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Richard C. Crossman

Eduard R. Riegert

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EDIFYING THE BODY

WHILE BUILDING THE EDIFICE

Richard C. Crossman and Eduard R. Riegert

INTRODUCTION

We are currently living in a period of economic history which makes the erection or upgrading of church facilities very difficult. High interest rates, rising labour and material costs, and increasing levels of inflation work against such projects. No doubt in some cases this causes congregations to take a needed second look at their priorities in doing ministry. A church building project can divert the Christian mission of the congregation as well as enhance the pursuit of it. Nevertheless, many of these projects should still be undertaken for the well-being of the congregation and the growth of its ministry. In such cases one must obviously be very careful to plan and build with the utmost concern for good stewardship.

While this kind of stewardship is seen always to include careful attention to expenditures and aesthetics, there is a dimension of the process which can easily be overlooked. In the press to raise pledges to fund the project and the drive to see that the bricks and mortar will take a functionally sound and aesthetically pleasing

shape, the *educational opportunity* for a congregation to do theology together in a very practical way is easily left to chance. Put more directly, the process of church building can be a theological educational opportunity for a congregation. Unfortunately, this opportunity has not always been capitalized upon to the fullest degree.

When a Christian congregation contemplates a building program it needs from the outset to proceed from a clear understanding of how its identity as the Body of Christ establishes parameters for the structure it plans to erect. This will require that early in the process a congregation reflect upon what it means to be the Church and how the erection of a building will promote rather than inhibit its Christian mission. Such reflection would include not only consideration of the project as a whole but also concern for its particular features. It must be remembered that church buildings are not neutral in their impact on either the community in which they reside or the congregation that erects them. On the contrary, a church building both communicates to the community the outlook of the present congregation toward that community and works to shape the future self-image of congregational members.

It is toward the end of helping congregations more fully address this interface between their confessional self-understanding and their building programs, especially within the Lutheran tradition, that this article is dedicated.

THE THEOLOGICAL-ARCHITECTURAL INTERFACE

Questions which arise in the church building process tend to cluster around three foci, each of which embodies both a theological and an architectural dimension. These three foci are: "What form shall the materials take?"; "What form shall the functions carried out within the structure take?"; and "What form shall the purpose of the structure take?" It is probably the architectural dimension of these three foci with which congregations are most familiar. In architectural terms these foci could be framed, in order, in the following manner: "Which structural design best reflects a proper understanding of the Church?"; "Which structural arrangement best enables the congregation to celebrate its faith?"; and "Which type of building provides a legacy that will best symbolize both the present and the future congregation's participation in the coming of God's Kingdom?" There is no doubt that a building program could not proceed very far before these questions would have to be addressed by the congregation. The congregation can not fully exercise its stewardship responsibilities if it simply turns the whole task over to an architect. While the architect has expertise, it is an expertise that can not do a satisfactory job in a vacuum. The congregation must come to terms with the theological dimension, and communicate that to the architect. For example, the architect can not ascertain which structural design will best embody the proper nature of the Church if the proper nature of the Church has not been described by the congregation. In like manner each of the other architectural questions also presuppose an essential theological dimension which must be concomitantly addressed. Drawing this out specifically in theological terms, the three areas of concern above could be phrased, in order, in the following way: "What constitutes the nature of the Church?"; "How does the Church properly celebrate its faith?"; and "How does the Church properly anticipate the coming of the Kingdom of God?"

Diagrammatically, this complementary character of the architectural-theological

dimensions of the church's building program can be expressed in the following fashion.

<i>Theological Dimension</i>	<i>Foci of Concern</i>	<i>Architectural Dimension</i>
What constitutes the nature of the Church?	What form shall the materials take? ← →	Which structural design best reflects a proper understanding of the Church?
How does the Church properly celebrate its faith?	What form shall the functions within the structure take? ← →	Which structural arrangement best enables the congregation to celebrate its faith?
How does the Church properly anticipate the coming of the Kingdom of God?	What form shall the purpose of the structure take? ← →	Which type of building provides a legacy that will best symbolize the congregation's participation in the coming Kingdom of God?

As a congregation becomes self-consciously aware of this complementary character of the theological and architectural dimensions, a most important part of the congregation's life will be enhanced. That is, the essential unity between belief and action, faith and life, which Christians are to cultivate, will be made concrete in a manner in which all the congregation can share. The building process thus can be used to help the members of a congregation recognize the important relation between being and doing, not just as a theoretical ideal but as a matter of actual practice. In this light a building program can become an opportunity for Christian growth which will have an impact far beyond the church walls that are erected.

Normally when a building program is undertaken, a Building Committee is struck, along with various sub-committees. One of these sub-committees should be given the responsibility of preparing an architectural brief which describes the theological-architectural interface summarized diagrammatically above. The purpose of this brief, of course, is to instruct the architect. In order to prepare it the sub-committee members will need to do research in doctrinal traditions, liturgy, history of church architecture, mission of the church, and stewardship.

In doing this task, the sub-committee will realize that the educational experience they have undergone is something desirable also for the congregation. Thus the architectural brief becomes an agenda or "curriculum" for the education of the congregation.

Not every congregation, of course, will have members capable of doing such research, and the pastor may not have the time to do it adequately. We therefore present such an "Architectural Brief/Educational Agenda" as a model or example,

done within the Lutheran Tradition. At the end of the article we suggest resources which assisted us in its preparation.

AN ARCHITECTURAL BRIEF/EDUCATIONAL AGENDA

1. *"What Form Shall the Materials Take?"*

When it comes to designing a building to house an assembled congregation, Lutheran procedure is to start not with what "looks like a church" nor with what people may want in a church, but with theology.

A primary datum of Lutheran theology pertinent to such an enterprise is Article VII of the Augsburg Confession:

It is also taught among us that the one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached and its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.

This Article at once points us in the appropriate direction: the Church is not a building but a faithful people who assemble around the Gospel and the sacraments, in order that they may, in the pathways their vocations lead them, "do God's will and glorify him" (Article XX; see also Article XVI).

Clearly, a building is not necessary for these activities, as the early Christians knew so well. However, weather being unpredictable, some kind of shelter seems necessary.

And that is the first principle we should note: a building is a shelter for the gathered congregation; walls and roof to protect against the elements.

Any kind of shelter will do, of course, as the early Christians discovered. When it became difficult to gather in the temple in Jerusalem they assembled in homes (see Acts 4 and 8) and homes became their "church buildings" for well over 100 years. The crucified and risen Lord, they understood, was present not in a shrine ("the God who made the world and everything in it," they protested, "being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man," Acts 17:24) but in the community of believers — his "body", "for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:20). At Troas poor Eutychus dozed off during a long sermon and fell from the third storey window (Acts 20:6-9); at Philippi the bank of the river was "a place of prayer" (Acts 16:12-13); Aquila and Prisca had "the church" meeting "in their house" (I Cor. 16:19) and so did Nympha (Col. 4:16) and Philemon (Philemon 2). And when persecution struck, the catacombs or underground burial chambers of Rome became relatively safe meeting places.

The first consideration for our congregation is therefore this: we are building a shelter for the church, that is, for the assembled congregation.

The implications of this principle, architecturally, have to do mainly with materials and construction, and secondarily with style. These implications can be summarized as a call for a building of: adequate size; structural soundness; energy efficiency (even the location of additions should be determined primarily by energy efficiency); a "human" scale which doesn't dwarf people, is easily accessible (for handicapped as well as non-handicapped), has convenient traffic patterns, and is acoustically

adequate; flexibility (allowing for multi-use of rooms); and considerateness for our children. We do not want to leave them with a “white elephant”, nor locked into some rigid edifice. Neither do we want to mortgage their future.

2. “What Form Shall the Functions Within the Structure Take?”

The repeated use of the same shelter will lead to arrangement of the space to accommodate the several activities carried out when the congregation assembles.

This gives rise to a second principle: function determines the arrangement of space. A cloakroom is arranged so it can function as a storage place for cloaks; it would be foolish to put picture windows in it and a fireplace. A classroom is designed and arranged to function as an educational space; it would be foolish to put ping-pong tables in it (unless the students were to learn the game of ping-pong, of course). A worship room is designed and arranged to permit worship to take place and to facilitate the doing of worship.

We wish to direct particular attention to the worship space.

Worship is best described as the activity of the people of God as they gather around the Word and the Sacraments. The Word and the Sacraments (i.e., Baptism and the Lord’s Supper) are “means of grace,” that is, the media or vehicles or means by which God is savingly present — for it is a cardinal Lutheran understanding that God reveals himself not “im-mediately” but always through a vehicle or medium. Foremost of these of course is Jesus of Nazareth who is “the Word (of God) made flesh” (John 1:14). He defines what a “means of grace” is. Because the Holy Scriptures, the liturgy, hymns, sermon, and mutual witness speak of him and the salvation he has accomplished for us, these are “Word”; and because the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper offer to us God’s gracious forgiveness, they too are “Word” for us.

The congregation is the communion (or community) of saints who have been called together by God through his Word, and are empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry on a ministry of worship, witness, service, and nurture (“ . . . The Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it united with Jesus Christ in the one true faith,” *The Small Catechism*).

Worship, then, is an activity of the community of believers (family of God) of (1) speaking and hearing the Word; (2) giving and receiving the promised grace of God; and (3) making decent reply and response (confession, praise, thanksgiving, supplication, intercession, service, offering).

Worship cannot, therefore, be a passive activity in which spectators watch and listen to a few leaders (pastor, organist, choir); it demands active participation. The word “liturgy” literally means “the people’s work.”

The worship space must not only permit but also encourage this participation: speaking-hearing-replying; going and coming; joining and separating or gathering and scattering; giving and taking; celebrating and mourning; confessing and praising; asking and receiving. For it is in this worship room that all the dimensions of life are addressed by the Word for judgment and for healing and for fulfillment: birth, childhood, adolescence, marriage, vocation, maturation, and death, even as the roll of the liturgical year tells the story of Jesus: expectation, Nativity, ministry, Passion,

death . . . and, the unexpected chapter, resurrection!

The community of believers that meets in this shelter is, therefore, comprised of all ages, from the newly baptized infant — who through baptism has been incorporated into this community — to the aged saint who, like a sheaf of wheat, is about to go to the threshing floor. And beyond even him, this community is bonded by faith and hope to “angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.”

If form follows function, then the following are the architectural implications for the worship room. First, it is one room. There are not separate rooms or spaces for “clergy” and “laity.” The clergy is called to perform certain functions; areas and furnishings within the one room refer to these functions. Second, it possesses lively acoustics so as to permit sound to originate from various parts of the room without amplification. Third, it includes a modest pulpit which neither towers over people nor symbolizes an impregnable fortress; a free-standing altar which permits the expression of the family of God gathered around the table of God; a Baptismal area visible and accessible; a seating area which approximates the circular or semi-circular rather than the rectangular; movable furnishings and seating so that space can be cleared for children and for special services, and so that the seating arrangements can be altered according to times, seasons, festivals, occasions; adequate space for choirs and musicians who are only functionally distinguished in the congregation; a variety of textures symbolic of the variegated textures of life; pre-worship and post-worship fellowship space integral to the worship room; aisles wide enough to allow movement of people, processions, baptisms, eucharists, funerals; and a flat, as opposed to a sloping floor. A sloping floor emphasizes the theatrical spectator posture, inhibits free movement, and bars the handicapped.

3. *“What Form Shall the Purpose of the Structure Take?”*

After a time of usage the building, because it is used by these people for these activities, becomes more than simply a functional shelter; it becomes a statement or symbol.

This gives rise to a third principle: the building symbolizes the nature and mission of the congregation.

Once a building has been shaped by the people to accommodate them and their activities, it begins subtly to shape them. The great cathedrals, for example, were shaped by the believers of the Middle Ages, and expressed their understanding of God’s way with man. Now, for seven centuries, the cathedrals have shaped Christian thinking about man’s encounter with and experience of God, even despite movements like the Reformation. That is how powerful buildings can become.

Since present church buildings will have this kind of power, too, they need to be designed so that (1) they will shape us and coming generations according to the Gospel; (2) the statement they make is a witness to the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and (3) they symbolize God’s concern for salvation, justice, and righteousness.

In light of this, certain architectural implications emerge, namely, that the church building manifest an openness to the world by welcoming and drawing people in from the outside, and conversely, pointing insiders out into the world; that it affirm change as well as continuity; that by creative use of natural light and color it lift up the spirit to the glories of God’s manifold creation; and that it symbolize the vitality

of the congregation as forward looking, willing to try new things, people-centred, out-reach or mission centred, Gospel-centred, having good taste — yet not ostentatious, and service-centred — both to those inside and to those outside the congregation.

CONCLUSION

Through such congregational self-awareness a temptation can be avoided which too often has overtaken church building programs, namely, to approach the matter negatively. Far too frequently it is assumed that any affordable, functional and aesthetically pleasing structure is desirable so long as it doesn't offend the congregation's theological sensibilities. In contrast, the approach proposed here would suggest that one properly begins only positively, with a concern for the way a congregation's theological self-understanding can best be served in a structure that is affordable, functional and aesthetically pleasing.

It is highly advisable to begin such an educational emphasis early — certainly well before an architect is engaged. An early start is especially urgent in congregations lacking a vital sense of their "nature and mission", for they will be most dominated by nostalgia and opinionated convictions about what is and is not a "proper church"; and they will have little compunction about diverting "benevolence" or mission-oriented offerings to the building fund. Furthermore, an early start is advisable in order to allow the congregation time to work through its feelings about the church building as a link both to the past and the future. Some people are tempted to lean to the past and be in danger of designing an antique; others may lean so far to the future that the design would be unidentifiable. In either case the building will be a hindrance to the Gospel and the people who incarnate it.

The pursuit of the educational emphasis advocated here can of course take a number of directions. Each congregation has its own identity which is marked by its unique strengths and concerns. The success of theological education for and in the building process therefore will depend on tailoring things to fit particular church settings. Nevertheless, there is a basic framework of activities which should be incorporated into the educational dimension of any church building project. This framework is not exhaustive but rather should be viewed as a beginning point from which to work.

1. Early in the building process the architect would be provided with a theological draft, in the pattern of the above case study, outlining the congregation's theological self-understanding. This would be drawn up by a broad-based congregational committee.

2. A sermon pulpit series would be pursued on the mission and nature of the church. This activity would also begin in the early stages of planning and be spaced throughout the building program.

3. A congregational Christian education program would be pursued which focuses on the ways in which architecture has been related to congregational life and mission in various places throughout history. This program will help members of the congregation identify their personal convictions and place those convictions in historical perspective. The use of audio-visuals, speakers, and bulletin boards can

be effective in pursuing this task.

4. Inserts in the congregation's newsletter and Sunday morning bulletin can be used in an on-going fashion to inform persons about the specific theological concerns of different dimensions of the building project. Included here might be the concerns of worship, Christian education, music, and social ministry.

5. Synod officials could be invited to speak with the congregation about the work which the church's benevolence dollars do. In this context the important question of the relation of benevolence giving and the support of the church's building program could be addressed.

6. The youth of the church, as the next generation, have a very important stake in a building program. Therefore their concerns need to be taken into account. This could be done through a youth Sunday wherein the youth could communicate and celebrate their views regarding the new church building.

7. Members involved in the pursuit of the congregation's regular every-member visitation could be instructed to encourage persons to see a deepened understanding of the church's mission as a necessary part of one's support for the church's building program.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Books and Articles

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