

Liturgical Principles

The building makes a visual theological statement about who we are as a community and the purpose for which we gather on Sunday mornings and at other times. What kind of statement do we want to make?

1. “A church building is not the house of God. The people are the house of God.”¹ The building ought to make a statement about the kind of community we are and are called to become. The building ought to be a welcoming, hospitable, and inclusive space. We are the body of Christ, a living organism, sisters and brothers in Christ. When we come together for worship we are called to model life in the reign of God, a reign of justice, love, and peace. Our gathering together ought to model just and caring relationships towards one another, towards visitors and strangers, and towards those who are marginalized by society.

2. The primary purpose for which we come together as a community is to give thanks and praise to God, to hear and respond to God’s Word, to share in the eucharistic meal, and on particular occasions to welcome new members into the Christian community through Baptism. Our primary response is one of mission, to reach out to the city and the world where we are called to live out the ways of God’s kingdom in loving and just relationships. The building ought to be open to the city, to the arts, and to those in need. This suggests flexibility and multiple use for the building.

3. If the building is to make a statement about the kind of community we are and are called to become, it ought to be one room in which clergy and people are gathered together around the proclamation of the Word and the eucharistic meal rather than two rooms, one for clergy and servers and choir and one for the congregation.

4. There ought to be three liturgical centres around which the community gathers: the altar/table, the pulpit/lectern, and the font. If the building is one room rather than two, with the people gathered around the proclamation of the Word and the eucharistic table, there ought to be one place of proclamation and one altar table. These centres ought to be of human scale (suitable for community hearing and for the common meal) rather than of formidable scale which detracts from the sense of the gathered community and separates clergy, readers, and congregation. Altar and lectern ought to stand in a balanced relationship to each other, emphasizing the unity of Word and Sacrament. They ought to be placed in positions which enhance audibility and offer clear sight lines for the gathered community. To serve as centres, they need have substance and artistic beauty, but also to be simple and functional rather than decorative. To enable flexibility, they need to be light in weight and movable.

5. The font calls for individual comment. Through much of Christian history the font was in a separate room, which became the baptistry. A contemporary solution suggests that the font might be placed at the west end of the building just inside the worship space, so that the congregation

¹Paul Gibson, “Designing Space as a Theological Task” (Unpublished paper given at God Space: A Workshop on Church Architecture), p. 3.

can face the font for baptisms and be reminded of their baptism when entering the church for worship.

6. Seating ought to allow the community to gather around the place of proclamation and the eucharistic table, to foster connection and relationship between the worshippers, to provide clear sight lines, and to allow ample room for movement and processions. Pews are a modern innovation and their straight lines, rigidity, and fixed character tend to work against the values of the gathered community: flexibility, relationship and connection, and movement. If for heritage reasons or in response to the congregation it becomes necessary to retain some pews, they need to be incorporated in such a way that they do not work against the kind of statement we want the building to make.

7. Music and song have been an integral part of liturgy from the earliest times. The primary purpose of music and song in the liturgy is participation by the whole community rather than performance. Congregational singing is one of the fundamental ways in which the unity of the Body of Christ is expressed. In the Anglican Cathedral tradition organs and choirs have provided support for the community's music and song, attempting to strike a fine balance between congregational participation and a rich musical tradition involving the ministry of trained musicians and singers. The organ needs to be in a place which supports the community's music and song, but it is not a liturgical centre; therefore it needs to be in the background rather than the foreground, and in a position which makes best use of the acoustical properties of the building. The choir is an integral part of the community and needs to be seen as part of the gathered community rather than separated from it.

Historical Sketch

In the early church the community gathered in a domestic setting around a place for proclamation and around a dining room table

When Constantine became the first Christian emperor and Christianity a legitimate religion of the Roman empire, the basilica became the principal style of church building. The basilica retained the domestic character of one room, now a very large room, with the community still gathered around the place of proclamation and the altar.

In the Middle Ages the two dominant styles were first the Romanesque style and later the Gothic style. The altar is now placed against the east wall with the priest facing the altar rather than the people. The choir is placed in the chancel, separating the sanctuary and the nave. The church building has become two rooms rather than one, with a separation between clergy, choir, and people. The people more and more assume a passive rather than an active role in the liturgy..

In England in the sixteenth century, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, the author of the Book of Common Prayer, moved the altar down into the chancel or into the nave, thus fostering again the sense of one room and of the community gathered around the table, but the prayers were still said primarily by the priest.

In the seventeenth century, Archbishop Laud moved the altar back to the east wall and placed a communion rail around it.

In the eighteenth century the architect Christopher Wren, in an early design for St. Paul's Cathedral in London, sought to restore the sense of a single room by placing the altar in the centre directly under the dome.

The Gothic revival of the nineteenth century sought to romanticize the Middle Ages. The result has been a proliferation of church buildings in the Gothic style throughout the world, leading to the impression that a "real" church is one that is designed or built in the Gothic style. This, of course, means a two room building with separation between clergy, choir, and people.

The twentieth century has led to the Liturgical Renewal movement, which has been ecumenical in its scope. Some principles of the liturgical renewal are the following:

1. The full and active participation of all the baptized in the liturgy.
2. Recognition of the ministry of all the baptized and the need to express this variety of ministries in the liturgy through the use of servers, readers, intercessors, sidespeople, people to bring forward the elements of bread and wine, etc.
3. The clergy are seen as presiders at the community celebration rather than those who celebrate the liturgy on behalf of the people.
3. The restoration of one room for liturgical celebrations in which the community is gathered around the principal liturgical centres.
4. The restoration of public baptism in the midst of the community at the Easter Vigil and on major feasts during the Christian year.
5. Emphasis on the link between liturgy and mission, liturgy and justice.

Christ Church Cathedral is a parish which has sought for many years to embody the principles of the liturgical renewal.

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