to receive a clear audio signal wirelessly from the church's sound system.

Experts: To make sure our new acoustically live space didn't impede intelligibility, a consultant worked with us and our AV

Assistance from Trained, Outside Eyes

We found working with consultants not merely helpful but necessary and worth the extra cost.

On one tier, we brought in consultants from our WELS circles. With just a phone call to our district worship coordinator, we were able to bring in a brother with helpful insights into Lutheran liturgical worship. He attended one of our services and gave us honest and objective feedback. At our request, he addressed our committee, walked us through a Church Renovation for Dummies presentation, and helped prepare us for the upcoming phases of our project.

That led to the second tier. When it comes to remodeling kitchens and bathrooms, a skilled DIY'er can tackle it. He can call in a friend or look up a YouTube video if he gets in over his head. Remodeling a sanctuary is in a totally different class. We hired a consultant who had both new build and renovation experience in liturgical worship spaces. He understood the centrality of the means of grace, and he assisted us in highlighting the gospel. We didn't use his full slate of services. But even his partial involvement brought a cache of great ideas, just the right amount of penetrating questions we needed to answer, and volumes of resource information—for example, contractor leads, updates on latest code regulations, and decoration insights.

The third tier of consultants also proved invaluable. Experts and consultants in lighting and acoustics helped us achieve just the right balance in both of those crucial areas.

contractor. Strategically placed sound diffusion and absorption features were added. Experts using measurement tools and software were able to make all the proper adjustments and set the calibrations just right for both speaking and singing. The results have been positively noticeable and energizing. Choir and congregational singing has never sounded clearer or better.

All Are Welcome

Because of the steps and the communion rail, our previous traffic pattern for receiving the supper excluded some from the flow and made it difficult for many others. That was remedied by moving the reception of communion down to floor level. Now almost every single member is able to approach the table—with wheelchairs, walkers, and crutches—without having to navigate steps.

One slight drawback is saying good-bye to the practice of kneeling for communion, which was dear to many. However, the inclusiveness and ease of our new pattern has overshadowed that one concession.

While our old, beautiful pews could have been reused, they were replaced with new, sleeker versions, which in turn offer a bit more space to sit and stand. The pews were also angled slightly, promoting a sense of community, offering better sight lines as we communicate with each other, and encouraging congregational singing. Pew chairs make up the first few rows in the front and in the back of church. This creates additional and moveable locations for those with special needs and offers much flexibility for funerals, weddings, children's services, etc. This past Easter we squeezed 560+ people into our sanctuary for one service. It wasn't optimal seating for such a large group, but the flexible pew chairs permitted us to maximize the use of additional folding chairs. We got more out of our square footage than our old fixed pews would have allowed.

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Highlighting What Matters Most

The eye-sore sprinkler pipes were repositioned and covered with beautiful wooden beams. New doors replaced old and weathered ones. Stained glass windows, outlined with a dated aluminum border, received fresh oak fascia. However, the project was not about covering up some unsightly elements. It was about bringing into plain sight those things which matter most.

We had the privilege of working with a Lutheran firm that listened to our ideas and designed customized chancel furnishings: a 13-foot free-hanging mahogany cross, a 9-foot by 4-foot free



standing altar, a baptismal font with a 350 pound Bedford stone bowl, and a prominent ambo. All handmade, inscribed, etched, and inlaid with liturgical artwork—these fixtures are the visual focus of worship. They are appropriately lighted as a vivid and beautiful reminder of the ways Christ comes to us. Although not visible from every pew, the inscriptions and artwork when seen up close preach sermons all on their own.

Full Circle

At the start of the renovation process, our leadership told our members: "We are speaking with experienced consultants about making some common sense improvements to our worship space, which may include better lighting, easier access to communion, acoustics/sound/video enhancements, and updated chancel furnishings."

Today, descriptive words like shadowy, dim, outdated, and inaccessible have been replaced with words like inviting, vibrant, and alive. As Lutheran designers, builders, and remodelers have done in the past, we have tried to glorify God and adorn his house with a Christ-centered focus. Because the sanctuary is the room that is *most important*, we worked to get it right. For the members of Peace Lutheran in Hartford, Wisconsin, a smart, thoughtful renovation was the answer.

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¹ A high level of quality allows vinyl to be a legitimate surface for church projects. Just like laminate flooring some years back, vinyl now comes in more options that resemble natural solid surfaces (stone, woodgrain, etc), and it is available in different sizes (squares, rectangle tiles, and larger panels). homerenovations.about.com/od/vinylflooring/ss/Luxury-Vinyl-Tile.htm