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SILENT SERMON; SACRED SPACE: EPIPHANY SEASON

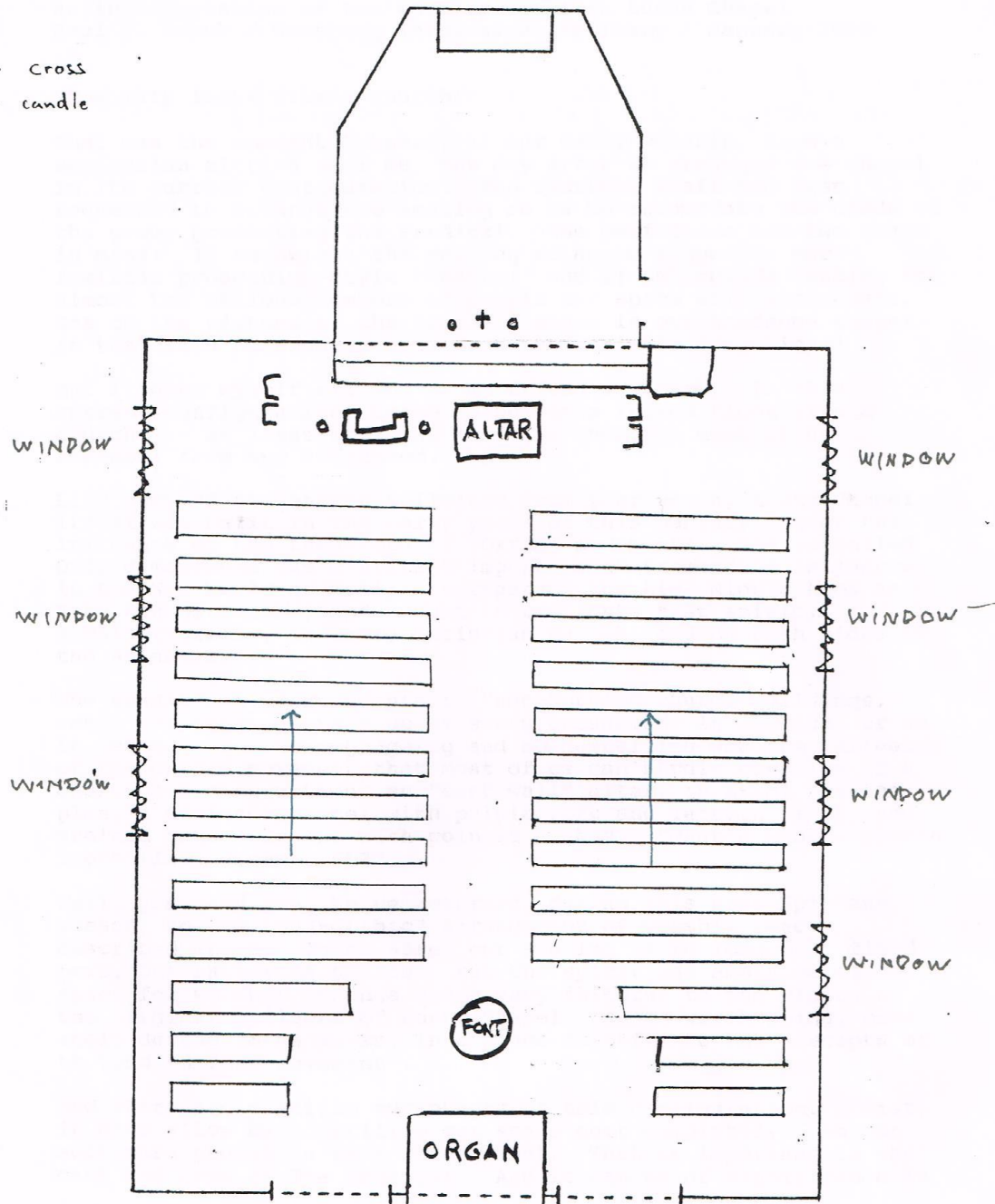
A With this posting I continue my four part series on re-configuring existing church spaces. This posting is the second in this series. The first was Essay 252 “Silent Sermon...Advent”. A third will consider Lent. A fourth and final posting will consider “Silent Sermon...Easter”.

B In each case, the space I am using as illustration is Loehe Chapel at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, where I spent an interim academic year as Dean of the Chapel and lecturer in worship, church hymnody, and church architecture.

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POST-EPIPHANY 1996

+ Cross
o candle



1 “Now THIS looks like a church!”

2 That was the comment I heard, at our daily worship, from a seminarian sitting near me, the day after we arranged the chapel in its current configuration. The sacristy staff had been requested to arrange the seating so as to accommodate the needs of the group presenting *The Prodigal*.

3 The performers had two goals in mind: 1) to orient the seating so as to suggest a more familiar proscenium-style theatre; and 2) to provide seating for almost the maximum numbers of people our space will accommodate. One of the virtues of the flexible space in our handsome chapel is that such accommodation is relatively simple to achieve!

4 But I found myself smiling at my friend’s remark. In this current configuration, Loehe Chapel does indeed “look like a church” – at least it looks like the churches most of us remember from our childhood.

5 Like many of the church buildings from your youth, Loehe Chapel itself was built in the early years of this century, under the influence of the then-popular “Oxford Movement”. The so-called Oxford Movement was a British import, with tremendous influence in the New World as well. It regarded the High Middle Ages as “The Age of Faith”, and sought to replicate that spirit, architecturally, in every Christian parish, and on both sides of the Atlantic.

6 The result was unprecedented. “Neo-Gothic” church buildings, small and large, sprang up at every crossroads in America, or so it seemed. So thorough-going and so compelling was the influence of the Oxford movement that most of us can hardly conceive of a church building without an “East-wall” Altar, an axial / processional seating plan, a divided chancel with Pulpit left and Lectern right, and stained glass windows with pointed arches. “That’s what a church looks like, doesn’t it?”

7 Well, yes, and no. We’ve returned, during this post-Epiphany season, to the “neo-Gothic” arrangement of worship space described above. To be sure, our seating is no longer in fixed pews, but rather in chairs. But the spirit and ambiance of our space for worship is once again very faithful to the vision of the original builders of Loehe Chapel. We’re worshipping, once again during these weeks, in a space faithful to the precepts of the old Oxford Movement.

8 And there are specific advantages to this configuration. First, it does allow us to utilize our space most completely. We can seat more people in this arrangement. That is important to the cast and crew of *The Prodigal*. And it can be of significance in WTS Worship as well, as for example at Services that open and close the school year, when we can expect larger attendances.

9 Second, there’s a theological and liturgical message – a “sermon” – in this architectural arrangement, as in every architectural arrangement for worship. The strong “East-West” axis suggests a people on the move: “Like a might army / Moves the church of God...With the cross of Jesus / Going on before....”

10 There is a sense of mystery and transcendence here. We all face the “East”, the location of the rising sun, and of Jerusalem. The “holy” is up there, ahead of us somewhere, beyond the “East-wall” Altar. Roman Catholic theologian Cardinal Ratzinger has remarked on the appropriateness of Christian people “turning toward the Lord” in worship.

11 But there are liabilities as well.

12 Gone, in this configuration, is the marvelous sense of community we knew in more radial arrangements, where we could see each others’ faces. All we see, in this arrangement, are the backs of peoples’ heads.

13 Gone too is the sense of God’s immanence: “God with us”, God among us, God’s spirit moving in our midst.

14 Further, a strongly axial / processional space carries an unmistakable hierarchical ambiance. Worship leaders, serving in such a clearly-defined Chancel, are necessarily closer to the “East”, closer to the “holy”, than the rest of us.

15 The word “hierarchy”, after all, comes from two Greek words meaning “priests first”!

16 But the strongest objection to an axial or processional worship space must be this: It encourages the perceptions and expectations of the theatre. That’s OK for The Prodigal: an “audience” here, “performers” there, putting on a show for us. But it’s deadly for Christian worship, as Kierkegaard long ago pointed out. In Christian worship, we’re all invited “on stage”!

17 And ask Martin Luther about the High Middle Ages as “the Age of Faith”.

18 I’d be willing to argue that an axial / processional worship space is fundamentally flawed for Christian worship – the precepts of the Oxford Movement to the contrary notwithstanding!

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