

WORSHIP SPACES for THIRD'S THIRD CENTURY: A Case Statement for Renewal

Worship is at the center of our life together as a church – and, as Third Presbyterian Church. Biblical exhortations to worship abound, and the presence of the Directory for Worship as a central part of our denominational Book of Order points to the centrality of worship in the Church. It also states that the Directory for Worship *“reflects the conviction that the life of the Church is one, and that its worship, witness, and service are inseparable.”* The Directory for Worship describes the dynamics of worship this way: (W.1.1001)

“Christian worship joyfully ascribes all praise and honor, glory and power to the triune God. In worship the people of God acknowledge God present in the world and in their lives. As they respond to God’s claim and redemptive action in Jesus Christ, believers are transformed and renewed. In worship the faithful offer themselves to God and are equipped for God’s service in the world.”

The Directory further states (W-1.1005a):

“From the beginning God created women and men for community and called a people into covenant. Jesus called, commissioned, and promised to be present to a people gathered in his name. The Holy Spirit calls, gathers, orders, and empowers the new community of the covenant. To each member, that Spirit gives gifts for building up the body of Christ and for equipping it for the work of ministry. A Christian’s personal response to God is in community.”

As the gathered community, in worship, *“the people of God respond with words and deeds of praise and thanksgiving in acts of prayer, proclamation, remembrance, and offering.”* (W-1.1005b)

Moving boldly into the future invites us to consider how we currently fulfill those mandates; how our facilities enable or hinder our ability to faithfully carry out our worship and build community; and to look at ways that we may more effectively build the body of Christ through our worship as it intersects with our worship spaces.

Worship Space, and How We Function In It

Regarding space for worship, the Directory for Worship acknowledges that *“Christians may worship in any place, for the God who created time also created and ordered space... Yet particular locations became recognized as places where people had special encounter with God, so they arranged space in such a way as to remember and enhance that meeting.”* (W-1.3021) It goes on to say that

“When a place is set aside for worship it should facilitate accessibility and ease of gathering, should generate a sense of community, and should open people to reverence before God. It should include a place for the reading of Scripture and the preaching or exposition of the Word. It should provide for the celebration and proper administration of the Sacraments, with a font or pool for Baptism and a

table suitable for the people's celebration of the Lord's Supper. The arrangement of space should visibly express the integral relation between Word and Sacrament and their centrality in Christian worship." (W-1.3024)

Setting the context

Third Presbyterian Church worships in a "traditional" style, with practices that include a sermon delivered from a pulpit and liturgy led from a lectern or pulpit; sacraments administered from a movable font and communion table; active congregational participation through prayers, affirmations, litanies and singing of hymns and responses, largely from a hymnal and accompanied by organ; and choirs of various ages that sing a traditional repertoire taken from historic and contemporary periods, including works accompanied by organ and other instruments.

What we believe and what we do interact with one another, and we adapt our space and our behavior to accommodate our needs. While the Arnold Park balcony was not designed for bell choirs, this location has been the most practical given the space needs of these choirs, and the limitations of space at the front of the sanctuary. The increasing number of Chancel Choir singers has necessitated the reconfiguration of seating in the upper chancel several times, along with the additional use of risers and platforms during special music offerings.

Over the past 60+ years, our congregational life has included the development of significant musical and performing groups within the life of the congregation. These groups function as educational, nurture and fellowship groups for those participating in them, as well as providing leadership in worship by proclaiming the Word through music. The richness of this congregational culture has no doubt grown out of and been fed by the fertile musical and cultural life of the Rochester community and has, in turn, fed the cultural life of the community around us. Thus, music in worship, and music as a vital life force in the community are highly valued by this congregation. The quality of this musical and worship life is one of the identifying traits of this congregation; is one of the significant points of entry for new members; and is one of the important aspects that set us apart from other churches in the community – including Presbyterian churches and those of other denominations.

In the current evolution of the American church, new worship styles are emerging. Third Church's style does not seek to be critical of other styles or traditions – God may be worshiped rightly in many ways. Our style has served us well for many decades, even as we remain open to new formulations. As we prepare for the future, we may wish to think creatively about ways in which to integrate technology – including, for example, making provision for webcasting our services and/or producing quality recordings (audio and/or video) of our worship.

The fabric of our worship spaces, particularly in the sanctuary, is in clear need of some careful and comprehensive attention. These spaces have served us well, but it has been over 50 years since any major work has been accomplished in either space, other than restoration in response to the sanctuary fire in 1988. Paint, carpet, pew cushions and the pews themselves are in obvious need of repair or replacement. The structural integrity of the floor in the sanctuary may be in question. Lighting and sound systems are inadequate and dated. Accessibility to and within the worship spaces, both for compliance with accepted standards, and considering the varied ages and abilities of our congregation, is a concern. Finally, the week-to-week compromises we are forced to make (i.e. placement of the communion table, baptismal font,

chancel and bell choirs and instrumentalists) invite us to take a new look at the spaces and consider ways in which we can build on the bold and generous gifts we have received from previous generations, and continue the visionary stewardship in this congregation..

Moving forward

Given all of the above, we offer some thoughts on moving forward. Attached to this document is a list of potential capital projects to address the challenges outlined in this statement. *[The list is not included here, as many of the projects have been incorporated in the conceptual design, while others have been modified or discarded as not relevant to the current project.]*

- Guiding these thoughts is the goal to create worship spaces that encourage the full participation of all members and visitors in prayer, proclamation and praise through words and music by achieving an acoustic that enhances both music and the spoken word in all parts of the worship spaces; a visual aesthetic that allows unbroken sightlines in as much of the worship spaces as possible; and a physical space that is flexible, comfortable and accessible to all worship participants, with special attention to the needs of an aging congregation and those with disabilities.

The benefits of moving forward in these directions include a greatly enhanced sense of community and renewed vibrancy in all aspects of worship, as the congregation and worship leaders are able to better see and hear each other and join voices more powerfully in word and song. An improved physical and acoustic environment will also allow Third Presbyterian Church to participate more fully in the rich musical and cultural life of the Rochester community by making the facility more inviting to outside ensembles and audiences, thus bringing more visitors into our worship spaces.

It is with a sense of excitement, and mission, that we strive to more fully live out and experience the dynamics of worship described in The Directory for Worship, and to provide a richness of resources for future generations of worshipers, just as we have been blessed by the boldness of vision and generosity of those who have come before us.

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