Much More than a Makeover

Improving the Function of Worship

"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" (Christian Worship Manual, p. 68).

This paragraph summarizes what we studied together in Bible Class back in September 2016. Understanding how God and his people function in worship has guided both the congregation in Bible study and also the Sanctuary Committee in our detailed work. This 2nd article seeks to answer the question:

**Since we need to address maintenance needs in our sanctuary anyway, is this a good time to also improve how our worship space functions?**

*Christian Worship Manual* lists the various functions that take place in Lutheran worship:

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

The last point was addressed a decade ago at Redeemer when the gathering space was significantly improved so that people could comfortably enjoy fellowship before and after worship. We’ll use the other five points to outline changes that are recommended by the Sanctuary Committee and Board of Trustees.

**The pastor leads – changes to chancel furnishings**

Our **altar** can be moved forward, making it a free standing altar. The pastor would stand behind the altar to face the congregation when he consecrates the communion elements. He could also face both the altar and congregation for prayers. This will especially help to better engage worshipers who are hard of hearing.

The **pulpit** is a large piece of furniture in a small chancel. If it is removed, the lectern could be enhanced to serve as the new pulpit (also called an ambo). Having one piece of furniture (instead of two) to symbolize the spoken Word of God opens up space to visually highlight a sacrament that hasn’t had a special place....

A **new font** would be crafted from black walnut to match the other furnishings. It would be larger, with a

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Command and teach these things. ...set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.

1 Timothy 4:11-13
visible bowl on top and would have its appointed space opposite the refashioned pulpit (the current lec-
tern). This would not only highlight the importance of baptism, it would also improve the sight lines for
worshipers—they’ll be able to see baptisms since they will take place on the raised platform.

**Believers participate – Audio and Acoustics**

Thankfully our sanctuary already has many good things going for it in the area of sound. Mr. David
Hosbach, a professional audio technician, visited and shared a brief evaluation of our sanctuary. He says
that we won’t need to do much in order to maximize its acoustic potential.

If a space is more acoustically dry (like ours), singers don’t hear each other as well. This can cause aural
tuning issues for choirs and can make singers feel like they’re singing by themselves. Most people—
whether the person in the pew or the 7th grader singing in front of church—don’t like singing solos, so if
they can’t hear others around them singing very well, they get shy and sing and speak more quietly.

In an acoustically live environment, singers hear each other more clearly, which allows choirs to better sing in tune. It allows young kids with developing voices to be heard better by the congregation. Most importantly, the sup-
portive sound gives more confidence to singers both in the pew and in the choir to participate more robustly.

On the other hand, an acoustic environment that is too live can cause problems with echoes that can re-
duce speech intelligibility. This was the greatest concern raised by members who can hear the spoken
word much better at Redeemer than at other sanctuaries in town. They don’t want that to change, and neither does anyone else. In fact, it’s the main rea-
son we want to hire Mr. Hosbach and his associates. He will help us maximize
our space for listening quality. He would make a digital model of our sanctuary and would test how different surface changes would affect both these ele-
ments of listening.

Since hearing the spoken word is already a strength of our sanctuary, we weren’t looking to upgrade our sound system or replace the large speaker at the ceiling. But we’ll hear
Mr. Hosbach’s suggestions to see if he has any cost-effective recommendations that would significantly
improve the spoken word over what is already working well.

Another audio enhancement will be adding to T-Coil hearing loop that will surround the seating area.
This loop will not affect anyone in any way who doesn’t use a hearing aid. Those with hearing aids
equipped with a T-Coil will be able to switch their aids to T-Coil and connect directly to the audio trans-
mission that’s produced by the T-Coil loop.

One of the last elements added to the committee’s work is video projection. Though this is not nearly as
important as audio, we will suggest improvements for video. This will immediately make the showing the
WELS Connection easier. It will also allow for an expanded use of video in the future, even though we
have no current plans to do so.

One suggestion shared at the October Open Forum to improve our video projection was to plaster the
front walls on either side of the cross. Not only would this brighten up the chancel (more on that next
week), it would allow one of the walls to be used as a projection screen. This has worked well for others.
We are visiting some to evaluate their video quality. Mr. Hosbach will also share other options with us.
Believers move - Communion

Think about that word *communion*. This important part of our worship is not only partaking in the miraculous union of body and blood of Christ in, with, and under the bread and wine, for our forgiveness. It is also a precious opportunity to gather together at the Lord's table with fellow believers in a tightly knit bond of fellowship. This gathering together around Holy Communion is a special way we can receive encouragement—not only from our Lord, but from fellow believers.

We are all keenly aware that not all are physically able to ascend the steps to gather together at the altar at communion, and many others have difficulty doing so. Two people have fallen on the steps in the last year. Of those who do make it there, not all are able to kneel. It begs the questions, "Are some not coming to Holy Communion because of the difficulty in doing so? Do some not participate because they would feel conspicuous as they stand while everyone else kneels, or because they are not able to climb the steps and join the rest?"

This concern leads to the recommendation to change how we gather for communion. Instead of walking up steps to commune in the chancel, worshipers would stand at the bottom step instead. That step would be lengthened by 12 inches for the pastor to walk on. A far less important, but still recognizable, benefit is that 16 rather than 14 people could be communed at once, shortening the time for communion in our larger services.

This will not be the easiest change for people who enjoy kneeling at the communion rail. Not everyone is excited about it. But consider that the Lord’s Supper is pure gospel. Standing is at least as appropriate as kneeling when we receive the Lord’s forgiveness in such a personal manner. And if this change allows more of our church family to safely commune next to us, it serves the greater good of the body of Christ.

The Choir, Organ [and Piano] assist – Increased space for musicians

The piano is crowded up against the pulpit. Our chancel isn’t designed for that. Even with the pulpit removed, we want to add more space by removing the front pew on both sides. Flexible seating in the form of chancel chairs that match the pews would be purchased to allow chairs to be added when needed.

With communicants standing in front of the bottom step, and with a tall piano obstructing sight lines of the chancel, the piano would either be moved out of the front of the church on communion Sundays, or turned to allow good movement for communion.

The extra space in front will better serve small singing groups and musicians. Extra microphone jacks would be added to accommodate amplification of more voices and instruments.

Believers assemble – Flexible chancel space

The chancel area will be simplified to be all one platform. To open up the currently crowded space, the communion rail, pulpit and extra levels will be removed. In addition, the pulpit and baptismal font will not be anchored. All these changes will open chancel space to accommodate greater use of the chancel. One example is the School Children’s Christmas Eve services, where most of the children will be able to sit in the chancel rather than the pews. This, in turn, would free up more seating space for worshipers. That’s a functional improvement we’ll greatly appreciate at those crowded Christmas Eve services. An added benefit is that children will be more easily seen by worshipers since they’ll be in the raised chancel area.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”
Matthew 11:28
An obvious function of assembling together is having enough space to do so. A common concern is that we’ll run out of space in the sanctuary if our worship attendance continues its steady growth. Moving the worship times back 15 minutes this past Fall has balanced attendance between the services very well on average. This has gained seating space in the late service. The next step would likely be to add a fourth service, probably on Saturday. By that time, we hope to have a second pastor on staff to help with our additional ministry needs.

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Next week’s article takes us from function to form as we consider how we can improve the aesthetic beauty of our worship space. This proposed project is much more than a makeover, but we will address aesthetic appeal, too. Everyone wants our church to look like a church – rather than an auditorium or something else. We all want God’s House to be beautiful. Our last piece on March 4th will talk about making a visual impact on worshipers—the last of the three renovation purposes that truly is a makeover.

But one more thing that you may be thinking about...cost.

**What will this Cost?**

In the surveys last November, members asked that we expand the scope of the project to address needed maintenance of the pews. This is a significant expanse of the project that pushes it beyond the initial $70,000. After adding the cost of new pews and chairs, flooring under the pews, professional consulting fees, and audio/video upgrades, the committee estimates the total cost to be $140,000, not to exceed $150,000. We included the high end of many estimates, hoping that actual costs will actually come in under $140,000.

With the increased scope of work, the Trustees feel this project should serve our worship needs well for the next 20 years. That’s an entire generation of worshipers. Putting that many years on the project can help put the cost in perspective when you realize that there will be 4000 separate services held in this space over those years. That’s $35/service. Or you could consider how many worshipers will be individually affected over that time. Assuming we have 20,000 worshipers/year for 20 years, that spreads the cost out to less than 35 cents/worshiper/service.

But God cautions us to be careful when we declare what we’ll do tomorrow, much less twenty years from now. Jesus’ brother James tells us to add a divine caveat to our multi-year plans:

> Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” (James 4:13-15)

So, we can bring these recommended improvements and costs forward, intending them to serve Redeemer’s worship needs well for the next 20 years...as long as we give God the last word.

> “If it is the Lord’s will, we will do this.”

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* For deeper reading on the function and other needs of a worship space, you can go to redeemerfdl.org to read the entire chapter about the worship space which was quoted at the beginning of this article.