



# Worship the Lord

No. 18, March 2006

Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors

## New Series: Church Architecture

Winston Churchill's famous remark at the rebuilding of the Houses of Parliament is quoted in numerous books and articles on church architecture: "We shape our buildings, and ever after they shape us." Perhaps Churchill is frequently quoted because people aren't completely happy with their church designs. James White wrote, "Church architecture not only reflects the ways Christians worship but architecture also shapes worship or not uncommonly, misshapes it."

This issue of *Worship the Lord* begins a series on church architecture. Most readers of this newsletter are not planning to build or renovate. Still, the principles to be articulated are worth our time and thought for minor changes to existing buildings or as catalyst for a more extensive future remodeling project. Design topics can be theological or practical. While there is no single correct way to design various features of a church, there is often room for improvement. So, a year in which students at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary worship in a renovated chapel also begins a series of articles to encourage assessment of parish worship spaces.

Jonathan Schroeder serves as home missionary and pastor of Faith, Sharpsburg, GA. For more insights on worship in Sharpsburg's new church (pictured below), see the Worship website for Schroeder's plenary address from the 2005 worship conference.

Bryan Gerlach

## Something Old, Something New By Jonathan Schroeder

"Now what?" The question hung in the air for a few seconds. We stood in a grassy field, formerly home to a few horses, but as of that morning's closing it was to be the future home of our new church. It was a good day.

Our mission congregation had purchased eight acres of land. We were ready to build our first facility. But what would it be like? The pastor and building chairman looked over the land and thought about all the possibilities. What kind of building would we design? What style or shape? What materials?

We began with God's Word. We spent six weeks in Sunday morning Bible class studying Lutheran worship and then six weeks looking at how Lutheran worship principles have been expressed in architecture.

When we finished, these were our stated goals:

- 1) express our Lutheran theology in architecture,
- 2) show our appreciation for the treasure of our Lutheran heritage,
- 3) construct a building that would serve as a tool for outreach to the lost with the Gospel of Christ.

The plan called for a design based on old lines and forms but in an updated style, a mix of the old and the new.

**Exterior: Building Sacred Space.** We wanted a building that looked like a classic church. We emulated a northern European style to celebrate our Lutheran heritage. We built a bell tower to mark this building for the community as a house of God, a place where God interacts with his people.

Our design differed greatly from the other churches in the community. Most were steel buildings that emphasized function entirely over form. Our design served to mark this building as sacred space. So many of our unchurched first-time visitors remarked that it was this emphasis on sacred space that made them look at us more closely. When they decided to check out a church for the first time, they gravitated toward one that evoked the concept of sacred space.

It seems that even the Christians who belong to the other churches in the area long for sacred space. We have had 57



wedding requests for the summer of 2006. It is, of course, anecdotal, but telling.

### **Gathering Space: The New Narthex.**

Our sanctuary focuses on our fellowship with God. Our gathering space focuses on our fellowship with each other. We wanted a space where the congregation could gather after worship to express joy in the body of Christ, a space that would help assimilate new members or visitors into the congregation. This required a large space. However, being a mission church, we had definite space and budget limits. Our solution was to design a gathering area that would serve a number of different functions.

First, our gathering space serves as the hub from which the rest of the structure radiates. Eventually there will be three legs to the building, worship space, classrooms space, office/fellowship space. Each of these legs is connected to the gathering area. The gathering space is multiuse space. We utilize it for extra teaching spaces, and it also serves as our fellowship hall. It's large enough to seat 140 people at tables for dinner. We use this space more than any other in our building.

**Interior: Blending Transcendence and Immanence.** The interior design of our sanctuary could be called neo-gothic. Specifically, it emphasizes verticality, and utilizes load-bearing masonry. The nave is built on four 50,000-pound concrete arches. They serve both functionally to support the roof, and aesthetically to give the space a sense of rock-solid stability. The arches rise to an interior ceiling height of 38 feet. The verticality of the space and upward sweep of the windows help to communicate that we are in the house of God; we have come to worship He Who is Above.

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The design is neo-gothic, because it is an update on the old gothic style. The old gothic churches tended to be long and narrow. We wanted to try and find the best of both worlds. Our nave is very broad; in fact, our length to width ratio is 6:5. In other words, we bring the people closer to the front of the nave by making it wider rather than longer. This allows more people to be close to the chancel and close to each other. The breadth of the building emphasizes that God is among us, and we are among the body of Christ.

**Chancel Furnishings: Celebrating the Means of Grace.** How can we express our theology in our chancel appointments? Our baptismal font is an example. Our goal was to build and place a font in such a way as to express our theology of baptism. The importance of baptism as a Sacrament suggested a large font. As we looked at fonts of the past, stone stood out as a material to use. We decided again to use something old, something new. We designed a large cast stone font, over three feet wide. Stone connotes age. But the design is simple and modern: a table and a bowl.

Placement of the font gave us another opportunity to express theology. We placed the font at the foot of the chancel in the center aisle, on the same axis with the altar. Its location stresses the importance of baptism and reminds us what baptism means for our daily life. As we approach the altar for the Supper, we go past the font where God adopted us into his family.

Yes, this placement means that bride and groom have to go around the font on the way to the altar. I personally like the symbolism, but I understand that not every bride or mother of the bride will agree. So we compromised and decided that any bride who could lift the font could have it moved out of the way. Since it weighs about 350 pounds, I don't want to disagree with the bride who can.

Two years after that day in the grassy field, the same pastor and building chairman were working on the landscaping at the new church building. A man stopped by to talk about the building. He said, "This building makes a statement. It says that you celebrate your past, but want to be relevant in the present. It says that you take your faith and your God seriously." It was a good day.

See the *Worship* website for additional photos of the Sharpsburg church.



## Sanctinasion and Jumbotron?

Economic realities in some situations might seem to require worship in a multiuse space. High tech worship might seem to be the wave of the future or the demand of the present. But here's another perspective.

"Thumbing through the biblical church model in Acts, I can't find anything about seeker-friendly buildings. What's there is a lot about seeker-friendly Christians. . . . [Megachurches] attract middle-age adults like iron filings. If they can be spiritually filled there, then bully for them. But my generation isn't in such awe.

Amid a culture inundated with bigness and cellular technology, iPods and TiVo, the technologized megachurch is no longer impressive. In fact, many young Christians come to church to get asylum from this worldliness. . . . Studies say our generation is the most conservative in decades on issues of religion, suggesting we're averse to the risks that churches with a flashy, pop-culture bent take to appeal, ironically, to us." Clint Rainey, a twentysomething journalism student. Dallas Morning News, July 25, 2005.

One WELS effort to enable a sense of transcendence in a multiuse space is Cross of Glory, Peoria, AZ. Similar to Sharpsburg's impact, another striking new WELS church (Antioch, IL) has seen a remarkable increase in visitors. Here, too, people from the community – not far from megachurch Willow Creek – appreciate that "it looks like a church." Photos of both Peoria and Antioch are at the *Worship* website.

