

Excellence in Unusual Places

Of Plans, Presence and People

(This article supplements the March 2007 issue of [Worship the Lord](#).)

By John M. Koelpin

John Koelpin, pastor at Calvary, Dallas, TX, describes a new church dedicated in September of 2004. It seats 300 and has an interior ceiling height of 38 feet. See pictures below and more under [Worship the Lord](#) at wels.net/worship. The web content includes additional descriptions of the new church. Pastor Koelpin has served this church since 1993. He is the South Central District worship coordinator.

Plans

For that past two and one half years, Calvary has worshiped in its new sanctuary. It provides us with a forum in which we strive to worship with excellence. That building, however, is the fruit of many more years of planning. Long before we had an excellent *place*, we strove for excellence in our *plans*.

After many hours of thoughtful planning and prayer, Calvary's leadership determined that a major building project was most likely in our future. Some already had ideas of what needed to be built first – a new sanctuary, a "Christian Life" center, or a new/remodeled school. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed before any lobbying for projects began. Some leaders proposed first forming a facilities planning committee before we engaged in any talk of building projects. The committee's task was simple: present to the congregation a long-range facilities plan that maximizes the 3.5 acres of land we own. Calvary had already determined to remain at its present location, but had little idea how best to use our site.

The concept of a master plan for our facilities assumed a phased approach to future building. That assumption strongly drove the process for finding an architect for our master plan. We were particularly interested in interviewing firms with experience in developing phased master plans and with a reputation for seeing those phases to completion.

The idea of developing a master plan was an excellent one. Yes, it added an extra step in the process and meant more time before a building would rise from the ground. But it was worth it. It's hard to over-estimate the value of having a fresh set of architecturally trained eyes to look over the church's site. They saw things (some of them very obvious when they pointed them out) that we would not have imagined. For example, Calvary occupies a corner lot with a highly trafficked road on one side and a much more lightly trafficked road on the other. When Calvary was first built, the parking lot entrances and the direction of the sanctuary faced

what was now the more lightly trafficked road. (When it was first built, 40 years ago, neither road had much traffic!). I can't speak for everyone at our congregation, but I assumed that was the way it would always have to be! However, one of the first suggestions from the architects for the master plan was to move the main entrance and direction of the proposed new sanctuary toward the more trafficked road. In the two and one half years since that sanctuary has been built, we have seen the benefits of that greater visibility.



View driving north on the busier street

Taking the time to develop a master plan helped force the congregation to think about its priorities in ministry and address future concerns in an organized process. Once the master plan was finished, Calvary could look at a “proposed” future with more clarity and make a decision about our present direction in a more informed manner. Only after the master plan was complete did we decide which building (if any) would be phase one. You may not think of “facilities planning” as part of excellence in worship, but time spent on front-end planning can make the back-end result more satisfying.

Presence

The word “presence” can describe many things in worship – some of them in “unusual” places. Beyond the physical presence of Word and sacrament or the compelling presence of the worship leaders, there is the presence of your facility in the community and the presence your facility exudes on the inside.

The sidebar in issue #23 of [Worship the Lord](#), mentions that “we can become so familiar with our comfortable settings that we notice less and less the things that need attention.” We can take that one step farther. We become so familiar with our settings that we don't even see what's there **or what's not there**. Here's what I mean. Because I work at Calvary, I assume people in the community know that we have a church and a school. It seems obvious to me. But it's not obvious to the

community. Most people that I talk to in the neighborhood (I am privileged to live three blocks from our facilities) – many of whom have lived here for many years – don't know that we operate a school. Our signage is not obvious enough and our buildings don't announce it very loudly. Some didn't even know that a **church** occupied that corner of real estate! Calvary has existed in our corner for almost 40 years. But our presence in the community has remained hidden from view.

Since the completion of the building, Calvary has seen its number of visitors from the neighborhood triple.

Big bulldozers and stories-high cement machines tend to give you a presence in the community. As our building went up, people would roam the sidewalks as they took their evening walk and watch the progress. Signs along the streets helped people identify who we were and what we were doing. The position of the new sanctuary on the main road and the obvious tall steeple have helped the casual passer-by to identify us as "that church on the corner." Since the completion of the building, Calvary has seen its number of visitors from the neighborhood triple. Calvary canvass teams have noted the comments from the community that they appreciate how nice the property looks. To be sure, the excellence of our God in forgiving our sins is the only means by which people come into the Church (note: big "C" Church), but excellence in the outward presence of your facility may get some people into the church (note: little "c" church, i.e. the church building).

Once inside, Calvary hoped for a certain "presence" in the interior. The architect designed a wider footprint to get the worshiper closer to the altar area. But we did not want to sacrifice awe and reverence on the altar of immanence. The height of the building (38 feet at its peak) and the materials with which it is built (split face block walls, wood ceiling, wood laminate trusses, and tile) helped give the structure a feeling of transcendence. In an effort to maintain a "pleasing" presence in the sanctuary, the architect even designed the direction the tiles would face, setting the grout lines at diagonals to the rest of the sanctuary.



38 foot high ceiling reinforces a sense of awe and reverence

Facility “presence” is not something we think much about Sunday after Sunday, but we certainly gave it a lot of thought before we built. A little forethought about presence can be another of those unusual places to strive for excellence that will reap benefits later on.

We may not *think* much about worship space, but that space has an *impact* on us whether we think about it or not. Recall Winston Churchill’s famous remark, quoted in the first issue of this *Worship the Lord* architecture series ([#18, March 2006](#)): “We shape our buildings, and ever after they shape us.” BG



Wood ceiling



Tile grout lines at diagonals to the rest of the sanctuary



Wide building brings people closer to chancel

People

The Facilities Planning Committee and the Building Committee have long since finished the bulk of their work (Is it ever really done?). By God's grace, we worship in a beautiful building that gives us an opportunity to strive for excellence week after week. By far the greatest assets for achieving the finished product were the people. At just the right time and with just the right gifts God placed people among us to bring our project to completion. It was more than just asking for volunteers. Rather, God provided us with lay leaders who were wise to choose men and women for various committees who had the gifts needed for specific tasks. Today some worship in the building they helped plan while others have moved on to other cities. Their excellence is a memory of the past as we worship within the fruits of their labors in the present. But their excellence was needed. We may not always think of people on a building committee as the place to look for excellence in worship, but it is.

Thank the Lord for people who were willing to move forward in faith and engage a project dedicated to our excellent God.

Thank the Lord for a congregational president who resisted the urge to "break ground" right away. He preached patience for a master plan and time to get "everyone on board." Thank the Lord for building committee chairmen that had the ability to lay their own ideas aside and listen to the thoughts of others. Thank the Lord for men and women on the committees who were not afraid to share their ideas, even offering design solutions (much to the delight of the architects). Thank the Lord for committee members whose secular vocations were in the construction business and, consequently, knew how to communicate in ways the architect and contractor could understand. Thank the Lord for people who gave huge chunks of volunteer time and for those who gave even what little time they had to complete the project. Thank the Lord for the people of God at Calvary who were willing to move forward in faith and engage a project dedicated to our excellent God. In the end, everyone involved benefited. And even those who weren't involved – new members and mission prospects who weren't around for the project – will benefit from this house of God dedicated to preaching his excellent message of salvation in Jesus Christ.

[Additional photos](#)