



Worship the Lord

No. 19, May 2006

Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors

Adam Mueller, pastor of Peace, Kokomo, IN, describes a remarkable opportunity and transformation that provided his congregation with a beautiful "new" worship space. The concepts apparent in the Kokomo renovation may generate ideas for existing WELS churches.

Church Architecture: From Catholic to Lutheran *By Adam Mueller*

Conrad Hilton, founder of the worldwide Hilton chain of hotels, once quipped that the three most important words in real estate are "location, location, location."

Many home missionaries conscientiously carrying out Christ's commission and our synod's directive for North American Outreach know the truth of Hilton's words only too well. Working from WEF units, make-shift storefronts, and dank basements, home missionaries realize that puzzled expressions on prospect faces are not always commentaries on faith, but on facilities. What missionary doesn't dream about owning a corner lot on a busy intersection and building a sanctuary to the glory of God there?

Our congregation saw some of those puzzled looks and shared some of those same dreams. About a year ago we worshiped in a two story house. The sanctuary was a remodeled garage. Our little "house-church" was cut out of a cornfield miles from town. To the community we were invisible. To prospects we "weren't what they were looking for." To the quarter million dollar homes going up around the corner we were embarrassing. Hilton's words echoed in our heads.

Exploration

We knew we were nearing an inflection point. We started asking questions. Was our current location viable? Should we add on? Should we build elsewhere on our ten acres? Should we pursue another location? What about the wishes of our forefathers?

Whatever decision we came to, it needed to be directed by God's Word, not by personal preference or nostalgia. Spurred on by a School of Outreach, we began a congregation-wide Bible study on Christ's mis-

sion for his church.

The Lord led us to realize that if we were going to take Christ's commission seriously, we couldn't expect the community to come to us. We were going to have to go to them.

Relocation

Prime locations inside city limits aren't cheap. For a mission congregation with shallow pockets we quickly learned that buying land was prohibitively expensive. Assuming we could afford it, we still stared the expense of a new facility in the face. Was there a better way for us to do North American Outreach?

We sat down with every realtor in town and asked about existing churches that might be for sale. Even in our city of about 50,000, we learned that several churches were looking to move. The more we researched, the more we discovered the advantages of pursuing a pre-owned building.

- Better location
- Cost-effective
- Faster time frame to move-in
- Minimal disruption to ministry
- Existing mission field
- Instant identity

God led us to a 50 year old Roman Catholic church. It was located on a corner lot on the busiest road inside the city limits. Originally built to be the regional diocese, their facilities were bold and beautiful. Limestone walls, slate floors, and marble accents imported from Italy—the building made a statement! When we learned the former congregation was eager to move to their new home, God even arranged a sale price that our little



congregation could handle—and they left the pipe organ behind for good measure. The building is so renowned in local circles that it is listed on the county historical register as a city landmark. God is good.

Renovation

The million dollar question we needed to answer next was how a mission congregation of 60 was going to fit in an old Roman Catholic church that seated 400. When moving from a 900 square foot remodeled garage to an 8,000 square foot cathedral of slate and limestone, people were naturally concerned that we wouldn't fit.

The church is of French Gothic design built in cruciform style like many of the cathedrals in Europe. As the Roman Catholics originally used it, the raised chancel stood at the very front of the church. The main altar was almost 30 feet from the first pew. That open space was the entire length of our former sanctuary! We wanted to shrink the distance between the altar and the people to give worshipers a greater sense of community, underscoring the Bible teaching of the universal priesthood of all believers. To accomplish that goal, we brought the altar out

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of the chancel onto the first step and built a reredos (screen) to create a backdrop for the altar and stop the eye from looking into the former chancel. The reredos serves a third purpose. It frames the cross on the front wall to give the worshiper a powerful visual of the central focus of our faith.

To give the impression that the sanctuary was fuller than it was and therefore worshipful for a smaller group, we removed all of the pews. The front half of the nave was filled with 120 cushioned chairs designed to look like pews from behind. Then we filled up the rest of the nave with original pews, but enlarged the space between rows from 36 to 42 inches. The additional row space gives worshipers more room for maneuvering, even allowing people to walk out of a row without disturbing others still seated. It also creates the feeling that the sanctuary is full with a small group seated in the chairs, while still being able to hold 250 comfortably.

Our renovation addressed several Roman details that Lutherans would find objectionable. Holy water fonts were removed and covered with limestone. Fourteen Stations of the Cross were removed and covered with decorative adzed wood, accented by up-lighted sconces. Prominent niches in the front of the sanctuary for the reserved host and statues of Mary and Joseph were incorporated into the chancel space as beautiful architectural details that could stand alone, or double as flower stands or banner holders. The confessional booths on either side were incorporated as storage closets, covered by architectural woodwork. Stained glass windows that traced the history of the papacy were removed and replaced with translucent stained glass that allows much more natural light into the sanctuary. Improved electrical lighting brightens the mood of happy worshipers. Glass doors replaced the fortress-like steel doors at the entrance to make for better curb appeal.

New to the worship space is a substantial baptismal font located in the gathering area as you enter the nave. As worshipers move past the font, they are reminded of the sacrament through which God brought them into his Holy Christian Church. A custom designed free standing altar is decorated with carvings of Luther's seal and grapevines. The pulpit, designed to match the altar and font, bears the same symbolic carvings.

Renovating an old Roman Catholic church took us back to the days of the Reformation when Lutherans took over many Roman churches throughout Germany. One element we were able to include that they weren't is located behind the reredos. We had space enough to include a small memorial chapel decorated completely with items from our former sanctuary. Amid our beautiful new building, the Faith Memorial Chapel it is a fitting reminder of our humble beginnings.

Dedication

When do you dedicate a church that you have purchased from Roman Catholics and spent nearly half a year Lutheranizing? On Reformation Sunday, of course, together with all the Lutheran brothers and sisters you can muster. In a joint Reformation service, we dedicated our new sanctuary to the glory of God before the largest ever gathering of WELS Lutherans in Indiana. God is good.

Maybe it seems far-fetched that your congregation will end up with such a pre-owned treasure. It seemed far-fetched to us, too. When we began asking questions, we never imagined where God would lead us. At the very least, exploring the pre-owned church market might be time well spent. In our case, it has allowed an old country church to move immediately into a community, give us instant identity, and move forward with ministry.



If your parish becomes interested in assessing your worship space, see Wayne Schulz's excellent resource, *Checklist for Improving Worship Environment* under national worship conference resources at wels.net/worship. The website also offers additional photos from Kokomo.

Compared to the old church Kokomo's renovated nave glows with a welcoming brightness. Mueller reports that members of the former Catholic parish have expressed wonder at the transformation, especially the lighting.

"Next to music, nothing creates (or hinders the creation of) a supportive environment in which [people] congregate to praise and worship God as much as the lighting." Viggo Bech Rambusch, *Lighting the Liturgy*, LTP, Chicago, 1994. Consider engaging a lighting consultant if your current lighting needs to be evaluated.

"The Illuminating Engineering Society, which is under pressure from the U.S. government to improve energy conservation, has lowered its recommended light levels for a church from the standards of the 1960s. Where it was recommended the 1960s to have 15 to 40 footcandles, today the IES recommends a base level in the nave of 10-20 footcandles" (Rambusch). But surely the highpoint of parish life should have the best lighting possible, especially since full lighting is needed only a few hours each week.

Bryan Gerlach

O gladsome Light, O Grace
Of God the Father's Face
Eternal splendor wearing:
Celestial, holy, blest,
Our Savior Jesus Christ,
Joyful in thine appearing.

From the "Phos Hilaron," the earliest known Christian hymn outside of the New Testament (ELH 572, TLH 101). Many choral settings of this text exist, also under an alternate translation: Hail, gladdening Light.



Worship the Lord is published by the WELS Commission on Worship
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