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YOUR CHURCH

Your True Colors

A palette of advice on using color throughout your church
Robin F. DeMattia

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Committee members can complicate a project, especially with something as subjective as interior design.

"I remember a job I did for a Baptist church in Fort Worth, Texas," says Norman Hatfield, from Hatfield Crookless Associates in Dallas, Texas. "The pastor had six interior designers in the church and put them all on the committee. What a cat fight!"

Peace was achieved by allowing each designer to do one of the six restrooms. Not every design project is that stressful, but each is important because most churches can't afford to redecorate very often.

Time for a Change

Color is an immediate sign of how current your decor is. If your sanctuary still includes browns and oranges, for example, you probably haven't updated it since the 1970s.

Choosing neutral colors rather than trendy ones is one way to avoid the dated look. But even safe colors, such as beige or white, need accent colors to perk things up. And choosing those can be difficult.

For one thing, color is so subjective. "When you mention a color, it conjures up an image, but everyone has a different image," says Bill Groninger of Cosco & Associates in Crestview, Florida. In addition, people may be thinking different shades of the same color. Red, for example, varies, depending on its mix with yellow, blue, white, or black. Some people catch those variations, while others are blind to them. To make sure everyone is thinking the same color, Groninger's company uses boards with color swatches during discussions with clients.

A Color Plan

Before you start splitting hairs over sky blue versus robin's egg blue for the fellowship room at church, work through some preliminaries:

Define the space. Ask when and how the room you'll be decorating will be used. Also, how much natural light the area will receive, and how this lighting will change through the year.

Choose a signature color. This color should be used throughout the church. Gray or tan would work well for the walls of a church's sanctuary, hallway, library, pastor's office, and classrooms. The same color could be carried into carpeting, tile, or wallcoverings.

Go bold with accent color. Gray or tan is a great base color, but don't stop there. Pick out dramatic colors to be used as accents in upholstery, window treatments, pictures, and floral arrangements.

Hatfield says that when people look at the churches he has decorated, he is sometimes asked why they're so blah. "I tell them that committees usually opt for the lowest common denominator so they won't offend anybody. That makes buildings look bland," he says.

He didn't go that route with First Baptist Church in Carrollton, Texas. Over some members' objections, he ordered a bold floral print for the parlor floor. "They fought me, but when the covering was in, they said it was the greatest decision," Hatfield says. "They wished they had known before how good it would look."

Color Considerations

Before choosing accent colors, consider these factors:

Context. History or geography can affect the color choices congregations make. Burgundies and reds are very traditional in churches in the Northeast, for example, while Southern churches tend to favor pastel colors.

Ethnicity. The ethnic makeup of a congregation can influence color preferences. "Colors have various religious meanings in different cultures," says Surya Vanka, who created a computer program that tracks the meaning of color in various societies.

For example, white is a symbol of mourning in India and China, whereas in the United States, white means purity. Yellow is strongly associated with religion in Ethiopia and the Ukraine, but it has a more secular meaning in the U.S. "Colors do not mean the same to everyone, even in the United States, which is influenced by different cultures," Vanka says.

Effect. Colors set different moods. Cool colors, or colors with blue undertones, create a different atmosphere than warm colors, or colors with a yellow undertone. Some colors are soft and soothing; others crisp and invigorating. Make sure that the colors you choose aren't so vibrant that they distract people from the task at hand, whether it's worship or socializing.

Trend. While today's color preferences shouldn't dominate your decor, they can serve as a guide to your choice. Black is passe right now. So are brown, harvest gold, avocado, mauve, yellow, and most cool colors. What's in right now are blue, burgundy, gray, pale green, off-white, teal, warm-red, and most warm colors.

Room-by-Room Color

Some designer suggestions for coloring various parts of your church:

The sanctuary. Keep color in this part of the church subtle, advises Stephen Adams of Stephen Adams Architects in Detroit, Michigan. "I tend not to use real strong colors in the sanctuary because they gain too much importance," he explains. "Part of the church service is the presentation of the people, and we don't want any features that they can't be seen against. It's almost like theater."

For accent color, Adams suggests stained-glass windows. These can carry touches of bolder colors used elsewhere in the building. Bruce Wardell, of Bruce R. Wardell Architects in Charlottesville, Virginia, likes to incorporate elements of nature into sanctuary windows. He uses greens to complement grass, or yellow for churches set near cornfields.

Many sanctuaries are multipurpose rooms that must accommodate videoprojection, theatrical lighting, and other forms of multimedia. Color shouldn't make the room look too dark or closed in when lights are turned down.

Classrooms. Children's artwork will dominate many of these rooms, so carpet and wall colors should be neutral. A livelier color can be used for an accent wall in a classroom or in a hallway, but avoid using agitating colors such as red, bright yellow, and bright pink. The accent wall can be repainted a different color every few years for a minimal cost, Wardell suggests.

Pastor's office. This room should be understated rather than opulent to give the right impression of the spiritual leader of a congregation. "No pastor wants to look too affluent when asking for

donations," Adams says. "An ornate or highly decorated space makes pastors look like they've been spending the congregation's money on themselves."

Since a pastor's study is often used for counseling, Hatfield suggests coloring it with muted hues of blues or grays that will calm spirits rather than stir them up. Softer hues of green are also soothing. One more consideration: If the office is small, lighter colors will make the room look larger.

Library, parlor, narthax. These areas are designed for socialization, so brighter colors are acceptable. Artwork can be used as accent pieces.

Kitchen. This room should look bright and clean, so stick with white, off-white, or very light tan, says Groninger. For accent color, add decorative wallpaper borders or tile flooring.

Finishing Touches

Accent color in a room should be carried in the carpeting and furnishings rather than on the walls. Sofas, tables, chairs, and curtains should carry the basic accent colors, while cushions, lamp shades and wall hangings can add complementary textures and hues.

If you select a plain carpet, you might add a border or block of color in the middle of the room or entry, Adams suggests. To add a bit more flair, upholster chairs in paisleys or tiny polka dots.

But don't go too far. "What really creates a wonderful ambiance is when things are contiguous; when you have a feeling of flow," Groninger suggests. "That's done with keeping a continuity of color."

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