



Worship the Lord

No. 25, July 2007

Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors

Faith Lutheran, Antioch, IL, sat quietly on the side of the road for fifty years while Antioch, a sleepy summer resort town, transformed into a Chicago suburb. Aaron Christie, pastor at Faith since 1997, describes a new church built in 2005 to stay ahead of the growth curve. See pictures below and more under Worship the Lord at wels.net/worship. The changes between the old and new churches are even more dramatic than those in the surrounding community.

Church Architecture: Opportunity for Change

By Aaron L. Christie

I received a wonderful gift from a parishioner at the dedication of our new church. Bill came up to me, coffee in hand, and exclaimed, "Pastor, those new microphones over the choir sure did a great job!" Then I told Bill a secret: the choir microphones were not for amplification. They were only for recording. Bill had heard 100% acoustical excellence. We had all the same musicians. But now we had a building to support their song!

The new world of sound in our sanctuary was a welcome change for us. After two separate additions to the old sanctuary, we were worshipping in an acoustical nightmare. Almost half of the congregation worshipped under an eight-foot drop ceiling. There was one area of the old church that the members affectionately called the "penalty box." The acoustics were so bad in that section that some people didn't even open up their hymnals to sing. To make matters worse, the organ was placed in a transept hemmed in by a large ceiling beam and a privacy rail. The organist was lucky to hear half the sound that the parishioners heard. The organ blared in the faces of those sitting in the front. It barely carried to the back of the "penalty box." Because the acoustics were so bad, the choir – straining to hear themselves – usually over sang. As a result, they were often flat. A wet acoustical blanket had been thrown over the people's praise. Our praise kept bumping up against a glass ceiling – actually an acoustical tile ceiling. One of Luther's worship principles is "Let the people participate." Our old sanctuary was stealing much of the people's participation!

We planned for a big change. We chose an architect who designed *liturgical* churches.



Our architect understood the role of music in worship and the people's participatory role in the liturgy. Scott Riedel of Wauwatosa, WI, is the acoustical consultant that our architect always uses. We accepted every one of Mr. Riedel's recommendations in the design of our new sanctuary.

There is not a stitch of carpeting in our new sanctuary. When we proposed this change, people wondered if they would be bothered by the sound of clicking heels during communion. That fear was unfulfilled. Instead, visitors regularly comment on the beautiful ceramic tile floor. (When is the last time someone has commented on all the beautiful red carpet in a church?) The peak of our roof is 44' high. The side walls are also

high. This gives the room plenty of spatial volume. Behind the choir risers, we installed three layers of drywall slightly angled to provide maximum projection of the choir's sound. On the wall opposite the choir risers and along the spine of the ceiling, we installed sound absorbing panels. This was done to *control* the sound: we have a live space, but sibilants don't spray and echoes don't bounce. Mr. Riedel promised that we would have 2.5 seconds of reverb with the church half full and 1.9 seconds with the church completely full. His design projections are now reality.

What are the results? Worship now rings! The congregation's participation in hymns has improved dramatically. The spoken word is heard with only one speaker in the entire

continued from page 1

sanctuary. The choir finds great joy in leading worship. Their singing is noticeably improved, and their descants truly soar. The elderly no longer complain about the organ hurting their ears. And because we designed the sanctuary to be a *single acoustical space*, “penalty box” participation is a thing of the past. God’s people now participate in worship at a level that was unattainable in the old church.

There have been other big changes at Faith. We have always strived to be a friendly congregation. Our old building, sadly, gave us no space in which to be friendly. The old narthex was a 10’ by 10’ space that tumbled people down five stairs to the exit. Our architect dubbed our old church a “tube of toothpaste.” 250 people were forced through a narrow narthex and a descending stairway directly into the parking lot.

Our new narthex is actually a commons. It is 60’ by 50’ with a 35’ ceiling. A brick fireplace with chimney soars up to the peak. Amish oak tables and chairs, comfortable couches, and a warm color palate invite people to sit and stay awhile.

The commons is completely carpeted to give it a family room feel. The fellowship life of the congregation has received a tremendous boost. It is difficult for guests to leave worship without being greeted several times by members.

Our new chancel has also changed the way our members view the arts. Our old chancel featured a blond veneer altar with a 1970s burnt-orange dossal curtain behind it. A voter’s assembly resolution from the past actually prohibited statues or paintings on the property of Faith Lutheran Church. (Elderly members told us it was because of Roman Catholic phobia.) After much education and discussion, a carved wood crucifix hanging over a painted triptych altar is a dramatic change. Guests regularly comment on the beautiful sanctuary. The old chancel communicated 1970s. The new chancel communicates Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. A most welcome change!

There is one last big change: we are now a church with two sanctuaries. A fifty-seat octagonal chapel has a blue tile floor and a gold ceiling. It has quickly become the busiest room at the new church. Small weddings and funerals, Bible information class, council meetings, private counseling, and a new Wednesday night contemplative service have all found a home in the chapel. Guests delight in this beautiful room. Forty people can feel insignificant in a sanctuary that seats 525, but the same forty people feel right at home in the intimate space of the chapel. Chapels are often labeled “expensive storage space.” In our new building, the chapel has quickly become a treasured people space.

Big changes have come to our community. Big changes have happened in our congregation. Attendance is up significantly since our move. Our Missionary Pastor recently noted that we have almost 100 non-members with us on any given Sunday. We built it. And they are coming. They come wanting to see the new church “that actually looks like a church.” They leave with the message of forgiveness and life ringing in their ears. It is our prayer that this – and *only* this – will make for eternal changes, one soul at a time.



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WORSHIP EDUCATION

A building project is an excellent time for worship education. The benefits of such education can result in worship enrichment and not merely consensus about a new building. Pastor Christie mentioned to me the steep hill his parish climbed to get from old to new. He describes a “trickle down” education process. “I worked extensively with our building committee, then went to the elders, then took the more significant points to the church council. While that was happening with the leadership, I taught *Come Worship Christ* to the members and tweaked the architecture class that you sent me [the CD mentioned below] for a second Bible study.”

In the late 1990s, St. John, Lannon, WI, invited me to give a Bible class series on church architecture and worship. Since it is impossible to talk about church architecture without also talking about theology, the five-week class dealt with far more than “bricks and mortar.” In the years following that series in Lannon, I gave the same presentation in several other churches in the Milwaukee suburbs. Several other pastors around the country have requested the material and have adapted it for classes in their own parishes. A CD containing presentation outline, PowerPoint files, and supplemental files is available to churches planning a renovation or a new building.

One goal with this *Worship the Lord* architecture series and its online supplemental material has been to develop material that will continue to be available for education. Back issues may be reproduced for Bible classes, building committees, or as background reading for an open forum. Other sources of good worship/architecture education include: *CW: Manual and Gathered Guests: A Guide to Worship in the Lutheran Church* (Timothy Maschke, CPH, 2003). Christie comments, “Everyone wants to build something that ‘looks like a church.’ It isn’t so easy, however, to build something that communicates *confessional Lutheran*.” Education can only help... and strengthen people’s understanding of how God works in worship.

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