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YOUR CHURCH

Blueprint for Worship

How to design space that lifts hearts to God

by Rob Hewitt

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Church architecture in America is as diverse as America itself. Yet all worship centers, from image-rich Gothic sanctuaries to deliberately understated auditoriums, show the influence of history, culture, tradition, and theology. They also suggest a variety of options. With all of that choice, how can a congregation begin to plan a worship building?

First Things First

Bruce Wardell, an architect in Charlottesville, Virginia, who has walked many congregations through construction, says the first question a congregation should ask is not about buildings. Rather, it should ask, "What does it mean to worship together?"

Many evangelicals recognize the importance of community, Wardell explains. But they have little understanding of why they gather together to worship God as a church. "We have lost the reason for worship," he says.

Wardell has created for such Christians a slide presentation that shows how the concept of a place of worship developed during Old and New Testament times. After the presentation, Wardell challenges people to take a close look at their assumptions about worship. In almost every denomination, liturgical traditions and theology have combined to produce a particular focus for worship, Wardell says. He suggests Christians should learn to listen without partiality to the call of God in Scripture and to let that inform their traditions of worship.

Matching Building to Worship

A congregation should then examine the specific characteristics of its own group. For example, with 60 musicians in a growing congregation of 600, Preston Wood Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, decided that the central focus of its worship was music and song. Correspondingly, the congregation decided that its new worship center would include ample space for a choir and orchestra, and that it would put them close to the congregation as a reminder of unity in praise.

An emphasis on congregational participation influenced Christ Community Church in Charlottesville, Virginia, to design a sanctuary that was wider than it was long. That shape will encourage greater awareness of the corporate group gathered for worship.

Congregational focus can affect decisions about acoustics, too. Worship space can be designed to emphasize congregational involvement, or it can be designed like a lecture hall, which maximizes sound at the lectern and dampens what goes on in the audience.

Churches should also think through the importance and placement of various symbols within a worship environment. They should ask: What sacraments should be prominent? Does preaching take precedence over worship? Will crosses or banners be part of the interior? How will necessary features like raised platforms affect the experience of corporate worship? What should be the first

thing people notice when they enter a structure to worship?

Answering those questions should help clarify the reasons why you come together for worship, the importance of those gatherings, and how all of that affects your building plans.

For the Love of God

Establishing a budget to build a worship center is more than an economic decision. "It has immense theological issues built into it, whether they are identified or not," says David Turner, a former building contractor who has chaired several building committees at his church. "The evangelical mentality is to build for this generation for the next 30 years and put all of our money into missions. We don't often have the concept of building a cathedral."

The tension between building "the house of God" or "the house of the church" is an old one, says Denis McNamara, a historian of American church architecture. During the Renaissance, people were more interested in building a place of worship that would be worthy of God, but the advance of modernism helped shift the focus from beauty and splendor to industrial practicality. It then became easier to lose sight of the theological implications of design.

"I think most of the things in church design are driven by economics," says Sam Harmon of S. R. Harmon Construction Company, a New York firm that serves churches from design through construction. "But most people realize economics has its limits."

Many churches today with 200 to 300 members are interested in building multipurpose facilities that can be used as classrooms or as worship spaces, Harmon says. But they should carefully consider the implications of that choice. They should ask: How will people feel about meeting for worship on Sunday morning in the same room that featured a talent show the night before? Is there value in preserving a place solely for worship?

The choice of how to use a central gathering room in a church building should reflect a congregation's understanding of worship, Harmon says. So should everything else in that room. For example, flexible seating, such as modular, stackable chairs, make a far different statement about worship than formal, fixed pews. So do floors that slope versus floors that are level. Even ceiling height and exterior architecture are influenced by a church's attitude toward worship.

The Outside Reflection

Size has been one distinguishing characteristic of church buildings throughout the centuries. Lofty steeples with prominent bell towers signaled the importance of a church within its community. According to McNamara, churches began losing that loftiness under the influence of modernism, which insisted that the church had no place in contemporary society except as a social institution.

Today, opinions vary greatly over what a church should look like from the outside. While curb appeal, or the impression a church exterior gives of a pleasant, welcoming place with plenty of parking, is almost always important, other architectural features of a church aren't. "Some people don't really care about the outside appearance of a church," Harmon says.

Churches that no longer look like churches bother Wardell. "We have homogenized our whole environment," he says. "We have gone too far in eliminating the distinctions between the sacred and the profane.

"Theologically, the New Testament does not acknowledge a hierarchy of places where God dwells, but the Scriptures say that wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, Jesus is present," he explains. "If we formalize the place where we gather—if we gather there every week—then that place develops an inherent sense of being set apart."

As more churches take on the look of corporate buildings with offices, classrooms, and meeting halls, some are finding it crucial to raise a large cross outside the building to identify the structure as a worship center. In many ways, those crosses have taken the role that steeples served in earlier times.

Build to Size

How large a church building should be has always been an issue for a growing church. When should a church enlarge its facilities to accommodate growth, and when should it send people out to start a new church? Trinity Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville, Virginia, made a conscious decision to build till the church reached 1,500, then to start a daughter church.

In the absence of any scriptural blueprints of the ideal church architecture, people will always differ on how to build a church. With such diversity, perhaps the greatest challenge is to maintain a clear, biblical perspective throughout any church building process. As Turner reminds us, "The church is not the building we go to. It's easy to give mental assent to that idea, and just as easy to lose sight of it."

In other words: God dwells in our hearts, not in the things we build.

Rob Hewitt is a freelance writer from Afton, Virginia.

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