

Holy Spaces: Presbyterian Liturgy, Theology and Architecture

Alternative Spaces: Looking Outside the Church Building Box

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Reviews from Canadian Ministries/The Vine

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# Holy Spaces:

## Presbyterian Liturgy, Theology and Architecture

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Prior to responding to a call into the ministry of Word and Sacraments in the Presbyterian Church in Canada, I studied and worked as an architect. In fact, I attribute some of my urgings to finally respond to my call to enter ordained ministry to the time I spent researching and studying for my architectural Master's thesis that was entitled "Church as Threshold: Connecting Secular and Sacred." This thesis focused on the relationship between Presbyterian theology and liturgy,

and architecture. As both an architect and minister, I hold a deep passion for sacred spaces.

As Christians, we have been taught that "the church" is defined by God's people and not the bricks and mortar that construct the building within which we gather to worship. We are holy people not because of where we worship but because we have been filled by the Holy Spirit to be the body of Christ here on earth. However, I firmly believe that the

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spaces in which we gather to be the church greatly affect how we relate to God, each other and the world.

Consider for a moment what the design of our church buildings say about who we are as a community of God:

- How we configure our seating in the worship space sends out a message about how we think we should relate to each other as God's gathered people;
- Where we locate the prime furnishings of worship - the pulpit, the communion table, the font - says something about our theology of worship and our core worship values;
- Where the choir and the clergy sit in relation to the congregation says something about our ecclesiology;
- The ceiling heights and the artwork hung throughout our church building, the images on the stained glass windows, and the light that radiates from outside all articulate a message about our vision of God;
- Where we locate our Sunday school rooms says something about our priorities in ministry;
- The location, design and accessibility of the

“We have one opportunity to shape our buildings, afterwards our buildings shape us.”

Winston Churchill

entrances and the links between rooms in the building communicate something about our theology of hospitality;

- The multi-purpose spaces that we provide and rent out communicate yet another aspect about what we think our relationship should be with our surrounding community: they communicate our theology of mission and outreach.

If we consider for a moment our sanctuaries, the spaces in which we gather weekly to lift praises and prayer to God, to experience the word of God and to commune with each other, we might reflect on whether or not they reflect who we are and who we believe God to be. If as

Presbyterians we profess a triune God, affirm a priesthood of all believers, and uphold a faith rooted in Word and Sacraments, then our sanctuaries need to reflect these beliefs. Our worship spaces need to express a God who is at once above, among and within us, a God who is transcendent and immanent. Our sanctuaries also need to encourage unity and interaction among community members and clergy rather than defaulting to a seating arrangement that causes worshippers to feel like an audience at a spectacle with long linear processions and elevated and distanced clergy. In addition, we must pay close attention to the placement of the

pulpit, table and font in the worship space. Are they in prominent positions where they can be engaged with weekly, regardless of whether the sacraments are being celebrated? Unfortunately, more often than not, I see communion tables segregated from the people and pushed off to the back of a chancel, or fonts shoved to the corner of the sanctuary, invisible to the experience of ordinary corporate worship.

Our church buildings are not just shelters for those of us on the inside; they are tools of communication and a means for invitation. More than we realize, each and every element of our church building communicates something about our various theologies, and we need to pay attention to this as we construct, renovate or reconfigure our church buildings to serve our ministries.

As I was considering the significance of the built form in relation to the life of the church, I was called to recollect my invaluable opportunity to study abroad in Rome, Italy, as an undergraduate architectural student. I believe that my time in Rome changed my view of the church in relation to the world.

Rome was a place that immediately drew me in. I soon realized that what made the Roman context so unique was not just the beauty of the architecture and art but the inherent spirituality that was embedded into each place. It was in Rome that I first experienced the concept of sacred space.

While I was in Rome, I was away from my family, from my church community and from all those natural connections that nurtured my relationship with God. I wasn't quite sure how I would live out my Christian faith in this place. There was a peace in this busy city, though, amidst the hustle and bustle, and it took me a while to figure out how to engage with this. It was in the church buildings that I began to find my peace. In these beautiful buildings that were often empty but always left open, that stood ready to share a moment with a lone person seeking a refuge amidst the chaos, I found my time with God. I had never felt this before in a church building back home in Canada; it had been the people that had given me a sense of God. But in Rome, it was through the building that I felt the presence of God. Perhaps this was because I was away from my Christian community, but I would like to think that it was more than this. I

would like to think that these beautiful structures, in their intentional designs, have the power to point to something beyond what they are. They point to a God that meets us wherever we are so we are not alone.

It was not just in the worship space that I felt this sense of holy place but in the public places, in the urban context of Rome. The secular and the sacred were not divided but instead seemed to live together in communion. The religious life came outside instead of remaining hidden behind the thick walls of the ecclesial

buildings. The churches did not have their backs to their neighbours, they did not seem like foreign objects that landed amidst a separate culture, but instead the church buildings were the anchors of their surrounding landscape. The

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town squares, called piazzas, that were sprinkled around the city in Rome were always anchored on one side by a church. The piazzas, often named after their church, were the centres of public life, where individuals, lovers, families and neighbours came to connect and play, to share music with each other, to sit and read or ponder the meaning of life, and to enjoy community. These churches and their adjoining piazzas said to me a lot about how this culture viewed the relationship between church and life; they were intricately connected.

I believe that in North America we have much to learn from the culture, architecture and urban landscape of Italy. As a church we need to consider more seriously our role in the public life of our neighbourhoods. The church, in both its built and human form, can become a connection between the secular and the sacred. By becoming this connection, the church takes on the immanent nature of Christ articulated in John 1: "*and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...*"

Our church buildings stand as a reminder of the connection between secular and sacred, a reminder that in Christ there is no separation, there is no "us and them," but only one creation. The design of holy spaces that I would advocate, and it is capable of infinite variety, is one that embraces both sacred and secular within a single volume, one which neither shuts off the liturgy from the world nor the world from the liturgy.

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