



Worship the Lord

Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors

No. 20, July 2006

David Clark, pastor of Grace, Glendale, AZ, describes a parish's decision to remain in its original downtown location and serve the community with the gospel and with a strong architectural witness. See pictures below and more under *Worship the Lord* at wels.net/worship. The goals pursued in Glendale may generate ideas for other WELS churches even if multi-million dollar price tags are beyond their reach. Smaller parishes may be encouraged to know that the September issue of this newsletter will tell the story of a successful renovation that cost only \$6000.

Church Architecture: A Testimony to the Community *By David R. Clark*

"Hi, I'm the pastor of Grace Lutheran in downtown Glendale."

"A Lutheran church in downtown Glendale? Has it been there long?"

"Well, yes, since 1927."

"Never heard of it."

We were three blocks from the center of a city of over 200,000, part of the fifth largest metropolitan area in the U.S., and people hadn't heard of us. The reasons were quite obvious. Although our building had served us faithfully since 1952 and was beautiful inside, the exterior was rather plain – almost unnoticeable. We had also outgrown the building.

We were part of a neighborhood where homes were past their prime. Most of them were over fifty years old, with less than 1000 square feet and no garage or basement. Most had become rentals for a very transient population.

We Are Staying

Members of the congregation wondered if we should relocate. The safety of our Lutheran elementary school children was certainly a concern. On the other hand, our roots were downtown and had been for over 75 years. The people in our neighborhood needed to hear the gospel. So what should we do?

After much study and discussion, we determined to remain in downtown Glendale and pursue a three-phase improvement project. For years the congregation had been quietly buying the small homes across the street. The first phase would mean tearing them all down and using the property to



expand. We asked the City of Glendale to close the street between those homes and the old church so that we could build a new church and fellowship hall in the middle of what used to be 56th Avenue.

This was by no means the simple way to go about building a new church. At neighborhood meetings our neighbors were enthusiastic about the demolition and building project, but city staff questioned "giving" a street to a church. The city council moved slowly to evaluate community support for the proposed action. In the end, our gracious God led all involved to see that this kind of improvement was in the best interests of the neighborhood, the city, and the congregation. A strong selling point was the city's own renovation of some of those same homes into shops and offices. The new church would be right on the edge of a new business district with a strong emphasis on pedestrian traffic.

The congregation made a strong commitment to the city and to the neighborhood. "We

want to be a part of this community. We are staying!"

We Are about People

But what would we build? A new church gave us an opportunity to improve some weaknesses of the previous building. The 1952 church had become uncomfortable. State of the art in 1952 wasn't really adequate for 2005.

Some noteworthy changes:

- Air-conditioning became a part of Sunday worship for the first time.
- The long and narrow 1952 nave seated 250 with rear pews 75 feet from the chancel. The most distant seats in the new amphitheater seating for 600 are only 55 feet from the chancel. This enhances a feeling of community in worship.
- Amphitheater or radial seating drastically improves sight lines, as does a sloping floor.
- A single exit narthex of only 150 square feet was replaced with a new gathering

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space of 1360 square feet and four double doors, along with another exit on the opposite side of the church.

- Five wide aisles in the nave allow people to move freely compared to three narrow aisles in the previous church.
- The new building comfortably allows 25 people to commune at each table compared to nine previously.
- Pews in 2005 are six inches further apart than in 1952, giving much needed room for knees and movement of people.
- Brightly colored paint creates interest within the nave.



All who come for worship are now seated in a comfortable, bright, and welcoming space. People participate in Lutheran worship in a facility that encourages worship.

We wanted a building which would point people up to their ascended Lord, not one that attempted to bring God down to our level.

We Are about Jesus

As you entered the 1952 church your eyes were immediately drawn to the two story high cross behind the altar. We agreed that we needed to continue this emphasis. The large stained glass cross in the balcony of the 1952 church was moved to the new altar and backlit, a testimony to Jesus Christ and a remembrance of past worship. Most of the new Christian churches built in our area looked more like office buildings or movie theaters. Many do not display a cross much less a denominational name. These seem like great places to gather people, but where is Christ? We wanted a building which would point people up to their ascended Lord, not one that attempted to bring God down to our level. An architect was chosen who understood this concept and knew how to carry it out.

The building also became a matter of stewardship, but perhaps not in the obvious way. "How cheaply can we get by" was replaced with "What's the best we can afford?" It was crucial that this building be a clear testimony about its members' attitude toward Jesus and worship. Our goal was a building that stated clearly to all, "These people love Jesus!"

We placed the new church in the middle of the 56th Avenue. As the city continues to improve its downtown, traffic patterns are changing. Every person who enters downtown Glendale is now welcomed by a large modern church right in the middle of the street, complete with bell tower and a lighted cross over sixty feet in the air. Future plans include stained glass in the large southern window and a carillon in the bell tower to witness to the pedestrians who visit the shops nearby.

We have been in the building less than a year, but our visitors have increased tenfold. A member of the city staff remarked to our builder, "That's the most beautiful building in downtown Glendale." As I was eating lunch near the church one day, I heard a woman at a nearby table remark to her friends: "He's the pastor of that pretty new church!" But perhaps the most telling testimony was the knock on the church office door by a passerby. "Thank you for building a church that looks like a church!" she said. "Can I make a donation?"

DOWNTOWN MILWAUKEE

In the 1970s my father, Joel Gerlach, assisted with a vacancy at Grace in downtown Milwaukee. I remember driving with him from Mequon and sitting in that large beautiful space with only a handful of mostly elderly people present. Average attendance back then was under 200 and shrinking. It now has exceeded 600 for several years! At Monday evening services, those over age 30 are in the minority.

Under God's blessing many factors contribute to such remarkable growth. Grace's story is an inspiring parallel to Glendale's because of a commitment to serve a downtown community. Earlier this year they broke ground for construction of a large expansion that will enable them better to serve members and the community. But before this happy milestone Grace negotiated many angles for 16 years before finally securing 10,000 square feet of precious downtown real estate.

Check their building's progress at www.gracedowntown.org. You'll find information on building projects during Grace's 157-year history as well as pictures and details about their new project. One unique feature is "Grace Place," a coffee lounge that will welcome students, professionals, and neighbors looking for coffee, Wi-Fi internet access, and a non-threatening atmosphere.



RADIAL SEATING

Reacting to architect Edward Sövik's preference for "three-sided seating" and his dismissal of other options, architect Armando Ruiz writes, "Radial configurations do not absolutely mandate people's passivity. . . . The radial plan can be executed in many different ways, some being more successful than others. For example, a steep floor slope in a radial floorplan does suggest spectatorship, but a gently sloping floor facilitates a sense of unity and gathering by providing visibility in a large room for worship" (*Environment and Art*, 1991). Some examples are on the Worship website.

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