



Worship the Lord

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Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors

Jon Hein has served in Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church in Summerville, South Carolina, since his graduation in 1997. In a decade God has blessed this parish with solid growth. Average attendance in 2007 is 177. Additional photos are under Worship the Lord at wels.net/worship.

Church Architecture: A Design that Speaks

By Jon Hein

Let me walk around your home for five minutes. You don't have to say a thing. Your house will tell me all about you.

The large kitchen – complete with the massive oven and center island – tells me someone there knows how to cook. In the family room I find a wide-screen TV and a comfy couch with a well-worn “groove.” Clearly, sports or movies are a big deal in your home. The Matchbox cars scattered here and there tell me you have at least one child...most likely a boy.

Your house speaks. So does your church.

When the mission congregation I serve undertook a building project a few years ago, we considered all the normal questions: “How big should we build?” “How much can we afford?” But being a mission church, there was one question that trumped all: “What are we saying with this building?” We wanted our building to speak to people in a positive way. What did we want it to say?

Well, Southerners are extremely proud of their heritage. (The “W” in WELS has been a stumbling block for some, as has my being a “Yankee pastor.”) So we wanted a building that said we're proud to be doing mission work in the South. Our architect gave me a book full of pictures of old-fashioned Southern churches. We eventually chose a Southern Colonial style. The classic features of such a church: simple lines; white horizontal wood siding (Ours is actually Hardiplank.); decorative trim and shakes; round top windows; storm shutters; small, boxy steeple (sometimes called a cupola); bright interior.



We gave it some 21st century twists. The round top windows are oversized, 21 feet tall. The ceiling of the sanctuary opens up into the cupola, giving us a maximum height of 48 feet. But overall the impression is of an antebellum church which the devout General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson might have attended. In the weeks after the dedication, I received a letter from the 86-year-old chairman of Summerville's Board for Architectural Review. It said: “I would like to congratulate you and your congregation on this happy occasion. Your new church not only honors our God, it honors our Southern heritage.”

We still have a few people who get hung up on the “W” in WELS. But considering we have more Southerners in our congregation than transplants, I think

we're doing fine. The message that our building sends has helped.

We also wanted a building that said that Christ is at the center of everything we do. And so we did something a bit unusual. We commissioned an artist to construct a three-dimensional cross that would hang in the center of our church. It is suspended from the cupola, right over the congregation. It is large and made of richly stained hardwood. It contains inlaid metal work. The entire cross is ringed with an iron circle featuring smaller Greek crosses laser etched out of the metal. The symbolism is rich: Christ among us, life under the cross, “Lift High the Cross” (which we sing frequently).

The cross is suspended directly between the two 21-foot-tall dormer windows. This makes the cross easily visible to those sitting in our

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entry courtyard. It is visible to our school kids as they play outside during recess. At night we illuminate the cupola. The light filters down and highlights the cross, so you can see it while walking by the church.

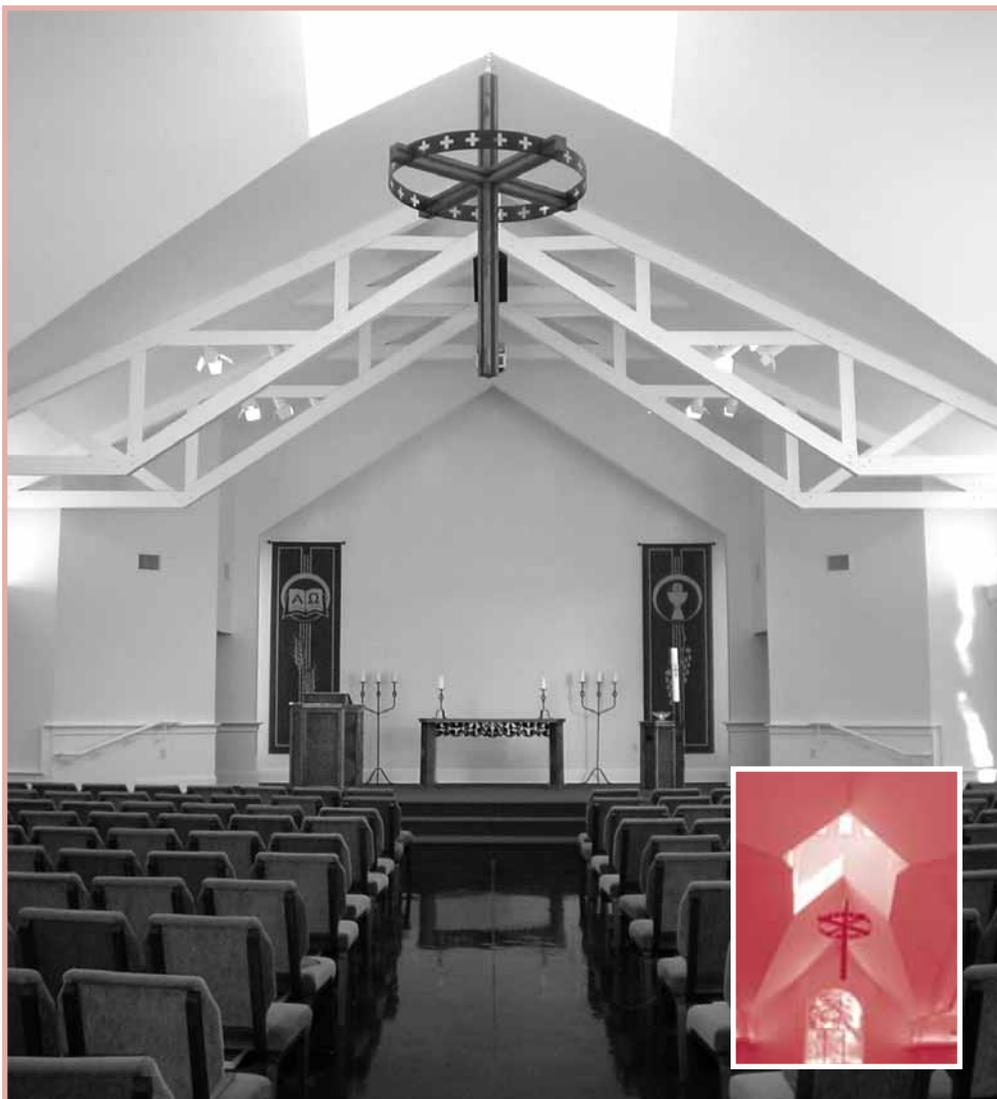
Is a free-hanging cross unusual? Yes. But it creates opportunities to talk with guests about what Christ and his sacrifice mean to us. It affects everything we do, not just our worship. Our building says so.

We also wanted a building that said we cherish the tools God uses, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. We did this through contrast.

Southern Colonial style calls for bright colors. Our interior walls are all crème. Our trim and decorative trusses are wedding white. So we had an architectural caseworker design liturgical furniture that would stand in contrast to the bright colors. He imported a burl hardwood from the Middle East. He stained it dark, with rich reddish undertones. For metal work, he intentionally stayed away from what you often see – silvers and golds – and instead chose black wrought iron. We designed the furniture to showcase large, colorful paraments. In a building that is intentionally plain, three pieces of furniture stand out as ornate – ambo, altar, and font.

We were careful with how we placed these central furnishings. Our font stands opposite the ambo (where the lectern would be in many churches). We even designed our font to take a parament. That is not traditional, but we thought the message was more important than tradition. Our building says to guests (most of whom have an Arminian background), *“In this church, baptism is cherished every bit as much as preaching.”* It has provided my members and me opportunity to talk to our guests about the mysterious, wonderful ways God works.

Finally, **we wanted a building that says we’re a family who care about one another.** Oh, and also...**we’d love to have you join us!** Our entry foyer is 40% the size of the nave of our sanctuary. It contains comfortable armchairs where people can sit and talk. Our church has an entry courtyard,



designed around three massive live oaks. Each oak is ringed by a garden. In the center of it all is a three-globed fountain – the Trinity Fountain. The courtyard contains multiple benches. It’s a pretty place to visit.

We have nice weather here! So there are picnic tables all around our property. Worship ends about 11:30AM. It’s a rare Sunday when everyone is gone by 12:30PM. Why? We have space for members to mingle with one another and with guests.

That entry courtyard is also a Wi-Fi hotspot. I can see it from my office. There are always people out there – surfing the net, reading, praying. Most of them aren’t our members...yet. But I’m glad they feel

welcome at our church. It was designed to communicate a welcoming message.

Whether you are going to build or are considering renovations, please keep this question in mind: *“What is this building going to say?”*

Our humble prayer is that our building says something to our God as well – that we’re thankful for the gift of his Son, for his Means of Grace, for the fellowship we share with one another, and for the privilege of doing his work in our small corner of the world.



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