



Worship the Lord

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Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors

A series on church architecture and worship has featured various parishes to illustrate beneficial ideas and designs. This issue departs from that pattern and focuses on functional and flexible space for musicians. Additional content is under *Worship the Lord* at wels.net/worship.

Church Architecture: Space for Musicians

By Bryan Gerlach

Balcony or main floor? Where's the best place for musicians?

Post-Vatican II architectural theory among Catholics and those influenced by much of graduate worship study often displays an aversion to balconies. This aversion might give some architects and consultants a bias that shapes their work with parish building committees. While there are disadvantages to a balcony, there are also advantages.

Some people have only known churches with balconies. They might prefer a balcony without considering other options. A more balanced approach carefully weighs the pros and cons of different options.

Balcony Pros

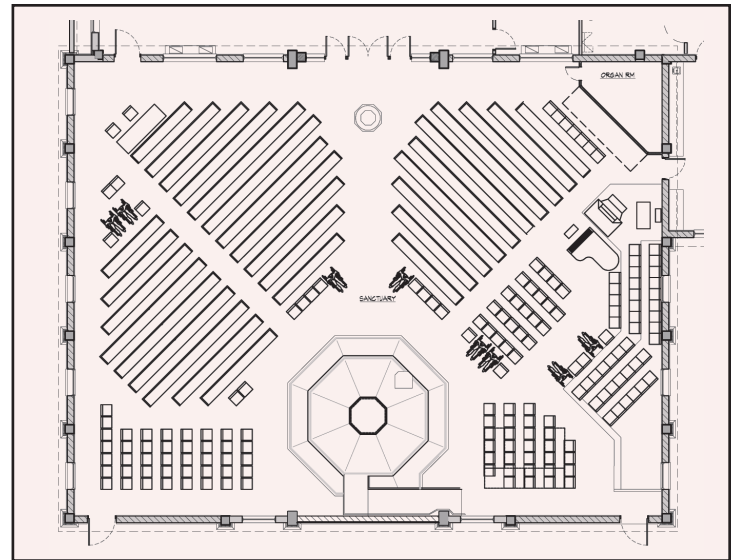
- Avoids temptation to place a musicians or pipe organ in a location that is visually competitive with the primary focus of worship, the chancel's symbols of the means of grace. One architect calls this "organolatry." See online content for exceptions.
- Musicians are less likely to be viewed – or view themselves – as performers.
- Provides practical space for musicians: choir or instrumentalists coming and going as needed; soloist or descanting instrument in optimal position only when needed. This is especially useful with multiple services or on festivals. A balcony hides certain activities, such as brass instruments draining spit valves.
- Storage of music and equipment is easier in a balcony. There is less chance of worshippers seeing clutter.
- Permanent tiered seating for the choir might work better in a balcony than on a main floor. This helps sight lines to the director

and maximizes the sound of each voice projecting into the room.

- The physics of sound projecting from a balcony can enhance sound. This is beneficial for singers and instruments.
- Balconies take advantage of the strengths of traditional church design.
- Balconies may maximize seating capacity within a church's design footprint. This is especially useful when space is tight on smaller sites.
- Balconies provide some of the cheapest square footage in the building since the ceiling and walls are already present.

Balcony Cons

- Musicians can feel isolated from the service and from other worshippers when they aren't providing music. Children may become less attentive to the service.
- Music and musicians can seem anonymous to worshippers.
- A poorly designed balcony can hinder or isolate sound. Balconies require a high ceiling for sound to bloom into the room and to avoid a cramped feeling for those in the balcony. But there are other benefits to a high ceiling.
- Balconies may add to construction cost. As the budget may force building a church



Our church in New Berlin, WI has excellent musician space on the main floor. Note the asymmetrical floor plan and flexible seating near the grand piano and organ console.

smaller than desired, it may also force compromise in balcony design. (See web content for examples of expanded balconies.)

- Without air conditioning balconies can become uncomfortably warm, distracting people's focus on worship.
- Balconies present problems for handicapped access.

Main Floor Pros

- Allows a visual and not only audible connection between worshippers and musicians.
- May allow a soloist to function visually as a cantor who gives visual cues to assist worshippers. This is common in some traditions with responsorial song repertoire.
- May work better for a service with a small attendance. This is especially true where the

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balcony feels isolated and musicians have difficulty hearing worshipers.

- Explores creative possibilities of newer church designs.
- Permanent tiered seating (or modular) for the choir can work on the main floor with proper planning, especially in new construction. But a flat floor can cause sight line problems.



Ideally, some of the seating directly to the front left of the musician area could be flexible, used either for musicians or for congregation as the need varies.

Main Floor Cons

- Space for musicians is too often an afterthought. If space is not designed well, musicians or instruments (especially a pipe organ) are likely to intrude or be *visually* dominant. Thus it's often easier to consider main floor location in a new design rather than an existing building or a reconfigured layout. The musician space needs to be far enough from the chancel and allow easy access for musicians to come and go during multiple services.
- One solution for main floor music space is an asymmetrical plan. Seating for worshipers on the music side will not mirror seating on the other side.
- Placement of an organ may be more difficult. An organ on the main floor may unavoidably be closer to some people than the same organ in a balcony, thus sounding too loud to the closest people.
- Music space in the back usually does not work due to seating expectations (families with small children) and proximity of *loud* sound to the back row of worshipers (full organ, brass). A position to the side, with ample room between musicians and worshiper seating, is far better.
- Flexible space may become crowded or intrude into regular seating. Festivals may require room for larger or multiple choirs and a larger musical ensemble (six brass, three timpani, other instruments). Addition of a (grand) piano may add to the sense of a crowded music space.

A main floor location is best designed so that musicians don't need to "take position" to sing/play, disrupting the flow of worship or visual focus on the chancel. Musicians need to be able to sing/play from a position near their seating. (Choir standing at chairs.) Since worship principles don't change with stylistic preferences, this ideal is valid for any style of worship.

Two Examples

Included in this article are two newer WELS churches with main floor musician areas, both dedicated in 2004. These are provided since most people are familiar with balconies for musicians, but less so with main floor options. These designs aren't offered as ideal or perfect, only as illustrative.

Visit wels.net/worship for more examples, including some balcony remodeling.

Here is an excerpt from a mission counselor's presentation at a Home Missions conference in 2000, expanded for the 2002 and 2005 worship conferences. The entire presentation is worth review when planning a new church, renovating an old church, or improving any church. It is available at the Worship Web site under Articles/Architecture.

MUSICAL AREA

Positioning the music area for organist, keyboardist, instrumentalists, sound boards, and choirs requires much thought. In Lutheranism the musicians are not thought of in terms of performance or taking center stage. They regard themselves as assisting the congregation in its worship. If musicians are there to serve the liturgy, it is good to locate the musical area in the vicinity of the chancel to the side of the congregation. The drawback to this is the commotion caused by the shuffling of music and the movement away from the center of the liturgical action. Another possibility and one that produces good sound is to station the music area in a balcony if the building is not long and narrow. Sometimes a balcony is called a choir loft or an organ gallery. Yet another location being used in smaller groups is directly behind the gathered worshipers.

Musicians who try to work with Lutheran worship principles often ask at conferences how they can "hide" while serving the people in their liturgy. Their primary task is not to perform but to serve. They lead in song where it properly fits, sing *in alternatim* with the congregation, and do what the liturgy says. They can demonstrate the Psalm tone and lead the congregation in Psalm singing. Their objective is to go with the flow of the service and not get in the way through untimely movements or fighting with the architecture as they move.

Bold and vigorous rejoicing based on the resurrection and the Scriptures is the compelling character of Lutheran music. It responds to Christ's victory over sin and death. It includes the song of the royal priesthood, the people of God. Luther advocated the use of all kinds of instruments to join the people's song (not to entertain).

DISCUSSION

- How will the music area be positioned so as to assist the saints in their worship?
- Who will make a study of Lutheran worship and recommend an organ and other instruments to lead in prayer and praise?
- If a balcony is included in the design, how will it be designed and engineered for a possible future installation of a pipe organ?
- What type of electronic equipment is needed? Where will it be placed?



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