



Worship the Lord

No. 22, November 2006

Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors

Douglas Tomhave, pastor of Resurrection Lutheran Church, Verona, WI, describes a new church that is both unapologetically Lutheran in design and able to connect young and old to theology expressed in stone, wood, and design. The name of this church – Resurrection – figures prominently in some of the design features. See pictures below and more under Worship the Lord at wels.net/worship. The web content also includes additional descriptions of the new church. Pastor Tomhave has served this church since it began as an exploratory mission in the year of his seminary graduation, 1998.

Church Architecture: Building Deliberately Lutheran *By Douglas Tomhave*

For months, the three-year-old had been struggling with the identity of the man in a white robe in front of church. She would ask, “Dad, is he God?”

“No, he’s our pastor.”

The dedication of our newly installed triptych altar was on Easter Sunday, 2006. The altar featured an original painting of the resurrection – a nearly life size Jesus with Mary at the tomb.

As the doors were opened for the first time and the painting was revealed, she strained to peer over the pew and asked about the new artwork. “Is that God?”

Dad replied, “That’s God’s Son, Jesus.”

People in the surrounding pews audibly heard what their minds were thinking.

“Dad, he’s beautiful!”

Setting Priorities

Rewind nearly three years. A recent seven acre land purchase in a growing area all but cleared the coffers. A newly appointed building committee sits at a table – blank pieces of paper in hand. The limited funds of a four-year-old mission congregation left us wondering what actually could be accomplished. We prayed, studied, brainstormed, read, searched online, and eventually arrived at priorities for our new space. We focused on our identity, worship, and the message we have to share. Our congregation approved the following guideline to maintain our focus:

This church building is to be a declaration of faith by the members of Resurrection Lutheran Church. This building is an affirmation in wood and stone, steel and



glass, of our steadfast resolve to believe, teach, and confess the saving truth of the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions. Therefore we as a body of believers resolve:

To design a sanctuary by which we offer our best to God in displaying our Lutheran heritage by its appearance and architecture and sharing with all people the biblical truths on which our Christian faith, life, and hope are based.

This resolution is to guide us in the entire planning and construction process so that we build a beautiful and deliberately Lutheran Church. May our merciful God bless the House we build, to his glory, so that long after we are gone, our children’s children may here encounter the Lord who graciously comes to his people in Word and Sacrament.

These priorities would help us focus on constructing more than a church that functions well. Our goal was a church that also *worships* and *teaches* well.

Deliberately Lutheran?

What does it mean to be “deliberately Lutheran”? There is no one right answer to

this question in architecture, yet our goal was to design a building that clearly is a church. The structure and materials would reflect the solid theology on which we stand. We desired a worship space that not only highlighted the Means of Grace but actually used different architectural features to teach how God works. We needed acoustics that inspired participation in worship, yet the spoken Word must be clearly heard.

To put these ideas into form we needed to bring in the professionals. Choosing the right architect was the single most important part of our building program. Much time was spent in finding a firm that not only specialized in churches but also understood conservative Lutheran theology. The firm we chose gained our confidence by their understanding of our theology and priorities.



God’s House Takes Shape

As a synod, our mission in *North American Outreach* is to share the message of Jesus with neighbors, nation, and world. The most natural thing that people do when they start talking about their faith is to start talking about their church. They invite their friend or neighbor to come to worship.

Worship is a natural connection point as the Body of Christ gathers to be served and to serve God. For this reason, we spent the most

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time, money, and effort on our worship space design. A four gable design keeps the ceiling high, helps with acoustics, and reminds us of God's transcendence. The 110-degree seating arrangement encourages community among worshippers and proximity to the chancel. We have found that parents with children and traditional back row sitters are comfortable everywhere with this arrangement.



The worship space has only three levels – round floor, chancel, and ambo platform. This reflects the Trinitarian formula and allows each Means of Grace to have its own level. The ambo is the central place where the word is read and proclaimed. The baptismal font is octagonal to symbolize the eighth day – the day of the resurrection – and its connection to Baptism. The font is placed at the main entrance to remind us that we enter into the kingdom of God as his child through these waters. The center aisle turns at the font to remind us of how God turns us from death to life. The sight line down the center aisle visually teaches us God's plan of salvation. The free-standing altar represents the sacrifice and the meal. Behind the altar the center panel of the triptych depicts the resurrection – “the reason for hope that we have” (1 Pt. 3:15).

The word synod means “walking together.” Our congregation has not walked alone, but together with so many.

Our lighting is unique with its traditional, yet modern flare. Large pendants give a traditional feel, while the asymmetrical design of the smaller pendants provide a modern touch. Yet the lights do so much more. They help teach the struggle of sinner and saint. A long arc of lights connects the baptismal font at the entry to the resurrection panel at the chancel, showing us how God keeps his promises in life and in death.

The details mentioned here are just some of the features that were designed specifically to teach. See wels.net/worship for further descriptions and pictures of architecture that teaches.

All of God's Gifts

All this sounds like it costs a lot of money. Yet beauty in theology can be affordable, especially when you use all of God's gifts. The word synod means “walking together.” Our congregation has not walked alone, but together with so many. Resurrection Church has been blessed by so many talents, discounts, artists, and laborers from within our congregation and throughout our synod. All of our chancel furnishings were designed and built by Nathan Pope, a recently retired WELS pastor. His daughter, Melanie Pope Schuette, painted the oil on canvass images for our triptych. We asked around and God provided. God's fingerprints have been all over the gifts of time, labor, treasure, and talent as his house took shape and now gives him glory.

Recently, a prospect family's eight-year-old daughter was baptized. After church, her high school step-sister was rubbing her hands over the inlaid crosses on the altar. I took the opportunity to explain, “The five blood wood crosses represent the five wounds of Christ. The altar represents Jesus' sacrifice for our sins. The triptych image shows us the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus died and now lives for you. This is the hope that we have.” Still taking it all in – hands on the altar, eyes on the painting – she said, “Wow, this is cool.” An eyewitness to God's greatest gift.

EIGHTH DAY?

The day beyond time, the day after the Sabbath, the resurrection!

Eight was the number of Noah's family saved in the Flood. The Eighth Day, Sunday, referred to the day of Christ's resurrection and the coming of the New Age which we enter in Baptism.

Huffman and Stauffer, *Where We Worship*, Augsburg, 1987



That [octagon] shape related to the rotunda of the Anastasis, the building over the site of Christ's entombment and resurrection. Furthermore, the number eight held special significance. Seven was the number of completeness – seven vices, seven virtues, seven days in the week, seven notes in the musical scale. The number eight was thus the number of beginning again and a significant sign to use in conjunction with the 'rebirth' aspect of Baptism.

Caemmerer, *Visual Art in the Life of the Church*, Augsburg, 1983



And that seventh age will be our Sabbath, a day that knows no evening but is followed by the Day of the Lord, an everlasting eighth day, hallowed by the resurrection of Christ, prefiguring the eternal rest, not only of the spirit, but of the body as well.

St. Augustine, *The City of God*, Bk.22, Ch.30



Even this side of heaven, the “seventh day” – numbered eighth by ancient tradition – is never “start yet another dreary week” but something entirely new: the always new life in Christ.

The Verona mission statement was influenced by similar thinking at Our Savior Lutheran, Houston, TX. New or remodeled churches need not imitate the appearance of Houston or Verona or any church featured in this series. But a deeply theological, sacramental, and Christocentric approach to church design is surely worth emulating by any WELS church that is building or renovating. Interested readers are encouraged to study a comprehensive description at the Houston website: www.osl.cc/ff/index.html. Both church and font are eighth day octagons.

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