



Worship the Lord

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Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors

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.

Church Architecture: Excellence in Unusual Places Of Patience, Pushing, and Professionals

By John M. Koelpin

Beyond a church's integrity in doctrine and practice, people – pastors, members, and guests – are looking for excellence in worship. That means excellence in homiletic study and style, excellence in the liturgical arts (from the presiding minister, the musicians, and the altar guild), and excellence in facility planning and maintenance. But excellence can be found in more places than in the stained glass windows, at the altar, or from the organ bench. Excellence can also hide away in nooks and crannies you maybe haven't considered. Let me share with you a few of those places.

During the planning stages for our new sanctuary, the architect invited the acoustic engineer to a meeting. His first question caught us off guard. (We were expecting him to address the "sound-absorbing" padded pews. It ends up they really don't!) His question was a good one: "What is the most important thing you want people to hear?" We concluded, "The spoken word." With that in mind, the acoustic engineer added facility improvements and designed a sound system that would maximize the spoken word. He wanted us to have excellence in something as simple – or complex – as sound.

That pursuit of excellence in hearing the Word hasn't diminished now that our building



is finished. Every Sunday our sound man is the first to arrive. He's not content that last Sunday's settings will optimize the sound for this Sunday. He "sound checks" the pastors regularly and insists that guest speakers arrive early so he can adjust how they'll be heard. He wants to know what choirs, soloists, or instrumentalists will be contributing to worship so that he can best capture their sound for the people in the pew and for the recordings sent to shut-ins or placed on our website. It's nitty-gritty kind of work and at times it tests one's patience, but in the end the payoff in excellence is worth it.

We wouldn't be talking about excellence in such "minor" things as the spoken word if the architects we hired hadn't pushed excellence in "major" things right from the start. The irony is, we didn't realize it. Unknown to us,



the architects had been sizing us up in the interview process even while we were sizing them up. After the project was finished, they admitted that they sensed, from our first meeting, that our building committee was interested in more than just four walls and a roof. They perceived a desire for excellence and their suggestions moved us in those directions, even though at times it made us

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uncomfortable or financially uneasy. A wood ceiling instead of ceiling tile, stone walls instead of drywall, height to reinforce awe and reverence, and custom altar furnishings are a few of the ideas they gently pushed and persistently promoted. Today we are happy with the fruits of their persistence.

I wish I could give you the science by which we chose our architects. But after interviewing three potential companies, it was the interview committee's instinct that determined the winner. A big part of that instinct came because the architects we hired designed only churches. Church architecture was their profession, their excellence. If we had to do it over, we'd do it that way. If you're considering building a sanctuary, hire a church architect. Ours listened carefully to how we worshiped and what we wanted to accomplish. They studied, on their own time, what it meant to worship as a Lutheran. They considered every detail, even taking into consideration a collage of colors for the sanctuary and how they would match and/or clash. Nonetheless, because they were experienced in working with churches and understood the "church dynamic," they were more than willing to listen to our suggestions and were patient with our church polity's decision-making process. We owe much of the outward excellence of our structure to a high quality building committee and a professional church architect.



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The building, however, almost wasn't. Little did I know how difficult it could be to take a design on paper and actually build it with wood and stone. The building seemed to go up with ease. But when I asked the architect, in the afterglow following the dedication service, what he thought now that the building was finished, he said, "This was not an easy building to build." Then he showed me a few examples: places where three or four sections of drywall met at unusual angles, places where split-face block and the poured concrete met, and the joining of the new sanctuary with the old school. "But," he said, "you hired the best contractor. They didn't call us once to tell us they couldn't build what we had drawn." Our instincts had served us well again. The contractor was a big company that primarily works on large churches, but was willing to take on our smaller project as a showpiece in the community. Their commitment to excellence gave us a visual presence in the neighborhood we had lacked before.



Long before there is any excellence in the worshiping congregation, consider the hidden excellence that comes in acoustic patience, architectural pushing, and the benefits of hiring a true professional.

EXCELLENCE IN USUAL AND FAMILIAR PLACES

The vast majority of WELS parishes are not considering a building project. But this article can still serve as a catalyst for valuable improvements. As in our homes or offices, so in our churches: clutter and deferred maintenance can accumulate. We who daily live and work in such places become so familiar with our comfortable settings that we notice less and less the things that need attention.

When was the last time your buildings and grounds committee did an inventory of things needing attention? A fresh pair of eyes might be even more valuable. Consider asking someone from outside the congregation to assist with an evaluation.

- What are a guest's first impressions? Here's where that outsider is valuable.
- What needs a fresh coat of paint or even a new color scheme?
- Should the lighting be improved? Check outside as well as inside. Use exterior lighting for publicity by emphasizing interesting design features.
- How much of all that stuff really needs to be on entryway tables or in the tract rack? How much usage does it get?
- What areas look cluttered and messy? The musicians' area? The ushers' area?
- What about dust, spider webs, stains, worn carpet, odor? Does the cleanliness of your house exceed that of your church – God's house?
- Landscaping. Consider going beyond marginal maintenance to a new design, at least at the entryway and where most visible to those who drive by.
- Church sign. Is it too harsh to say that this can be an embarrassment rather than something that adequately communicates both information and image?
- Are first-time visitors able to find their way around – which door to enter, location of restrooms, childcare?
- Furniture and fixtures. Is it time to remove an old ratty sofa or a piano that won't stay in tune? If many members' homes have updated kitchens and bathrooms, is it time to upgrade at church?
- Create a wish list of things that will help your church achieve excellence in familiar places. Prioritize the list and add completion dates.
- Most important, people. Do they radiate the joy that comes from knowing and cherishing the Good News? By their love are they recognized as Jesus' disciples? Okay, granted: this isn't architecture or design. But this is a primary outcome for everything we do in worship. Does attention to excellence help?

None of these ideas need be heard as elitist or focusing on trivia. A modest home can communicate warmth and hospitality just as well as – even better than – a meticulously decorated suburban McMansion.

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