

## **BUILDING AGAIN, II: “A FITTING PLACE OF WORSHIP”**

by Tom Cox

According to an old adage, “necessity is the mother of invention,” and if the history of the First Presbyterian Church is any indication it is also its architect (or at least its interior decorator). When the new church was built in the late 1920s, the result was a big barn of a structure, empty, antiseptic, and unadorned — even the old white frame church it replaced must have seemed warm by comparison. This was not the result of any lack of taste on the part of the new structure’s designers or builders, or of the congregation that commissioned them, but of a lack of funds to make it otherwise. The congregation, it will be recalled, had started out to raise \$100,000 for the new building, but had to settle for less than a third that amount. Under the circumstances, First Presbyterian was fortunate to be able to erect the basic shell, regardless of whether it seemed like an empty barn or not. There were still denominations, such as the Quakers, whose places of worship were simple, bare meeting halls, but Presbyterians had left the hostility of Calvin and Knox to religious adornment behind; the austerity of the new structure was not a desired end, but a financial necessity.

Bit by bit, gifts from private donors, funds from the church’s various organizations, and congregational expenditures changed all this; gradually the sanctuary became what one member came to consider “a fitting place of worship,” a place whose beauty and quiet solemnity encouraged meditation and communion with God. But change came slowly. The Great Depression was a time when mere survival of the church was in doubt; for the most part, adornment — no matter how desirable — would have to wait. With masterful understatement, the Rev. Lininger said of that period, “other needs and priorities demanded the attention of the congregation . . .”

Finally, in 1973 some members of the church went together to make \$8,000 available to finish the chancel. The project was soon under way. When that time came, the members of First Presbyterian found that what was already in place provided an excellent beginning. This was no accident. The architectural firm that designed the building in the 1920s, Charles W. Bolton and Son of Philadelphia, was an experienced and respected designer of churches. The firm did not simply design a building to seat a certain number of people, but a building that would reflect its religious purposes, be consistent with Presbyterian tradition, and yet could be gradually brought to its full potential if available funds did not make that possible immediately — as, indeed, proved to be the case.

Bolton’s design was a modified gothic structure, whose beam structure, vaulted ceiling, pointed arches, exterior buttresses, and cruciform shape provided a building clearly intended for a church. It was not a flamboyant Gothic structure such as those built during the High Middle Ages — with soaring spires, stained glass iconography, and a plenitude of instructional statuary and decoration — but a solid rock of a building more appropriate for a Reformed church, a *modified* Gothic structure. The entry was through a door in the base of the bell tower, a massive element more reminiscent of a fortress than of the cathedrals of the High Middle Ages. It was the sort of entryway that brings to mind the God who is a “strong tower” (Proverbs 18:10) or Martin Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” The door was double, symbolizing the two

natures of Christ and making a wide opening to welcome all and remind them of Jesus' words: "I am the door . . ." (John 10: 9). The tower and door, indeed the entire building, bespoke a sturdy no-nonsense faith. The appearance of solidity was further enhanced in 1983 when the family of Ron Reed provided funds to install and finish the present sturdy oak doors as a memorial to him (prior to that the doors had been plain, painted doors — doors which, one spring, Bob McLaughlin and Roger Wheeler dared to paint lavender, which they considered an appropriate color for the season).

The Rev. Lininger noted that "Gothic has often been described as the architecture of Calvinism as it implies that God is all powerful. Gothic appeals to the imagination; as a result, both the Calvinist and the mystic feel at home" in it. While true, that statement can mislead. To John Knox and many another leader of the early Reformed church, high Gothic churches stank of papistry, and our Presbyterian forebears in Scotland sacked and destroyed the magnificent Gothic cathedral at Elgin because it symbolized all that Reformation leaders sought to overturn. The Bolton-designed building at Seventh and Lewis was as far removed from the high Gothic of Elgin, Chartres, and Notre Dame de Paris as Calvin was from the Roman church of his day. Still, it *was* Gothic, however modified. The rose window above the sanctuary and the stained glass windows lining its sides helped to make that clear.

As the completion of the chancel and other aspects of the sanctuary proceeded, the Rev. Lininger grew concerned that members might miss the importance of what was being done and even question the advisability of spending considerable money on the improvements. He took the lead in educating the congregation about Christian symbolism in general and that of the sanctuary in particular. In a little booklet prepared for distribution to members, he noted that "Symbolism has played a very important part in the proclamation of the Christian faith," yet it should be remembered that "Symbols are not objects of worship, but aids for our understanding . . . The church should first relax people, then excite them; put them at ease, and then inspire them; this calls for a minimum of confusion and distraction and a maximum of unity. The new chancel furniture and arrangement are an attempt to do this." Lininger then proceeded to discuss the symbolism involved in what was being done — but he did not start with the new, he reviewed the symbolism of the building itself and one by one the symbolism involved in the rose window above the altar and the stained glass windows lining the sanctuary.

Much of the arrangement in the sanctuary was familiar, having been present in the original white church. Indeed, it went much further back in Presbyterian history. Lininger noted that traditionally the Reformed church has not used an altar, but rather a communion table to emphasize the centrality of that sacrament. The table was placed away from the wall, and the minister stood behind it so as to symbolize being around it with the congregation as at the Last Supper. Moreover, the table was normally at the level of the people (or, on occasion, up a step or two to give it more visibility) with the central aisle leading directly toward it; the placement symbolizing free access to the table and all that the sacrament of communion stands for. A simple Latin cross stood in the center of the communion table, with a candle on either side indicating the human and divine nature of Christ. The lighting of these candles at the beginning of a service indicated the fire of the Holy Spirit coming down to be with the worshippers ("Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.") and the idea that Christ is "the Light of the World."

The pulpit and lectern were placed on either side of the chancel. This too was familiar. As Lininger put it, this was “a matter of interpretation and tradition,” not something dictated by architects, for nothing should stand between the believer and the cross, which was intended to be the focal point of the worship service; “the pulpit,” he wrote, “should not preempt the center of the chancel.” Meanwhile, the open Bible on the lectern indicated that “our direction comes from the Word of God.”

None of this was new to the congregation. Not only had the same symbolism prevailed in the old white church and in its replacement at Seventh and Lewis from that structure’s beginning, but also much of it had been used in the Memorial Chapel, located across the narthex from the sanctuary in the new addition and completed a decade before the remodeling of the sanctuary. On the other hand, what was done in the chancel area *was* new, and Lininger went to considerable pains to explain it.

The reredos, ornately carved wooden columns connected by a curved crosspiece that passed under the rose window like a giant support, gave an added sense of height to the chancel area and provided a frame for the giant Celtic cross that dominated the area beneath the window. Featured on the reredos were three shields — shields themselves being symbols of protection and faith. The shield in the upper right corner featured the superimposed Greek letters chi and rho, derived from the Greek word “Xpictoc” (Christos) and used as a monogram for Christ for at least 1600 years. The shield in the upper left featured a symbol of God the Father, a right arm and hand with two fingers extended as in divine benediction and topped by a crown. (One would think this shield with its right hand of God should have been placed on the upper right, but for reasons that Lininger left unexplained, it did not.) The third shield, in the center, bore the familiar symbol of the Holy Spirit, a descending dove — at certain times of day, its location left the impression that the dove had just flown out of the sparkling rose window immediately above.

A heavy velvet dossal hung within the reredos, its deep red color symbolizing blood, the fire of Christian zeal, and the work and ministry of the church. Mounted on it and providing a visual focal point was an eight-foot high Celtic cross, the style of cross whose use went back to the earliest years of the Presbyterian Church and beyond into Scottish antiquity.

New choir benches and screen providing seating for 25 ran from side to side of the chancel immediately below the great Celtic cross. At first glance, this placement would appear to be contrary to the notion that nothing should stand between worshippers and the cross, but the conflict was more apparent than real. While it was a focal point, the Celtic cross was not the symbolic center of the church. That was provided by the simple Latin cross on the communion table — and nothing stood between that and the seated congregation.

The new furnishings for the chancel had been designed and built by Ossit Inc., a church furnishings specialty company in Janesville, Wisconsin, and installed by local workmen. The new chancel was an aesthetic triumph; its dedication in October 1973, a joyous occasion. Not only had the church taken on new beauty, but since during the preceding summer, while construction had been going on, the congregation had worshipped across town with the Congregationalists, the dedication was a sort of homecoming. It was good to be “home” again.

A pipe organ was added a few years later. More will be said about that later, at this point suffice it to say that it provided the finishing touch, its visible pipes completing the framing of the rose window. What had originally been a bare wall was now the crowning glory of the sanctuary. It had, indeed, become “a fitting place of worship.”