CHAPTER 5:

The Worship Space[1]

In their private devotions and meditations, individual Christians can worship God not only in any manner and at any time, but also in any place. They can offer God their prayers and praises on a crowded bus, in a busy emergency ward, or in a quiet bedroom. God can serve individual believers wherever they can open his book and read it. But when Christians, especially many Christians, come together for worship, their service to God and God's service to them demands a worship space, that is, a building, a church. Lutheran congregations which begin plans to provide this space for worship (or to renovate an existing space) need to think about energy conservation and maintenance. Much more, however, they need to study concepts and theories of church design. The congregation's called and elected leaders will want to be determined that their worship space, like their worship rite and their worship music, matches the theological emphases of God's Word and is in step with the worship principles of Lutheranism.

OBJECTIVES OF THE WORSHIP SPACE

What is our church building for? is an important question, even though it sounds rather obvious. There are right and wrong reasons to erect a building for worship. Although Scripture doesn't call the tower of Babel a church, we do know that the people of Babel began their building program with two wrong objectives: "'Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches into the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth'" (Genesis 11:4). King Herod's objective in building the great temple in Jerusalem (20 B.C.) was to placate the Jews and to coerce them into accepting his Idumean monarchy. History makes no effort to hide the truth that much of the cathedral building in medieval Europe was carried out with decidedly commercial rather than spiritual objectives. With these realities in mind, a church planning committee is wise to begin its work by asking the question, "What is our church building for?"

FUNCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

A church building is for worship, for the intellectual and emotional interaction between the Bridegroom and his bride, between Christ and his Church. The church comes to worship to serve God, and God is at worship to serve the church. The church comes to pray, confess, sing, listen, and offer. God comes in the Word and the sacraments, in water at baptism and in bread and wine at Holy Communion. The worship space needs to allow believers to do what they do at worship, and it needs to provide space for God to do what he does at worship. Planners must take care that the design of the worship space does not hinder either the believers or God, but that architecture, furnishings, and art encourage the interaction of Christ and the Church.

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The church of the first centuries after Christ's ascension thought about church design primarily with this "function" objective in mind. As long as Christians lived under the threat of persecution, they were concerned only with finding a place that allowed them to carry out the most necessary worship activities.

After the civil authorities allowed Christian worship and then even made Christianity the religion of the state (fourth century A.D.), the church's leaders still thought first of function. Rather than erecting new buildings for their worship, Christian congregations took over the large public meeting halls that were found in most Roman communities. The basilica was open and airy, it had a raised central platform that allowed for preaching and reading, it had room for praying and praising, and it allowed people to move for eating and drinking. It invariably had an atrium or vestibule in which Christians could gather before and after the public service and often had a pool at which baptisms could be performed. The design was so perfectly functional for Christian worship that the basilica style remained the preferred church architecture for over a thousand years. The functional pragmatism of the early church is a good place for church planning committees to begin their work. A list of the various functions that take place in Lutheran worship will help:

1. the pastor *leads;* he preaches, reads, speaks the believers' prayers and intercessions, and takes part in the liturgy's dialogue
2. believers *participate;* they sing, listen, confess, pray, and praise
3. believers *move* for communion, for baptisms, with their offerings, for entry and exit
4. the choir and the organ *assist* the worship of the believers
5. believers *assemble* for concerts of sacred music and for dramatic and artistic programs
6. believers *gather* before and after worship

Once a list of worship functions has been determined, studied, and prioritized, church planners can begin to design a building that will allow the functions to take place easily and naturally. It is a sad reality that too many building committees have failed to address these functional questions, with the result that many church buildings have hindered and sometimes even made impossible important components of Christian worship.

The "form follows function" concept of architectural design has had the dominant voice in church building for almost a century. In their 1989 book on church architecture, James and Susan White agreed that

> Christian worship is not an esoteric, devious affair; usually the most simple, direct, utilitarian approach is the best. The finest church buildings in every era have sought to provide the simplest and most useful settings for worship. The Christian community gathers not to admire its building but to use the structure. It is not a community of tourists from afar, viewing something in which it never shares. The Christian community must build simply and directly for its own needs in worship. Anything beyond that is conspicuous consumption and contrary to the essence of Christianity.
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> Frequently, when Christians take most seriously that which is simple and direct, eschewing the monumental or purely decorative, the resulting building has the greatest aesthetic appeal. The dictum of architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "Less is more," has much to say to church builders.[1]

SYMBOLIC OBJECTIVES

One cannot help but wonder how the Whites react when they read of God's obvious approval of Solomon's temple. The point has been made previously that God not only communicates his message directly through the divine word but also reinforces the Word with symbols. Martin Luther understood that art carried Christ to the eyes just as music and speech carried Christ to the ears:

> [The gospel] has been proclaimed richly and clearly; it has been emphasized masterfully and powerfully by the apostles; now it is announced everywhere by word of mouth and with the pen; it is written, sung, pictured, etc.[2]

Again he wrote, "God's Word is presented so powerfully, lucidly, and clearly in preaching, singing, speaking, writing, and painting that they must concede it is the true Word of God."[3]

In the same way that believers cannot judge whether the gospel has greater effect in one place on earth than in another, so they cannot determine absolutely that the gospel has more effect when it is delivered through one medium than through another. The Holy Spirit has his own economy. That reading the Scripture is better in every case for every Christian than singing the Scripture, or that singing the Word is more effective in every case and for every Christian than picturing or symbolizing the Word cannot be known. The truth is that the author of the divine Word has communicated his message to his creatures in various ways and calls upon his followers to do the same.

As believers began to build churches of their own instead of taking over unused Roman basilicas, they thought about arranging wood, stone, iron, and a variety of other materials with the specific objective of proclaiming the divine story in symbolism. The styles of architecture have changed through the centuries, often because of advances in constructional technology, but each succeeding style retained an emphasis on symbolic communication:

- Thick walls, rounded arches, and barrel vaults gave Romanesque churches (eleventh century) a heavy and durable quality that underscored the eternal nature of God.
- The Gothic style appeared a century later in France, with its pointed arches and ribbed vaults. Flying buttresses removed the building's weight load from its walls, and architects filled the space with bright and colorful windows. The height, light, and upward direction of the Gothic style pulled believing eyes to heaven and encouraged medieval souls to live and long for heavenly glories.
- The period of the Renaissance (sixteenth century) wanted to recall the orderliness of the Greek and Roman cultures, and the artistic harmony and classical proportions of Renaissance architecture exalted the orderly creation of God.
- The churches of colonial and pioneer America did not have the splendor of many of Europe's churches and cathedrals, but the durable materials of which these churches were built spoke about God's eternal presence; the spires that reached toward the sky in thousands of towns and cities pointed to the eternal worship of heaven.

The furnishings and artifacts that are inside history's churches have spoken similar symbolic messages. Only God knows how many of his people were strengthened in faith through the centuries as they contemplated gem-studded crucifixes of gold and silver, as they gazed at Bible stories in stained glass windows, or as they thought about Christian symbols on tapestries and paraments. In fact, there have been times in the Church's history when the gospel was proclaimed more often through ecclesiastical art and architecture than it was in sermons.

The Christian church has also intended its buildings to be symbols of the worth its people ascribe to God. Through the centuries believers themselves may have lived in shacks, tenements, or sod houses, but they have built sturdy and beautiful structures where together they might enter the presence of God. Just as they worshiped God in many languages and types of music, so they constructed buildings in various styles and with varying degrees of splendor. But invariably their buildings confessed symbolically that God was greater than they were and that their service to him, to say nothing of his service to them, demanded nobility, beauty, and loveliness.

Building committees are obligated to understand that the structure, that holds the worship space of a Christian congregation, as well as the furnishings and artistry that serve the congregation's worship, are inevitably symbolic of something. Some are convinced that extreme examples of modern architecture and art are intended to be symbols of disorder and chaos and fail to speak a valid and honest message about God. Therefore, while the question of function ought to be the first question a committee asks, it ought not to be the last. How will we proclaim God's story to human eyes as well as to human ears? is a legitimate question for any church that wishes to convey, through every possible medium, the intellectual and emotional interaction between Christ and his bride in worship.

The principle of "form follows function" can be overstated and too simply applied. In fact, an emphasis only on the function of the worship space can rob the church of exactly that which, in some cases, is most beneficial in reinforcing the gospel message on the human heart. Building committees need not choose between function and symbolism; realistic and honest church design includes objectives for both.

When Christians try to follow both objectives, however, voices occasionally insist that architectural symbolism and artistic beauty rob the church of offerings that could be better used for the physically and, especially, the spiritually oppressed. "This money could have been spent for missions" is the often-heard criticism when congregations erect beautiful and symbolically rich church buildings.

The Savior's commission to "make disciples of all nations" was a call both to bring unbelievers to begin the walk with Jesus and to strengthen believers already on the walk with Jesus. A building for worship certainly serves the cause of the church's mission if both parts of the great commission are recalled. It is also a part of the divine record that Jesus did not disapprove of Mary anointing him with costly perfume (John 12:1- 7) and in fact rebuked the disciples, especially Judas, when they criticized her action. In his rebuke ("You will always have the poor among you") Jesus was not negating the value of helping the poor; he was rather exposing the error of setting false alternatives.

The Christian life is not always a matter of doing one thing or the other; it more often involves "doing the one and not leaving the other undone." The Lord himself promises his Church that he is able to supply the necessary gifts that will allow believers to carry out a variety of tasks. It is true enough that the church has a mandate to carry the gospel to the lost, but who can determine to what degree a beautiful church building, rich in its testimony of the gospel, helps to encourage believers to carry out their mission? For that matter, who knows how the Spirit works through such a building to draw the attention and the interest of the unbeliever? Decisions in these matters are part of sanctified Christian judgment and wise Christian stewardship. That tensions are present is often good, for thereby members of the congregation are obligated to reflect on both the mission of the church and on the role of artistry and symbolism in Christian worship.

THEOLOGICAL OBJECTIVES

Setting theological objectives for the worship space involves the examination of both functional objectives and the symbolic objectives. Planning committees want worshipers to be able to perform easily and naturally the worship activities that are in line with its theological priorities. They also want the building and its furnishings to symbolize the importance of those priorities. Although there is no inherently Lutheran or Christian style of church architecture, all architecture makes a statement about what a church believes.

> A church is a place where God's people gather together to worship him, and how they worship, as well as what they believe, is either reinforced or undermined by the architecture. Church architecture is therefore first and foremost a matter of theology rather than a matter of style.[4]

Historic examples illustrate the validity of that opinion:

1. The shallow chancels of the early Christian basilicas were deepened only after the Roman Church changed the theology of the Lord's Supper and turned the Sacrament into a sacrifice. The chancel became a separate room reserved for the celebrant and his clergy assistants; the people remained in the outer room (the nave) since their participation was not essential for the sacrifice. Thus, the "two-room" church was born in the false theology of the Roman mass.
2. Catholic churches of the Baroque period (early eighteenth century) resembled opera houses, with their banks of balconies circling the nave. The plan was true to Roman theology, which insisted that its people derived spiritual value simply by seeing the performance of the mass.
3. Leaders of the Reformed community stripped existing churches of everything that had roots in Catholicism and rebuilt church interiors to encourage preaching and hearing. Massive central pulpits towered over insignificant communion tables and carried a strong message about the Reformed theology of the Sacrament.
4. The lack of a pulpit and rows of facing pews in the worship buildings of the Quakers is an obvious indication that among the Quakers subjective expression has more theological significance than objective proclamation.
5. The design of contemporary Evangelical church buildings speaks just as clearly about modern Reformed theology. Worshipers gather in an unthreatening theaterlike atmosphere where it is not necessary (nor possible, really) to move and participate. All the action of worship takes place in an expansive chancel, which enables preachers to wander around, choirs to perform, dramas to be staged, and musical combos to be set up with ease. Thus, church architecture is made to perfectly match the entertainment focus of the church growth movement's style-over-substance theology of worship.

Architectural design, the floor plan, building materials, placement of furnishings, acoustics, and much more, all speak a message about the theological priorities of a Lutheran congregation. It is imperative, therefore, that church building committees study both church design and theology before they embark on a building or renovation program.

LUTHERAN CHURCH DESIGN

Since Lutheran worship has two primary components—God's service to his people and his people's service to God—it is obvious that a worship space designed for Lutherans will have, in most cases, two primary sections. Throughout the history of Lutheranism, Lutheran churches usually have had a distinctive chancel and a distinctive nave: the chancel where God comes in word, baptism, and supper, and the nave where the people offer prayer, praise, and confession. Since Lutherans believe that there can be no service to God without service from God, the chancel is the center and focal point of Lutheran church design.

Some have insisted that the chancel/nave design fails to give a clear confession about what the Scripture teaches concerning the universal priesthood of all believers and that it rather represents the incorrect Roman Catholic doctrine of the priesthood. Traditional Roman doctrine surely would have insisted upon the tworoom church, but the chancel/nave design does not necessarily give a compromised message.

The Lutheran church speaks clearly about the universal priesthood; Luther enunciated the scriptural principles that are still held by most Lutherans today. But the Scripture also speaks about the public ministry of the gospel and calls upon believers to designate certain individuals as their representatives not only at public worship but in other areas of gospel ministry as well. The chancel/nave design is not only very functional as far as movement, sight, and sound are concerned, but it is entirely in keeping with the Scripture's perfectly balanced teachings of the universal priesthood and the public ministry.

The chancel/nave design can also be helpful as a reminder to believers that they can come into the presence of God only through Christ. The writer to the Hebrews wrote, "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water" (Hebrews 10:19-22). This symbol becomes even more striking when the pastor speaks the Confession and Absolution in the nave and then moves—as the representative of the people—into the chancel.

THE ALTAR

A century ago, a study of Lutheran chancel design would not have begun with discussion of the altar. Especially among Lutherans who had their roots in Pietism, the altar was not a notable chancel furnishing. Calvinism refuses to speak about an altar at all, even to this day.[5] The strong reaction against the altar was born in Calvin's determination to rid Reformed churches of everything that smacked of Catholicism; the altar, as much as anything else in church design, was the symbol of Rome's doctrine of the sacrifice of the mass. Pietism was closely aligned with Calvinism, and many Lutheran chancels at the turn of the twentieth century had altars that were in fact tables, and small tables at that, located at the foot of massive pulpits. The altar's size and placement symbolized more than an aversion to Rome's sacrificial theology, however. There was also a statement in that design that the Lord's Supper was neither often celebrated nor highly cherished among Pietists.

Lutherans who retained the worship principles of Martin Luther did not have the same difficulty making the altar the focal point of their chancels and the most lavishly adorned of the chancel's furnishings. That reality does not mean that they held to a sacrificial theology in communion or even that they ranked the Sacrament above the Word. It simply meant that they were content to follow Luther's example of accepting the tradition of the church unless the tradition clearly violated the Scriptures.

Luther eliminated from Lutheran worship the doctrine of the sacrifice of the mass, but he did not eliminate the basic structure of liturgy that surrounded the sacrifice nor the altar at which it was offered. When Lutheran congregations assumed control of existing Roman Catholic churches, they renovated sparingly; they took over the organ, the windows, and even church names— Luther attended St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg until he died! These Lutherans also retained the elaborate central altar, and when they came to America, they built churches that were copies of what they had known in Germany.

Lutherans maintain a balanced thought concerning the symbolism of the altar. They recognize its Old Testament significance: on the altar, animals were sacrificed. God had designed the sacrificial rites for the nation of Israel to point his people to the truth that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). In the Old Testament worship rites, the altar was a foreshadowing of Christ, who finally "appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Hebrews 9:26). For New Testament believers the altar is a visual reminder that there is no forgiveness without the shedding of the blood of Christ.

Just as the ark of the covenant, placed in the temple's Most Holy Place, was the visible symbol of God's presence in the Old Testament, so the altar also symbolizes that God is present with his people in Word and sacrament. When the pastor speaks to the people from the altar in the Words of Institution or in the Blessing, he is speaking as God's ambassador from the foot of God's own throne. When the pastor speaks for the people facing the altar, in prayers and in the confession of sins, he is addressing the throne of God. Of course God is not confined to the altar any more than he was

confined to the ark of the covenant. This is symbolism, not reality. But it is symbolism that correctly represents a theological reality, and it is an important reality. Our society has little interest in supernatural revelation, and society's attitudes often influence the thoughts of Christians. The altar helps believers to remember that God is present in a supernatural way whenever the Word and sacrament are used. This is reality.

The altar has an important functional use besides its symbolic purpose. The sacred vessels are placed on the altar in preparation for Holy Communion, and the people gather around the altar to receive Christ's true body and blood in the bread and wine. Even here, however, there is some symbolic value. The fact that the elements are positioned in this special place, usually in a special way,

reminds believers that the sacred meal that begins at the altar is a unique meal that has no equal except in heaven, where the church confesses it will "eat of the eternal manna and drink of the river of thy pleasure forevermore."[6] That all the believers receive bread and wine from a single location is also a confession of the truth St. Paul related: "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:17).

Therefore, by means of the altar that they place in the chancels of their churches, Lutherans symbolize Scripture's theology in three ways: they portray the vicarious sacrifice of Christ as the central theme of God's plan of salvation; they symbolize that God is actually present among his people in the Word and sacrament of Christ; and they show that Holy Communion is a unique meal offered to believers.

Because of the symbolism that Lutherans attach to the altar, they usually place the altar in a dignified and beautiful setting. Often a *reredos,* a backdrop made of wood or stone, stands at the back of the altar, usually containing niches for statues, a crucifix, or another Christian symbol. Some altars are positioned beneath a *triptych,* a set of panels decorated with paintings or carvings. Occasionally Lutheran altars are covered by a *baldechin* (also called a *tester* or *ciborium*), a canopy supported either by pillars or from the wall behind the altar. A popular innovation during the 1950s and 1960s was the dorsal, a large curtain that replaced the reredos as a backdrop for the altar. More recently church designers simply have set the altar against the chancel wall and have decorated the wall with a prominently displayed Christian symbol.

As he conducts the liturgy at the altar, the pastor honors the altar's symbolism (and helps the people understand its symbolism) by his orientation to the altar. He faces the altar when he speaks to God on behalf of the people, and he faces the people when he speaks to them on God's behalf. The idea that pastors should never turn their backs on worshipers is new to the church and seems to be nothing more than trendy advice.

In the *Deutsche Messe,* the German service Luther composed for village parishes, he made this comment as he wrote about the liturgy for communion:

> In the true mass of real Christians, the altar should not remain where it is [i.e., against the wall], and the priest should always face the people as Christ doubtlessly did in the Last Supper. But let that await its own time.[7]

The freestanding altar actually waited for the Roman Catholics, who introduced it during the middle decades of the 20th century. However, the concept concisely matches Lutheran theology, which considers the Words of Institution to be the gospel proclamation of the Sacrament. Whether serving at a wall altar or at a freestanding one, the pastor more properly speaks the words facing the people than facing the altar. Luther purposefully removed the words from the ancient Thanksgiving Prayer so that they would be proclaimed and not prayed.

The freestanding altar has much to commend it, but committees need to take care that the altar is constructed and positioned in such a way that it can serve not only as a place for communion but also as a symbol of Christ's atoning sacrifice and of God's abiding presence. A freestanding altar that retains the three traditional functions of a Lutheran altar invites the pastor to continue to face the altar as he speaks to God and to face the people as he speaks for God. In fact, it is best if the pastor conducts the entire *Service of the Word* in front of the altar, facing the people when he speaks as God's representative and facing the altar when he speaks on behalf of the people.

The altar is *not* a lectern. In no case should the lessons be read from behind the altar. If a lectern is not installed in a church's chancel, the lessons may be read from a position in front of the altar. This position should not be the same as that used during prayer or liturgical proclamation, however. Traditionally, the lessons are read at the "horns," or corners of the altar: the First and Second Lessons at the right side and the Gospel at the left side (as one faces the altar). Whatever materials are needed by the leader (e.g., a copy of the psalm or the creed) can be placed into the Bible. The leader moves to the other side of the altar to read the Gospel as the choir or congregation sing the Verse.

If the Creed follows the Gospel (as it does in the *Common Service*), it may be spoken by the pastor from the middle of the altar as he faces the people. The pastor moves behind the altar either after the Lord's Prayer (just before the Preface in both the *Common Service* and the *Service of Word and Sacrament*) or during *Holy, Holy, Holy.* He then returns to the front of the altar after the distribution and concludes the service there.

Some Lutheran congregations have noticed that their deep, tiered chancels require uncommon physical activity of pastors who must move frequently and quickly between the wall altar and the communion rail. To minimize the problem, they have installed a communion table on a lower chancel platform and closer to the rail. The communion table may be used as a free-standing altar during the proclamation of the Words of Institution. If there is a desire to conduct the entire communion liturgy around the communion table, the suggestions made in the previous paragraph may be followed.

THE PULPIT

Before he ascended into heaven Jesus instructed his followers, “Preach the good news to all creation.” Martin Luther wrote, “When God’s word is not preached, one had better neither sing nor read, or even come together.”[8] The Apology of the Augsburg Confession includes in its German text: “There is nothing that so attaches people to the church as good preaching.”[9] Considering what the Scriptures, Luther, and the Lutheran Confessions have to say about the value of preaching, it would be strange indeed if preaching did not occupy a prominent place in Lutheran worship. It would be equally strange if Lutheran church design did not accentuate the position and artistic significance of the *pulpit.*

Lutherans have usually positioned the pulpits in their churches close to the altar; the symbolism of the centrality of Word and sacrament is obvious. However, pulpits have come in all kinds of sizes and shapes. Some were large and high, reaching above the level of wrap-around balconies that were common in Lutheran churches a century ago. Many were topped by an ornate canopy, a *Schalldeckel,* which served primarily as a sounding board. As public address systems became common (and as some people began to resent pulpits that seemed as though there were “six feet above contradiction”), the canopies were often removed and the pulpits lowered. The church architects of the Victorian era (nineteenth century) tended to value artistic symmetry and often designed pulpits and lecterns that were identical in size and shape.

Some contemporary church architects are beginning to rethink the diminuation of the pulpit. In recent designs pulpits have once again risen above the floor of the chancel and many have had canopies attached overhead. This has been done not for the sake of function, but for symbolic purposes; the massive, towering pulpit speaks a visual message about the authority of the Word. It underscores what the pastor says in the sermon: “What I am saying to you here is what the Lord says in his Word!” As inviting as this idea may be to Lutherans, care must be taken that the pulpit does not again begin to suggest dominance over the altar. The Lord does not rank the means of grace; neither should symbolism.

Building committees must keep several practical concerns in mind. In some way the pulpit must be able to accommodate preachers of various heights; an adjustable book stand helps deal with this situation. The book stand ought to have room for a Bible and the preacher’s manuscript if he uses one. A shelf for a glass of water, a handkerkerchief, an additional book, and perhaps even a small tape recorder is desirable. Some preachers want a small clock installed in the pulpit. A good lighting system is important so that the pastor does not preach from the shadows.

Dimming the nave lights (in some churches the nave lights are actually turned off) and training spotlights on the speaker is a practice of doubtful value. The custom tends to isolate the worshipers, who may desire to participate actively as they listen, and makes it more difficult for the preacher to establish eye contact. In fact, it does more to invite dozing than it does to encourage attention.

THE LECTERN

The *lectern* is the place where the pastor or lector reads the lessons of the day. Usually it stands on the opposite side of the chancel from the pulpit and often is designed with a book stand that accommodates not only the Bible or lectionary but also other materials that are used during the Word section of the service, e.g., the psalm and the creeds.

Although it has been standard chancel furniture in most Lutheran churches for years, some liturgical design consultants wonder if the lectern is really necessary. Especially in small churches the lectern often makes for a crowded chancel; sometimes it needs to be moved before the communion distribution can take place. Also, when the lectern becomes one of the three visual centers in the front of the church, the baptismal font often has to be relegated to a corner of the nave. Some are convinced that the lectern draws too much attention away from the pulpit and inadvertently undervalues the work of preaching.[10] With all this in mind building committees might be wise to ask if money could not be better spent on something more important for worship than the lectern. (The place for the reading of the lessons when there is no lectern has been discussed earlier in this chapter.)

THE FONT

The sacrament of baptism requires nothing more in Lutheran worship than a bowl of water. However, Christians have invariably placed in their churches elaborate and artistically significant *baptismal fonts.* In the medieval churches of Europe and the Near East, the font often stood in a chapel of its own, separated from the main church building. Beautiful fonts of marble and wood grace many churches in both the old world and the new.

The elaborate and obvious baptismal font means to be a symbol of the great value Lutheran theology ascribes to baptism. By far the greatest number of believers in any given congregation enter the church through infant baptism. The reality that baptism initiates the miracle of faith is enough justification for a font of significant character and design.

However, Lutheran theology also maintains that baptism is a lifelong reminder of the believer's daily spiritual struggle and triumph of faith. Luther made the point that confessing sins and receiving forgiveness is nothing else than a reliving of baptism.[11] It was this truth that led the framers of *Christian Worship* to include confession and absolution in the baptism rite. In fact. the rite includes the words of Luther's Small Catechism:

> Baptism means that the sinful nature in us should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance, and that all its evil deeds and desires be put to death. It also signifies that a new person should daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever (CW, p. 12).

Therefore, the architecturally significant baptismal font serves as a visual reminder to every worshiper of both the initiating and the durative value of Holy Baptism.

The observation that many present-day Lutherans need these truths about baptism underscored in their minds and hearts is sufficient justification for thinking carefully about the design and placement of the baptismal font. A position in the chancel on the opposite side from the pulpit (replacing the lectern) commends itself, as does a place in the center of the main aisle just below the first chancel step. Some contemporary church designs position the font at the entry of the nave, although this requires careful pew placement so that the congregation can be involved in the baptism rite. Beautiful and significant works of art can be attached to the font just as they are to the altar and pulpit.

CHANCEL APPOINTMENTS

It is not the objective of this cursory treatment of the worship space to cover in detail all aspects of chancel design. It would be impossible to give an adequate presentation of all the various sacred vessels, lights, paraments, banners, and other appointments that are used in Lutheran worship. However, there are several considerations that apply generally to all the appointments that congregations place into the chancels of their churches.

The first of these considerations has to do with *excellence.* What is placed in the chancel as a gift to God for the visual proclamation of his truth ought to be of high quality. Building project monies need to be reserved for altar ware, communion vessels, and paraments. Since these are used to present to the worshipers the choicest of Christ's gifts, they demand the best his people can give. If a congregation invites individual members to present these items in memory of a family member, the responsible committee will retain the right to designate what will be purchased. The point of view cannot be accepted that "anything will do." Well-meaning members occasionally volunteer to create and produce items for the chancel. The committee ought to know exactly what is being offered and approve designs *before* the gifts are presented. Banners prepared by little children are usually best placed in Sunday school rooms or in the narthex.

Whatever is placed in the chancel ought to *neither replace nor compete with* the altar, pulpit, and font as the focal points of the worshipers. It is possible to have too many floral arrangements and too much greenery. The chancel is not an art museum. Pictures, statues, symbols in brass or wood, and tapestries must be chosen carefully. Altar candles, paschal resurrection, or Christ candles, and eternal lights ought to be included judiciously, or they do nothing but clutter the chancel and obstruct both the worshiper's view and attention. Fewer adornments of good quality do more to accentuate Christian truth than many appointments of questionable value.

Committees must also take care that the appointments (cross and candlesticks) that are placed on a freestanding altar are actually designed for a freestanding altar. The elaborately tall appointments that are so fitting on a more traditional altar are out of place (to say nothing of being in the way) on a freestanding altar.

The chancel appointments ought to carry a clear and distinctive *theological message,* and the worshipers ought to be able to know what the message is. The chancel or altar cross can be so "common" that it fails to draw attention to the centrality of the cross in Christian teaching. Although

some insist that an empty cross is a symbol of the resurrected Christ, it is to be remembered that some denominations display a plain cross precisely to overcome the implications of the Savior's vicarious atonement of blood. Committees are wise to consider a crucifix, i.e., a cross with the *corpus,* either depicting the suffering Christ or the exalted Christ dressed in his high-priestly vestments.

Congregations do not, however, need to eliminate every chancel appointment that has carried an imprecise meaning in other Christian churches. Both the eternal light and the altar candlesticks have been defined by Roman Catholics as symbolizing the presence of the living host in the church, i.e., the bread placed in the altar tabernacle that remains the body of Christ even after the communion. Lutherans can use these lights in freedom as long as they carefully explain what the lights truly symbolize.

Some churches like to include the national, Christian, and denominational flags in the chancel. While many Lutheran congregations have displayed flags of one sort or another, building committees ought to carefully analyze this tradition. Altar, pulpit, and font "all point to Christ," while national flags "speak not of Christ, but of the nation."[12] Especially in an age when so many Christian churches confuse the separate roles of church and state, it may be wise to place national flags in the narthex rather than in the chancel. The use of the Christian flag may promote an imprecise view of the church and a false ecumenism besides. Denominational loyalty is important in a congregation, but recent history seems to indicate that it is better to teach loyalty to the Scriptures that cannot err than to denominations that can. The important work of the church body can surely be emphasized in better ways than with a flag.

There are many books and tracts available from Lutheran publishers that give more specific and detailed information concerning the appointments, paraments, sacred vessels, etc., that Lutheran congregations may desire to place in their church chancels. Paul H. D. Lang's book, *What An Altar Guild Should Know,*[13] remains an invaluable resource.

THE NAVE

The Lutheran church understands that the service of the congregation to God is the second purpose of public worship, and it rightly defines worship as an *interaction* between Christ and his bride.

Therefore, participation is the key word as church building committees think about the design of the *nave,* the place for the worship of the people. Two considerations ought to be studied: where will the people stay and how will the people move?

For the most part Lutherans remain in one place, usually in *pews,* while they worship. Church furniture companies offer a variety of pew designs that can serve almost any congregation. Committees will have to decide whether they want pews to be padded and how they will include

places for hymnals and Bibles. Often pews need to hold visitor welcome cards, communion registration cards, and even used individual communion glasses. Some church planning committees have replaced pews with dignified and well-constructed chairs, usually made of wood. Movable seating commends itself for several reasons. By removing a chair or two, wheelchairs can be located in any place in the nave and still be kept out of the aisles. Chairs can be rearranged for smaller worship gatherings (e.g., weddings and funerals) or for organ and instrumental recitals. The use of chairs also eliminates the problem of crowding too many people into a church pew.

More important than the kind of seating is the placement of pews and chairs within the nave. The traditional two-room rectangular church that Lutherans inherited from Roman Catholics after the Reformation was designed primarily for hearing—and especially for seeing—rather than for participating. Lutheran worship theology that emphasizes the participation of the congregation is not well-served, it seems, by row after row of pews flanking a long central aisle. Not only do worshipers have difficulty seeing the focal point of worship, i.e., the chancel, in such a design, they also find it impossible to see anything but the backs of other worshipers. Such a situation hardly encourages mutual edification.

A nave design that accentuates width instead of length, that gathers worshipers closer to and around the chancel, and that allows worshipers to see one another seems to be far more suitable for Lutheran worship than the traditional rectangular concept. The modern idea that human response has equal value with divine revelation needs to be rejected, of course. Church planners are wise to retain a notable accent on the chancel at the same time that they maximize opportunities for congregational participation in the nave.

Some attention should be paid to the space where the congregation assembles to receive the Sacrament. The *communion rail,* a traditional feature in most Lutheran chancels, is another of the furnishings that Lutherans inherited from Roman Catholics. Lutherans have used the rail in good conscience,[14] although its history is rooted in the false theology that the members of the priesthood were of better spiritual character than laypeople. The rail is a convenient, obvious, and reverent place for the distribution; even a large group of people knows where to go and what to do when they get there. Some Lutherans have used the rail for individual absolution, for opening and closing prayers,[15] and during the confirmation rite.

The communion rail is not without its detractors, however. In some older churches the rail allows only a few people to gather at a time, resulting in lengthy communion services. Elderly people have real problems using the steps to get to a rail located in the chancel, and many would rather endure the pain that comes with kneeling than the embarrassment that comes with standing. Some surely refrain from attending the Sacrament to avoid both kinds of pain. Many pastors feel that communing people who are kneeling is difficult. The communicants' mouths often are hard to see. Then, too, shorter pastors may find it awkward to serve taller people when they are standing. Nevertheless, both worshipers and their pastors may be happier if the Sacrament is distributed to people while they are standing at a designated place on the main floor in front of the chancel.

Lutheran worship expects that worshipers will occasionally move: people move to receive the Lord's Supper, to bring their children for baptism, to present their offerings, and, of course, to enter and exit the nave. Because such movement occurs, church planners need to think about the *space between the pews* as well as the *aisles.* Not everyone attends communion every time it is offered, and communicants who leave their pews to attend ought to be able to walk easily past someone who remains seated.

Aisles need to be wide enough for a row of chairs when there is an overflow attendance, for caskets to be carried to and from the chancel entrance, and for brides and fathers of brides. The aisle between the first row of pews and the chancel steps should be designed with the consideration that visiting concert choirs (and occasionally the congregation's own choirs) may need space for a piano and instruments. It stands to reason that aisles made of rough brick or uneven tiles, while perhaps beautiful, are impractical and actually dangerous for the people who must walk on them.

THE BALCONY

The *balcony,* standing a story above the nave and usually at the back of the church, has often been called the *choir loft* or the *organ gallery.* Both optional titles identify the traditional function of the balcony.

Many Christian denominations place the organ and choir in the chancel, in front and in the view of the congregation, rather than in back and out of sight of the worshipers. Lutherans occasionally ask about the traditional Lutheran practice and wonder why the choir could not be brought to the front of the church. The answer has to do with the Lutheran understanding of worship and the corresponding function of the choir and organ.

The main participants in Lutheran worship are God and the congregation. The music of worship is the servant of both, assisting God in his service to the congregation and assisting the congregation in its service to God. The organist and the choir have a similar function to that of the worship leader. Just as the pastor is a servant of God as he proclaims the Word and administers the sacraments, so the congregation's musicians are servants of God as they proclaim the Word in music. Just as the pastor directs and guides the congregation's prayers, so the musicians assist the congregation in the singing of the liturgy and hymns. It is vital that the pastor, the congregation, and the musicians themselves understand this role of the choir and organist.

The placement of the choir and organ behind the congregation is, to a certain extent, symbolic; one might say that music "stands behind and pushes" as the congregation brings its praise to God. The two poles of the building may be thought of as representing the two components of worship: God serving the congregation is symbolized at the front of the church by altar, pulpit, and font, and the people serving God are symbolized at the back of the building by the choir loft and organ case. Just as pastoral vestments symbolize that the person of the pastor is less important than his function, so a position in the balcony is a reminder that the function of the music is more important than the musicians themselves.

However, the placement of musicians in the balcony has much more to do with practicality than with symbolism. If the choir is to assist the congregation in its corporate praise of God, the sound of the choir's voices must be directed toward the worshipers and be above the heads of the worshipers. If the choir is able to gather easily and quickly on the chancel steps, this objective will be able to be met. But it would hardly be possible for the choir to be up and down on the steps every time it was to function, and this will occur if the choir is involved in more than an anthem (particularly when the Lutheran choir participates in the hymns and the liturgy as well).

Some make the case that permanent chancel seating solves this problem. However, another matter needs to be mentioned. Neither church choirs nor church organists memorize the music that they present during a Sunday service. They have music to put away, music to get ready, and pages to turn. Musicians must often begin their preparations while other things are happening in the service (e.g., prayers or recitation of the creed). Instrumentalists occasionally need to make tuning adjustments and clean out their instruments. The members of bell choirs must pull on gloves and make quick moves from one bell to another. When they are arranged in the sight of worshipers, the musicians' completely necessary activities become distractions. Unexpected events during the service cause more problems. They often require a "mad dash" to the music cabinet or a "quick grab" for something left in the wrong place.

There are occasions, of course, when musicians may appear in the front of the congregation without these disadvantages. Recitalists often memorize the music they perform; at the very least they rehearse page turning as faithfully as they practice notes. Our college and high school choirs (and church choirs, too, for special song services) prepare concert programs with the understanding that they will be seen as well as heard. Finally, seeing the enthusiasm of children at a Christmas service can be as edifying as hearing the music itself.

The balcony is usually the place where the organ is located, and committees need to take care in the placement of both electronic and pipe organs. An electronic instrument requires less space than a pipe organ does, although the electronic one does demand thoughtful placement of speakers. A pipe organ needs room in the balcony. The romantic organs of a half century ago hid their pipes in chambers and produced a sound that often was unable to encourage enthusiastic singing. The organs that are built today, usually patterned after the great instruments of Lutheran Germany, are able to support our hymns and liturgical music with far greater capability. This is true for several reasons, one of which is that the pipes of these organs are mounted in a freestanding wooden organ case. These pipes are able to speak without the impedances of walls and grill cloth; the case actually serves as a sounding board to amplify the organ's tone. A smaller organ of this design is able to support singing much better than a larger romantic instrument. In any case, building committees still need to design the balcony with the organ in mind. Congregations are often left with very few options when committees have waited until after the church is completed to think about the placement of the organ.

Should a balcony be impossible or undesirable in a building's design, a raised platform (with at least three levels of seating) located in a back of the church serves as an adequate replacement.

ACOUSTICS IN THE WORSHIP SPACE

Lutheran worship accentuates sight and sound, and sound is the more important ingredient. Worship does not involve much more than speaking and singing by pastor, congregation, choir, and organ. It is imperative, therefore, that the building committees give genuine and serious attention to the subject of acoustics in the worship space. A noted acoustical expert has written:

> A desirable acoustical setting is a matter of good design and planning. It means making decisions regarding the nature of a space, its shape, dimensions, materials, furnishings, and construction. A great amount of money does not have to be spent to "purchase" good acoustics. A good acoustical environment is a result of proper planning, of selecting and using the components of a space in proper relationship and proportion. A good acoustical environment must be planned early, with clear goals and sensitivity to its importance always in mind.[16]

All participants in public worship ought to be able to speak and sing and be heard. This is true first of the pastor. The words of the sermon and the liturgy must be audible and understandable, and the pastor's voice must be clear and articulate, whether it is naturally or electronically amplified. For the sake of precise speech, planners must take care to control unwanted noise from the street or from the building's air conditioning and heating units.

It is equally important that the voices of the worshipers be heard. It is essential that a church building have live acoustics. Live acoustics give music a certain reverberation period so that the music can move from one worshiper to another. In most cases, a two-second reverberation period suits both singing and speech very well. Dry acoustics, that is, where there is little or no reverberation, often give worshipers the feeling that they are singing alone. Nothing discourages singing in worship more than dry acoustics.

There are other acoustical concerns that demand the assistance of an expert. Money spent to secure the services of an acoustical engineer invariably will bring a rich return. Under no circumstances should a building committee rely exclusively on the acoustical advice of an organ or sound system salesperson. Many reputable companies employ sales personnel who are knowledgeable and trustworthy, but not many of these have expertise in the matter of acoustics. Add the reality that always a few people involved in sales are interested solely in selling.

Committees should consider the following points as they discuss the issue of acoustics:

1. Where can worshipers, speakers, and musicians best be located for optimal hearing and sight?
2. What building materials, components, and furnishings encourage good acoustics? What materials discourage this? For example, acoustical tile, draperies, unpainted concrete block, plywood paneling, and especially carpeting should be assiduously avoided. As the saying goes, "Carpet bedrooms, not churches." Brick, plaster, drywall, terrazzo, and glazed tile are excellent materials for promoting good acoustics.
3. What kind of electronic sound reinforcement is best for this building?

It may be that acoustics, even more than pew position, choir and organ placement, or nave design, encourage the active participation of the worshiping congregation. It is imperative that decisions on these issues be made with theology and not just maintenance in mind.

THE NARTHEX

When the social center of most Lutheran congregations was the neighborhood or the school gymnasium, the need for a carefully designed narthex was not very pressing. Hundreds of churches have been designed with only a tiny and insignificant space for gathering.

What was true of Lutheran sociology a century ago is not true today, however, and most church members find their prime opportunities for social interaction before and after worship. Congregations that worship in older churches have gone to great lengths (and occasionally into great debt) to enlarge the gathering space of their buildings. Those who are planning a new building have a decided advantage as they design an area for gathering.

The primary objective of the gathering space is to provide opportunities for members to visit with one another. Some churches have a narthex with small tables surrounded by chairs. Often included is a small kitchen for the preparation of coffee, punch, and light snacks. The narthex might well be carpeted and have a low-ceiling; its casual atmosphere means to say, “Come early and stay later.” Rest rooms, cloak rooms, and the church nursery ought to be nearby, if possible. In any case, there ought to be clear directions as to where these facilities are located. Occasionally a gathering space may be located outside and decorated with trees and shrubbery.

Those who oversee the worship of the congregation need some space in the narthex. Controls for the sound system are usually best located in a place where they can be adjusted while the leader is functioning. A place to store chairs for overflow seating, a cabinet for offering plates and medical supplies, and a stand for the guest or communion register all need to be included.

Smaller congregations that lack the facilities of a large educational wing or school building may need to use the narthex for Bible classes and meetings. Study tables and chairs will have to be available for easy set-up and will also have to be stored. Service folders, bulletins, newsletters, and other printed material for members usually need a place in the narthex. Planning committees need to think about where the Christian book and supply shop and the church library will be located to meet the needs of both members and volunteers.

Also the needs of the handicapped ought to be respected and met as the narthex is designed. City building codes invariably dictate this consideration. Christians ought not limit themselves to the letter of the local building codes but plan in the spirit of Christ as they make provisions to allow all of God’s people to worship.