

## REPURPOSE WORSHIP SPACE, DON'T REBUILD

Having to deal with poorly designed or ill-suited worship space can be demoralizing. However, constructing a new building can be costly. In 2010, new building costs ran approximately \$100 per square foot, but since then inflation has brought the cost range closer to between \$120 and \$150 per square foot for the church building itself, not to mention the cost of developing the site, including parking lots, sidewalks, utilities, and landscaping.<sup>1</sup> Often, worship space can be repurposed at substantially less cost than building a new structure. What options are available?

### Decorate

Worship space can be temporarily altered without renovating through the use of visual installations such as colorful fabrics and banners or other symbolic objects. Purchase banners predesigned from any number of stores, or make them using templates from books.<sup>2</sup> Ideally, these decorations can be used to illustrate the message of the week, the season of the church year, or double as a place where the congregation can foster faith formation and community.

For designs that are more easily changed out each week, banners or ribbons cascading from poles can be carried into, out of, or around the space in procession. For instance, a set of eight to twelve poles made of PVC and draped with fabric can be marched around a space, offering movement and energy during a hymn or another aspect of worship.

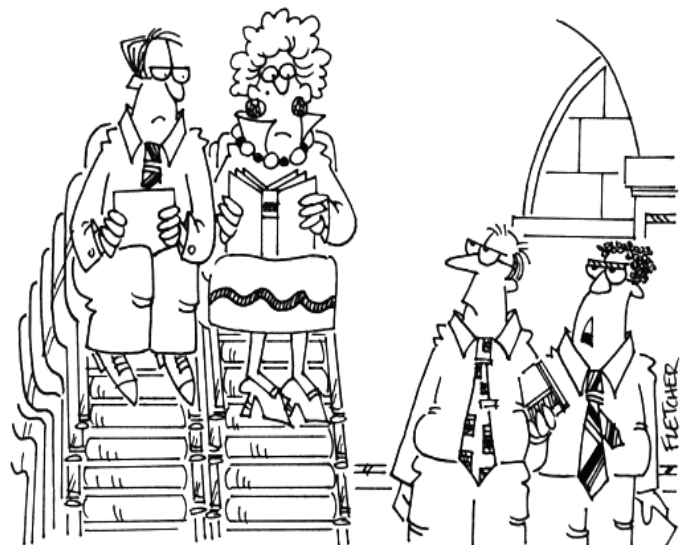
For long-term installation such as for liturgical seasons, churches can hang fabrics against the side walls and front. Using adjustable T-shaped poles draped with fabric or ribbons and placed in stands in a row behind the last row of seating creates a “false back” and provides an intimate atmosphere. Additionally, a drop-line system with eye-hooks and fishing line can be installed from one side of the sanctuary to the other and hung with fabric to fill the air space above people’s heads.<sup>3</sup>

Decorations can also serve a purpose beyond just being visually appealing. Stations can be located around the room where people interact with the display. Some ideas include lighting a candle of hope, planting a seed, writing a prayer to insert in a prayer wall, or contemplating a babbling fountain.

### Renovate

Renovating the sanctuary represents a next step in repurposing the worship space. While more permanent than decorating, it is still much less expensive than constructing a new building. At least two design options suggest themselves—contemporary or classic.

**Contemporary designs** have certain qualities unique to them that arose out of the architectural choices church leaders made in the 1980s and 1990s who sought to make the worship band and digital technology more central to worship. The first thing a worshipper might notice on entering such a space is the worship band, not the preacher, front and center on the stage. A pulpit is nowhere to be found, so the



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preacher's body is emphasized during sermon delivery, which is unassisted by anything but a small table for Bible and notes, and also perhaps IMAG (image magnification), which projects the preacher's facial expression and body movement on the big screen. Indeed, electronic technology itself takes center stage as sound system, projector, and theatrical lighting offer the worshipper a multi-sensory experience of music, videos, and still photos. The baptismal font and altar table are noticeably absent, to be brought out temporarily when the occasion calls for it. At the rear or to the side of the sanctuary, the worshipper might notice a production booth with technicians in headphones making the technical aspects of the operation run smoothly.<sup>4</sup> Any or all of these elements may be introduced when renovating the sanctuary, leaving other aspects of the sanctuary intact.

*Contemporary Design Case Study: A Tall Steeple Church Goes Digital.* In 2008, Christ Church in Troy, New York, faced a daunting challenge: how to modify a large, ornate sanctuary for the digital age. Built in 1871, the sanctuary seats 650 on the floor and 250 in the balcony. Using his Ph.D. dissertation as a basis, the Reverend James Fenimore recommended placing two large television screens in the front of the sanctuary and attached two more to the ceiling created by the balcony ceiling at rear of the sanctuary. A production booth was located out of sight in the balcony. Nothing about the sanctuary's front—long wooden kneeling rail, center pulpit up high, and ornate woodwork behind it—was modified. Fenimore and church leaders wanted to introduce digital technology without diminishing the beauty of the ornately designed interior.<sup>5</sup>

**Classic designs** are centered around word and sacrament rather than the performance of the worship band. Richard Giles, an Anglican priest who has written about worship design, notes that many older sanctuaries were designed when crowds were larger and worshippers were not expected to actively participate. However, too many pews and other furniture can make a space feel crowded and heighten a sense of isolation among worshippers. Decluttering can create more space for participation, conversation, and movement. Increasing the amount of floor area without furniture has a "restful effect which recalls us to tranquility of spirit in a frantic world." More importantly, less furniture allows the space to be designed around the community of worshippers first and foremost. In some cases, this might require reducing the number of pews

and widening the space between them, arranging them in a herringbone or rectangular shape before the pulpit or altar, or replacing them with stackable chairs.<sup>6</sup>

*Classic Design Case Study: A Tiny Church Removes the Pews.* At the Church of the Epiphany in Newport, New Hampshire, parishioners removed the pews and stored them in a nearby barn. Next the wall-to-wall carpeting came out, the hemlock floors were refinished, and thirty lightweight, stackable chairs were bought and arranged in two semi-circles around the pulpit and a simple altar table. The inspiration came from the parish priest, the Reverend Jay MacLeod, who before coming to Newport served for twenty years in the United Kingdom, where he got to know Richard Giles. "The feel of worshipping in a circle makes it easy to worship here," a parishioner said. "It feels joyful and inclusive. People feel welcome to contribute," especially those who are not used to being in a church.<sup>7</sup>

## What Are Your Options?

Redesigning a worship space need not be expensive. Banners, fabrics, and other objects can be used to decorate the sanctuary and alter its character. Furnishings can be moved or removed. Digital technology, sound equipment, and screens can be installed. All of these can be done without the expense of new construction. For some churches, the best option may be to erect a new building or buy an existing structure and adapt it as worship space, but why not try repurposing first?

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1. "Figuring a Ballpark Estimate of Your Church Building Costs," The McKnight Group, <https://www.mcknightgroup.com/figuring-a-ballpark-estimate-of-your-church-building-costs>.

2. For example, Joyce Bowers, *Church Banner Designs* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2007); Betty Wolfe, *The New Banner Book*, New York, NY: Church Publishing, 1999).

3. Marcia McFee, *Think Like a Filmmaker: Sensory-Rich Worship Design for Unforgettable Messages* (Truckee, CA: Trokay Press, 2016), 82-90.

4. Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 44-45.

5. James A Fenimore, Jr., *High-Tech Worship: Digital Display Technologies and Protestant Liturgical Practice in the U.S.*, Ph.D. dissertation, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 2009.

6. Richard Giles, *Re-Pitching the Tent: The Definitive Guide to Reordering Church Buildings for Worship and Mission* (Norwich, Norfolk, U.K.: Canterbury Press, 2004) 114, 111-120.

7. Bill Chaisson, "An Episcopal Church Remade by Many Hands," *Eagle Times* (Claremont, NH), July 3, 2018, [https://www.eagletimes.com/news/an-episcopal-church-remade-by-many-hands/article\\_b5fc2598-7e77-11e8-a4b0-cff6e91782b0.html](https://www.eagletimes.com/news/an-episcopal-church-remade-by-many-hands/article_b5fc2598-7e77-11e8-a4b0-cff6e91782b0.html).