

November 2006

## Further Discussion: *Building Deliberately Lutheran*

[The comments below complement the [November 2006](#) issue of *Worship the Lord*, a publication of the WELS Commission on Worship.]

By Pastor Douglas Tomhave

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](http://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.

### Not recreating the wheel

Our building committee had no intent to do something that had not been done before. We did not intend to be original thinkers or pioneers on our new building. We did, however, want to make sure that we thought through everything before proceeding. Four walls, a roof, and a steeple simply would not do.

For months, we asked our members to bring pictures from any church that they visited. We looked online. We researched articles on theology and architecture. We also wanted a building that served as a continuum, bridging the past to the present and on into the future. You will see that we wanted to take old architectural features and blend them with current features and function. (You can see how our building guidelines reflect this.)

### The importance of a good architect

Good architects usually aren't the least expensive, but we learned that it is an important expense. The firm that we choose was one that understands Lutheran theology, not just church architecture. We hired Groth Design Group out of Cedarburg, WI. We did not choose to use a design/build set up. We hired a separate architect and builder. The end product was far greater than we expected. An analogy might go like this: The architect designed a Cadillac, the builder would scale back with cost and value. The result was that we ended up with a nice Buick with leather interior. Excellence without unnecessary extravagance.

## What about the cost?

A sobering reality that we faced immediately was that building anything today comes at a great cost. Since this is true, we prioritized our worship area (the most expensive space). This is the place where our God comes and serves us in Word and Sacrament and we respond as his corporate body. Also, the worship space will never get any cheaper to build, so we decided to tackle those expenses now. We also knew that we could not afford everything right away, so we intentionally roughed in and planned things to add in the future. (We have space for a future organ [even pipes], stained glass, future triptych panels, technology, video cameras for web casting, and planned expansion.)

A sensitivity to cost helped us plan the worship and chancel space to be simple and deliberate. Our chancel is nearly a quarter of the whole worship space and hosts only an altar, ambo, triptych, and free-standing crucifix. (The font is on the entry path.) These furnishings are large and dramatic. The point and priority is clear: we focus on the Word and Sacrament.

## Chancel space

We believe that less is more. Therefore you will notice the altar and ambo have no paraments. Everything in the chancel area is big, spacious, dominant, and simple. **No clutter.** A free-standing parament – 12 feet tall! –and the pastoral stole provide seasonal color. We wish to spend our money on commissioning new triptych side panel portraits that teach the church year. Quality paintings and stained glass are timeless. Paraments can cost thousands, and one thing I notice is that time is not always kind to them. Faded and dated paraments make a statement that isn't always positive.

The altar was constructed to look like a sepulcher. This reminds us of a sacrifice that ended in death. The corbels support the upper portion. The mensa hangs over the sepulcher about 12-15 inches all around to give the visual of a table. The mensa is not the tight fitting top that goes on a sepulcher; the idea is tomb and table, sacrifice and meal. Here the Lord's sacrifice is now the substance of the meal he hosts.

The altar is bare, reminding us of Christ's bareness on the cross and without proper burial in the tomb. The altar is not a flower stand, offering holder, or book rest. No fair linen covers the inlaid crosses. (The use of the altar for these purposes is fine and good; we just didn't design things that way.) We are planning two large and low profile 3" pillar candle holders for the altar in the future. Otherwise the elements alone rest on the altar. This is our practice that was developed as we reflected on what we have seen (likes or dislikes) and what gives us opportunity to

teach. The only other items that will occupy our chancel space are a paschal candle and, during Lent, a crown of thorns candle stand with seven pillar candles.

### **What did we do to be “deliberately Lutheran”?**

A simple goal was to bring along our cherished past into the present. As you approach the front doors, you will notice “U.A.C.” etched in stone above the mantel. So many have asked what this means (including almost every carpenter, mason, electrician, and plumber who worked on our building). To be able to explain the “Unaltered Augsburg Confession” and its meaning for the Lutheran church is an awesome opportunity (plus 475 years of God’s grace).

We used our lighting to bridge the old with the new. The large pendant lights connect the gathering and worship spaces. These lights actually create the visual of the traditional long and narrow church naves of the past.

The small pendants are done in an asymmetrical parabola to connect the baptismal font to the ambo, altar, and triptych. This lighting teaches how God keeps his promises from baptism to the resurrection. Also, it teaches the path of sinner and saint. Our life as sinners is not a straight line. We walk away from God in sin and God is constantly drawing us back to himself through Word and Sacraments (the very things these lights connect). Our life ends up in the shape of a parabola. Yet the Christian life always ends in the resurrection.

We used asymmetrical design to create interest in the building and also to teach. We actually wanted to create architectural tension. Our focal point in worship is a corner rather than a flat wall. This is resolved with different features. The suspended wing walls serve as a matte for portraits of the triptych and help erase the corner and bring your focus down to the altar.

You can imagine how two engineers on our building committee struggled with the asymmetrical ideas. I believe that one guy had to almost retrain his brain. When he saw it physically take shape, he came to love it. The building is far from boring; in fact, it keeps people's interest. You may notice that we did not use conventional colors on the walls. The colors are very cool but quite radical in the corner triangles with deep blues and clays. All in all, the architect did not disappoint us in design or creativity. Our builder, Roberts Construction in Madison, did a good job keeping us under budget. This was amazing in and of itself.

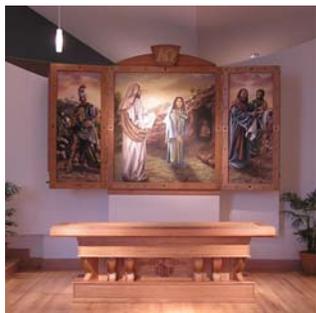
We also gave careful consideration to sight lines. As you enter the sanctuary, the sight line over the font follows to a window. The future stained glass will be Jesus and John in the River Jordan. The sight line over the ambo is a window that will eventually be enlarged and feature the Holy Spirit as a dove – picturing verbal inspiration. All of the windows are designed with an offset cross in the framework.

The idea is to teach that the cross was necessary, but it is offset because the resurrection is “the reason for the hope that we have.”

The ambo is strategically placed on the structural line that follows the backbone of our building. The picture is that the Word – read and proclaimed – is the backbone of our ministry. Sola Scriptura.

### The triptych altar

Triptych is Greek for “three images.” Our triptych altar was an idea inspired by Martin Luther’s church in Wittenberg. Our idea for a larger scale triptych came from the new church at [Faith Lutheran Church, Antioch, IL](#). Our free-standing altar, triptych, ambo, and baptismal font were designed and build by Pastor Nathan Pope. His daughter, Melanie Pope Schuette, painted the portraits. The side panels can be changed throughout the church year to teach the seasonal Gospel narratives. Our goal was to teach God’s gospel with clear symbols and pictures. The center panel is the snapshot of Mary recognizing Jesus’ voice in garden. The empty tomb and glorified Jesus teach the resurrection. We will commission future panels to help our chancel teach visual learners of all ages.



The triptych was a common feature in European churches. We chose this form to unite us with the roots of our confession as Lutherans.

On the front of our triptych is a mosaic of a cross crosslet. The mosaic contains over three thousand pieces of stained oak and blood wood that makes a design of five crosses.



(The five crosses represent the five wounds of Christ and match the five inlaid crosses on altar.)

The mosaic art form brings us back to the East and connects us to the roots of our Christian faith.

The mantel of the center panel has a large Alpha and Omega with gold leaf outline to remind us that our eternal God is in control no matter what is happening in the panels – whether positive or negative responses to the gospel of the resurrection.

### **We're never done**

All these design features are all fine and good, but they don't convert anyone. We aren't done with our church, because the Holy Christian Church is not a building. A goal we had from the beginning is that our building would aid us in worship and outreach. But our work is never done in growing God's Church in God's way. So we work to fill this building with new hearts and lives that they might hear, experience, and know the God who reveals himself in Word and Sacrament. These means are the center and heart of all we do to God's glory.