



Worship the Lord

No. 21, September 2006

Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors

A series on church architecture began last March with mention of the redesigned chapel at the seminary. "A year in which students at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary worship in a renovated chapel also begins a series of articles to encourage assessment of parish worship spaces." This issue brings an update on worship at the seminary during the last school year. Readers are invited to evaluate the various observations to see how they might be worthwhile in a typical parish setting. See wels.net/worship for additional photos.

Church Architecture: Worship in the New Seminary Chapel By James P. Tiefel

There were reasons why Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary wanted its students to be able to attend the dedication of the seminary's renovated chapel and why we set the dedication date a day before the beginning of the 2005 school year. At least the middlers seemed to deserve to participate; they had lived through the construction mess and inconvenience as juniors. Generally, students had followed the design and construction process with a great deal of interest; over 50 registered for *Planning the Worship Space*, a 2005 Winterim course that focused on the renovation project. (That's a full one-third of the student body!) Besides that, the seminary chapel is "church" for the seminary family, and it would have seemed odd to dedicate the new space with a major portion of the family absent.

So what was it like worshipping in the seminary's new church? Ask ten students and you'll probably get ten different answers. Generally, however, students, faculty members, and the many guests who arrive on the seminary campus during the course of a year were very positive about the experience.

It's so bright in here!

Perhaps it was the comparison with the old chapel which was dark and even a little dreary on overcast days. Add to this that three large windows in the original design were covered by the 1969 library addition and three more by the 1991 organ case. But even without an ability to compare new against old, the chapel is impressive in its brightness. By opening the ceiling and moving the organ case, the room has ten exterior windows, all paned in clear glass. Not only has light become a virtual theme of the room, the views from the crest of seminary hill are quite incredible in all seasons

of the year. What has been especially intriguing is to watch the color of the interior walls change; the cream color "moves" from greens to yellows to whites depending on what's visible outside. Backlighting problems never materialized. Plans are to install etched glass panes in the windows in the near future (designs are complete and six donors have stepped forward), but we anticipate absolutely no effect on the chapel's wonderful brightness.

Speak to one another

We designed the chapel with flexibility in mind. The initial arrangement departed from the old "basilica" floor plan and brought worshipers to three sides of the altar and ambo (pulpit/lectern). It was our thinking – and we enabled this by the way we designed the chancel platform – that we would occasionally reposition the furniture in a more traditional configuration.

After a year of "speaking to one another" in a wide axis design, no one seems too eager to move the furniture (which, while movable, is still pretty heavy!). We've become accustomed to seeing each other listen, confess, pray, and sing; it's an interesting and edifying experience. We like the proximity of the ministers and the musicians. The singing seems stronger, especially when one sits where voices merge from three seating areas.

Where are the symbols?

This was a question asked early and often. There are no painted, carved, or sculpted pictures or symbols in the entire worship space. Contemporary thought in liturgical church design contends that the focus of worship ought to be on Word, Baptism, Meal, and the people gathered around them to enjoy them. Pointing to history, liturgical architects



note that paintings and statues were often added to churches to give the people something to do while the clergy carried out the liturgy. Without the ability to participate in the liturgy, the art became the message. Today architects spend much more time designing the ambo, altar, font, and seating arrangement than they do debating what symbols should grace walls and ceilings.

The seminary's Building Committee bought into this concept in part, agreeing that the Word and Sacraments should hold the central focus in public worship both in reality and in symbolism. The committee also felt, however, that a careful and tasteful display of Christian symbols enhanced the means of grace as the symbolized truth proclaimed a message of its own and on its own.

The seminary family began to buy into this "keep it simple" concept as it saw the rather bold and distinctive paraments that came to adorn the altar and ambo as the seasons of the church year progressed (along with the fine set of banners purchased over the last decade). They also expressed approval as designs for the etched windows began to be known. The symbolism in fabric and glass is understated, but perhaps will come to speak a stronger message precisely because of its simplicity.

continued from page 1

The free-standing altar

Except for rare occasions when we would move the old altar away from the wall, worship at the seminary didn't include the experience of a free-standing altar. When we began using the chapel in August 2005, we followed the suggestions in *Christian Worship Manual* that the minister preside in front of the altar until the conclusion of the Prayer of the Church and then preside behind the altar during the liturgy of the Meal. Since the Sacrament is celebrated only occasionally at the seminary, we rarely presided behind the altar.

We encouraged chapel leaders at the 2006 Summer Quarter to preside behind the altar for all liturgical elements of the morning services, and we found this to be very natural. We'll encourage students to do the same as the school year begins. They won't read the lessons from the altar – the ambo is the place for the lessons and the sermon – but they will lead the people in prayer and praise from that position.

It was an interesting year at the seminary ... a year to challenge some architectural presuppositions and to think about trends in contemporary liturgical design.

Using the piano in worship

The chapel's old console piano never quite had the volume to support the singing of 150 seminarians, and we used it rarely in worship. The gift of a six foot grand piano made it possible to add an entirely new musical element in our worship. Thursdays became "piano day," and we selected hymns arranged in a more pianistic style. We purchased a small library of hymn-based piano literature for pre-service music and postludes. Best of all, we were able to involve a number of accompanists who, while not proficient at the organ, are fine pianists!

Generally, our students weren't happy with the selection of hymns and songs chosen for the piano. Our worship committee members need to work harder to identify piano accompaniments for CW hymns and to search for new hymns accompanied by piano-based settings. With a few exceptions, LAPPY was found lacking for worship. The search goes on for good texts paired with more contemporary musical styles.

Worship with a smile

It's a well known axiom on our campus that "without the everlasting gospel, joy is never lasting." But worship in the new chapel elicited more than a few smiles even without the gospel. A 6'4" wide-shouldered worshiper heading down onto a kneeling bench is an interesting sight. Faculty alley isn't the same; worshipers enter the room from two entrances, and professors tend to sit nearest to the entrance they used – with the students. And with worshipers facing one another, more than just the day's preacher can observe the frown that crosses certain professors' faces when the speaker has barely skirted (or perhaps not skirted) dubious theology!

An interesting year

It was an interesting year at the seminary as new sights, sounds, and symbols came to enhance the worship of a theological community not noted for dramatic changes. It was a year to challenge some architectural presuppositions and to think about trends in contemporary liturgical design. It was a year to focus again on public worship, not only its orders, hymns, and prayers, but its spaces – spaces we shape, and then in Winston Churchill's words, "ever after they shape us."

For a more complete description of the chapel renovation at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, see *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 103. No. 1, Winter 2006.

SEMINARY CHAPEL RECEIVES DESIGN AWARD

The seminary was pleasantly surprised to learn in May that its renovated chapel had received an AIA Wisconsin Design Award. The award, one of eight granted in 2006, is presented by AIA Wisconsin, a society affiliated with the American Institute of Architects. The award was actually received by Hammel, Green, and Abrahamson, the project's architect. The citation explains:

In renovating this 1920s chapel, the architects removed a low, flat ceiling to open up the interior and added natural light by unbricking three [sic, actually six] arched windows. A slate floor, oak chairs, a black granite font, and other liturgical furnishings were all handcrafted.

Jurors praised the design's detailing, lightness, and simplicity (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 11, 2006).

The chapel project, which included the renovation of corridors surrounding the chapel as well the library entrance, was made possible by several generous gifts designated specifically for the project.



Worship the Lord is published by the WELS Commission on Worship
2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222-4398
Phone: 414/256-3265 FAX: 414/256-3899
<www.wels.net/worship>

Worship the Lord
Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors