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Series: Worship Workbench
Issue: Essay 252 + November 2020
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SILENT SERMON: SACRED SPACE: ADVENT

A I'm proposing, beginning with this posting, a four-part series on re-configuring a worship space. The space I have in mind is Loehe Chapel at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa – see 1 - 16 below. But I believe the principles I advance in the following paragraphs will apply everywhere.

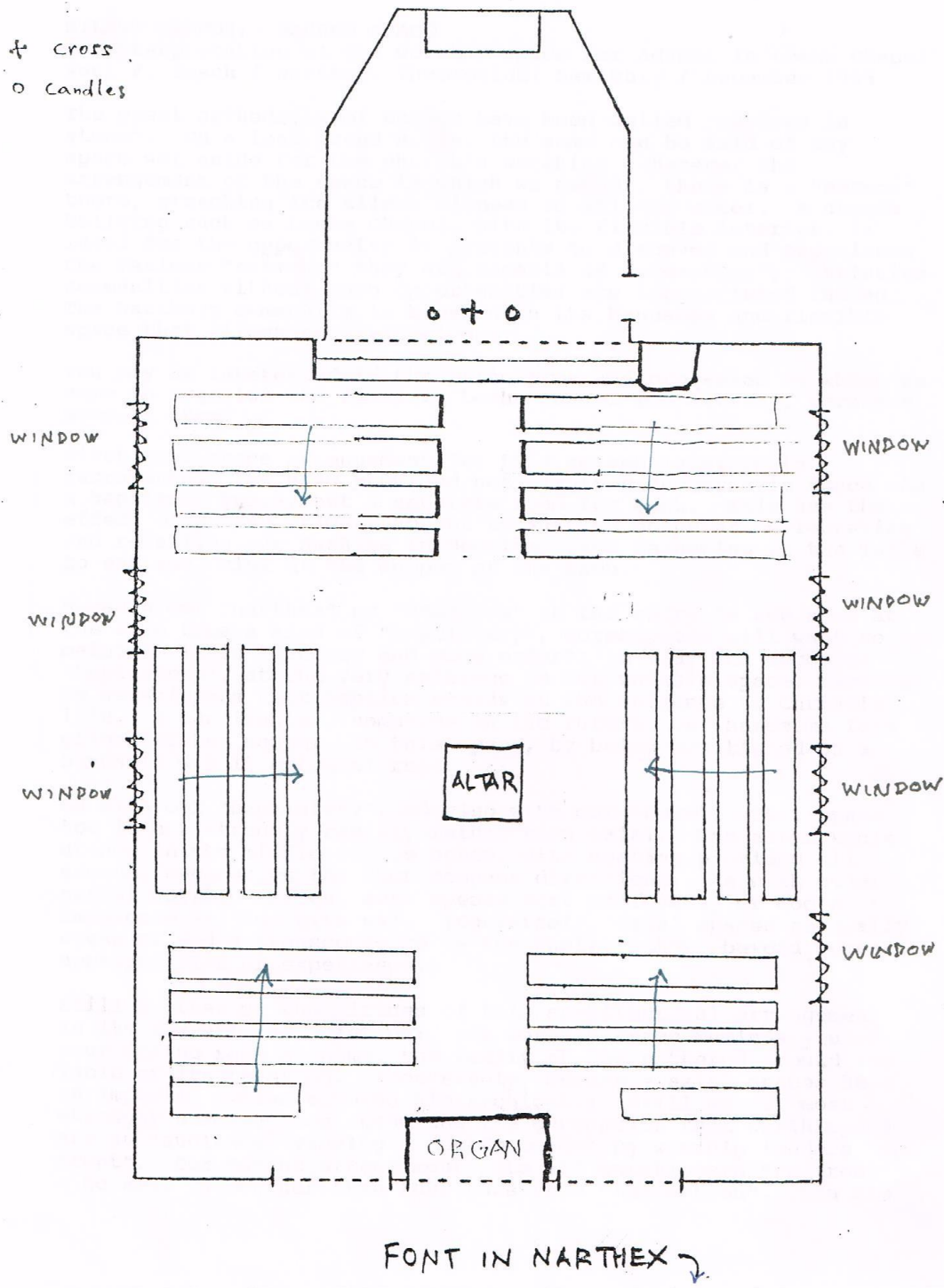
B The Wartburg Chapel had been re-configured some years before under the inspired direction of Gordon Lathrop, I believe. The pews had been removed from chancel and nave and replaced with handsome moveable wooden chairs. The high altar at the east wall was ignored, the wall mounted pulpit was ignored, and a handsome moveable wooden Table altar installed, with a handsome moveable wooden Ambo and a handsome moveable font: an enormous plexiglass bowl set in a handsome wooden frame.

C Besides teaching courses on Christian worship, church music and church architecture, I served as Dean of the Chapel, with an energetic Sacristy staff of volunteer students. And my church architecture class helped out as well, each Season.

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ADVENT 1995

+ Cross
o Candles



SILENT SERMON: SACRED SPACE: ADVENT

An Interpretation of the worship space for Advent in Loehe Chapel

Paul F. Bosch / Wartburg Theological Seminary / December 1995

1 The great cathedrals of Europe have been called “sermons in stone”. On a less grand scale, the same can be said of any space set aside for the church’s worship. Whatever the arrangement of the space in which we gather, there is a “sermon” there, preaching its silent witness to all who enter.

2 A church building such as Loehe Chapel, with its now flexible interior, is ideal for the opportunity it presents to discover and to experience the various “sermons” they are capable of “preaching”. Christian communities without such opportunities are impoverished indeed. The Wartburg community is blessed in its handsome and flexible space that allows such experience.

3 You may be interested in the principles and processes by which we came to organize the space in Loehe Chapel for Advent. Here are some of them.

4 First, our space arrangement for Advent is strongly sacramental. We have provided not simply a eucharistic space and a baptismal space, but a separate room for each. This has the effect of giving primary honour to what we do here: Celebrating and recalling our Washing in Baptism, and Gathering at the Table to eat and drink at the Supper of the Lamb.

5 Because our narthex or coatroom at the entry is now also at the same time a kind of Baptistery, worshippers will want to maintain it in “decency and good order”. A tidy and decorous Baptistery, at the very entrance to our worship space, recalls to worshippers that baptism stands at the entrance to Christian life. I can imagine, sometime in the future, our handsome Font given further honour, in this space, by being positioned on a handsome 9 x 12 oriental rug.

6 As with our Baptistery, so also now with our Nave. This space too is now strongly radial, rather than axial. The altar Table stands in the middle of the space, with seating provided all around, suggesting the four compass directions. As with other radial worship spaces, ours speaks most profoundly of God’s immanence – “God with us”. (Conversely, axial spaces generally speak of God’s transcendence – the Wholly Other, beyond human appropriation or experience.)

7 Still another of the virtues of this architectural arrangement is its domestic association. Our Advent worship space reminds you of your dining room at home, the Family of God gathered around the Table of its Feasting.

8 Conversely, strongly axial spaces have an imperial ambience, even hierarchical. Still worse, most strongly axial spaces encourage the perception that worshippers are an audience, viewing a performance by worship leaders “up front”.

9 Our Advent arrangement puts all worshippers “up front”. No seat is further than four rows from “the action”. You are thus invited to take your place “on stage” in this space. To assume an important and irreplaceable role in our corporate voice of praise.

10 Our Advent architectural configuration thus reminds us of still another Advent theme: “The Dominion of God has come near!” I can imagine, sometime in the future, our handsome altar Table given further honour, in this space, by being positioned on a handsome 9 x 12 oriental rug.

11 There are, of course, trade offs. As always in human life, “There’s no free lunch”. Leading worship and preaching can be a challenge, in such strongly radial spaces. It’s like leading a campfire at Bible Camp. Someone is always behind you.

12 And although there is ample theological and liturgical precedence for preaching from the altar Table, we have paid a price: There is no strongly identifiable Place of the Word. Such an arrangement – without ambo, lectern or pulpit – will not ultimately satisfy children of the Reformation, who like to think of themselves as “Churches of the Word”.

13 Further: There are even those who maintain that the circle, as a symbol of eternity, is not an appropriate architectural form for the arrangement of space in Christian worship. We are all, after all, living still in “this vale of tears”.

14 But you would be prudent to let the “silent sermon” of this Advent architectural arrangement speak to you, inform you, shape you, work its work in you – if only “for a season”.

16 Remember, your appreciation of anything is not so much a matter of “I know what I like” as rather, “I like what I know”. It is only fair to approach any unfamiliar expression of faith in the spirit of Philippians 4:8: “...whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just...whatever is pleasing...think about these things...”

Fondly,
Paul Bosch, Dean of the Chapel
for the Sacristy Staff and the members of the class on Church Architecture

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