

Saint John's Lutheran Church  
West Seneca, New York  
Evaluation and Recommendations

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I have been a parish pastor for more than 28 years and have earned a Doctor of Ministry degree in the area of Sacred Space. I served as a consultant to several congregations as they engaged in building projects. At the request of Pr. Klatt and having read your current proposal and walked through your buildings I offer you the following evaluation and suggestions, recognizing that you are faced with difficult decisions.

**Option 1 - Restore the structural integrity of original building.**

The entire dollar cost of this option will be spent to restore the structural integrity of the walls and roof system. Depending upon the details of the final plan interior beams to strengthen the side walls and tie rods to retain the walls in plumb may be required. Both of these will be intrusive into the space visually and physically. Beams to strengthen the side walls may require the shortening of some or many pews to maintain the use of side aisles. Tie rods will need to be placed low enough on the walls to provide strength, thus increasing their visual intrusiveness.

This option may include some renovation of the interior space but the weight of remaining in the traditional space makes it difficult to make significant changes.

Given the high dollar cost it may be a simple matter of stewardship to consider using the liturgical appointments, stained glass, and other architectural elements in the remaining options, spending limited dollars to gain additional, newer space, with higher energy efficiency and lower maintenance costs

Having said that it should be known by all that choices and decisions related to worship space are never simple. Emotions run deep. History tugs at our hearts. Memories of many kinds haunt us. All of these factors will be added to the mix of financial cost and liturgical design in making a decision that suits the needs of your congregation. Be patient with each other. Take time to listen carefully. When you feel tension or confusion, pause for prayer. In the end God will guide you through the process and lead you to the place you need to be.

## **Option 2 - Reorient sanctuary and add new entry space.**

This option utilizes newly constructed elements to buttress the walls and retain the structural integrity. There will still be a significant cost to return the walls to plumb and correct weaknesses *in* the roof truss system.

In turning the church interior ninety degrees and relocating the formal high altar in a new apse, I would suggest the addition of a new table altar with a strong sense of presence, and open area beneath the table surface. A similar smaller scale, more domestic version of this table could then be located in the gathering space establishing a visual tie between the Lord's table and the table of common fellowship (communion/koinonia).

This option can include individual/cathedral seating which offers great flexibility and several varied seating arrangements for ordinary Sunday's, Daily Prayer, Festivals and concerts etc.

In both this and option 1, the stained glass windows in the nave should be removed and restored while the walls are being repaired to prevent any cracking, breakage or buckling that may occur as the walls are straightened.

Since several windows will be sacrificed, the best can be restored and the remaining windows can be sold or used for other purposes. The pews can also be shortened and used in other settings in the church or sold.

### **INTERIM CONSIDERATIONS:**

The immediate move from the sanctuary to the fellowship hall has provided you with a unique opportunity. Here are some simple suggestions to make the most of this interim reality:

1- Purchase new padded seating to be used in your future fellowship hall NOT your new worship space. A neatly coordinated seating will make the space and arrangement look much more intentional than the current arrangement, and everyone appreciates a padded seat to sit on.

2- Place a carpet under the altar, communion table, lectern, presider's chair etc This will give visual weight to the altar area, and make the arrangement look a little less temporary.

3- A platform with communion rail can be added under the communion table providing the option for kneeling at the time of receiving the Lord's supper. This may use the communion rail from the former sanctuary, or a temporary rail constructed according to your design. Beware however that adding too much furniture in this smaller space may become a bit overwhelming. Before you make the change permanent, experiment by moving in the old communion rail to see how it looks.

4- Because much of your furniture is moveable, be creative, play with new and different placement of the font, and reading desk during Lent, Easter etc. Consider adding a visual projection system (note 1).

5- Experiment with a variety of ways to distribute communion, varied placement of the choir and band, different seating arrangements etc. You have no investment in any one of these options and walking through them in public worship enables you to test them together before you build a new space for worship with a more ordered placement of furnishings.

Use this moment of crisis to do something that is very un-Lutheran. BE CREATIVE. TRY NEW THINGS. DISCOVER A NEW WAY OF BEING CHURCH. You may find some things that you will not want to continue, but you may also discover some new things that serve your congregation well.

### **Option 3 - Raze old sanctuary and build new Sanctuary on site.**

The construction of a new sanctuary gives you greater value for cost. The cost of demolition will be significantly less than the cost to repair and stabilize the old sanctuary.

Building the sanctuary to your own specs will enable you to use the old formal high altar in the most appropriate and visually pleasing manner.

The challenge will be to design the new space according to your current needs for worship, rather than replicating your former space in a new setting.

### **The experience of space.**

Your current worship space is a "processional" space. The aisle is long, the pews are fixed. The focus of the congregation's attention leads forward along the central axis (aisle) toward the place of action in the sanctuary.

Your temporary worship space in the fellowship hall is very different. This space is arranged as a "place" where the aisles are short and the center of action is close to every participant. There can be multiple centers of focus all within ritual reach - Table, font, reading desk, pulpit etc. Seating is arranged so that people not only see what is happening, but also see the faces of other people gathered for worship.

A processional space is most often a *domus dei* a house for God while a place form of space is more often a *domus ecclesia*, a house for the church.

Your current dilemma allows you the freedom to experience the difference between these two varied forms of space. Use this time to discover the difference and learn how these varied forms of worship space shape your worship and your church in different ways.

## **Option Four: Relocation**

I will not be shy in saying that given my experience and objective review of your possible options, I consider this to be your best choice.

Why is it the best option ?

Your dollars will be spent to purchase new space for a relatively low cost.

You will not waste dollars on invisible repairs.

You will have land and space to expand over time

You will leave behind an energy inefficient building and inhabit an energy efficient building freeing up energy dollars for ministry. The new building has space for all your current needs, as well as a space for a chapel or prayer room.

Is there any downside?

A flat roof can be a maintenance nightmare.

There will be costs involved in rehabbing the space for your needs.

Leaving your historic site will not be easy.

### **Considerations:**

Your historic high altar can be located in the apse of the worship space. This will be a tight fit and may require removing the cross from the altar apex. A rail can be placed in front of this altar, devotional candles placed nearby and the ceiling rebuilt to accommodate placement making this a devotional space within the worship space.

A permanent dividing wall can be created at the location of the first structural ceiling beam beyond the entry doors, using the stained glass windows from the former sanctuary, set in heavy oak beams to form the wall and setting three doors within the wall. This will create a gathering space and worship space clearly divided. By placing speakers in the gathering space, and making the doors large and able to fully swing open, the gathering space will connect to the worship space for overflow seating on festivals and special occasions.

A font that serves and speaks.

The baptismal font should be a major consideration and artistic commission.

Flowing water, a basin for babies, and a basin for adults, says that this church expects to welcome children and adults to Christ. The design and placement of the font should be a community consideration. It may be permanent or moveable.

## **RELOCATION OF PIPE ORGAN**

Options three and four assume that the pipe organ now located in the main sanctuary will be relocated to the new worship space. This is a very doable project but do not limit your considerations to a simply moving the current instrument from point A to point B.

Secure multiple bids for this project from national and local companies.

Evaluate the bids according to your needs and suggested changes.

Check the references of your top choices.

When moving a pipe organ many builders will often suggest re-leathering the wind chests and other major maintenance items to be done as the instrument is disassembled and moved. This is often the best and cheapest tune to accomplish these tasks but they will add significant cost to the "moving expense". Think ahead and realize that doing these same tasks five or ten years in the future will cost twice as much, and may render the instrument unusable for several months.

Because options two and three involve a more modern worship environment you may wish to consider adding several new ranks of pipes that are exposed within the worship space and are non-expressive. (Not set in a chamber for volume control) These pipes are visually dramatic and draw attention to the space set aside for music ministry. The selection and specification of any such addition must be made by a professional builder in order to properly blend the registration of the whole instrument.

## **SUGGESTED USE OF WORSHIP SPACE IN OPTION FOUR**

I have enclosed a floor plan sketch for suggested use of the worship space. This is only one suggestion and since this space is free of permanent furnishings the flexibility of the space should be retained allowing for multiple arrangements of furnishings during varied times of the year, or for multiple uses. Let me walk you through the space.

As you enter the worship space through the main doors you come into a large gathering space or narthex. This space will be separated from the worship space by a permanent wall set beneath the first lateral ceiling beam. The wall is formed from stained glass windows relocated from the historic sanctuary and set within a framework of heavy wood beams. Three doors are cut into the wall for access to the worship space.

Centrally located within the gathering space is a fellowship table. This table is intended to be large, beautiful, and similar but not identical to the altar - communion table. Used for coffee hour and fellowship this table ties the ordinary and regular koinonia of the church to the communion celebrated in worship. Such a table can be considered in options 2, 3 and 4.

Entering the worship space through the central doors one encounters a large baptismal font with water flowing from a smaller upper pool to a larger lower pool. The upper pool is appropriate for the baptism of small children. The lower pool is intended for adult baptisms. A font with running water, including a place awaiting the baptism of adults speaks clearly a theology that is central to our live as Christ's living Body.

Directly ahead and visually prominent in the space is the historic altar from St. John's relocated within an apse at the far wall. Relocating this altar will be a tight fit. The current stage floor must be removed and the altar set on the level of the main floor. The dropped ceiling must be removed and rebuilt sloping toward the peak of the altar and providing lighting directed at the altar. The upper most cross may need to be removed or resized to accommodate the move.

I am suggesting that the historic altar be set on the side of the main worship space to be used as a place of private devotion and for regular services of healing. A place for vigil candles can be included as well as a niche or shelf containing a large cruet with oil used for the anointing for healing. A visually light rail and kneeling pad is set before this altar with a break at each end allowing access.

The main reason for setting the historic altar on the side is that its size requires that it be set on the level of the main floor. To be visible to the congregation any altar area should be elevated. Placing a communion table in front of the historic altar on a platform would basically obscure the historic altar. Leaving the historic altar in its own space for private devotion with a separate new altar area is I believe, a better solution. Congregational seating may be reoriented in Lent or at another time using the historic altar as the main place of celebration.

Setting the new altar on the side wall and orienting the church toward the side provides great freedom in worship as well as a sense of intimacy in congregational seating. The Altar is set on a stage higher than the music area, with a ramp providing handicapped access to both levels. The altar and reading desk are simple furnishings that should be dramatic and beautiful. I would suggest that these both be commissioned works of liturgical art. The altar should be visibly a table, tied to the design of the fellowship table in the gathering space. Behind the altar there should be a significant piece of art that brings visual focus to the space. Seating for presiding and assisting ministers can be located on the stage area.

Seating for the congregation is suggested to be individual chairs not pews. These chairs should be substantial weight and made of wood to tie in with the other wood elements in the space. Sufficient wood chair seating for average attendance can be supplemented with other folding chairs when needed.

Pews from the historic sanctuary can be shortened and placed in the prayer room chapel. To reuse the pews in this new space would require that they be mounted to the floor in order to keep them from tipping. The installation of pews would shape the worship space to be inflexible. Other pews might be used in other areas of the church including some set on the back walls or in the gathering space.

The area for choir or band is a platform which should include floor mounted power outlets and microphone jacks in multiple locations. The organ console can be moveable and if needed can be designed to hide away in what are now several closet spaces set in the wall. Above the sacristy and the utility room are spaces that can serve as chambers for the organ pipes. A small platform can also be added at that same level to accommodate several ranks of exposed pipes that would be visually dramatic and draw attention to the music ministry space.

Lighting to highlight the Altar and music areas, an adequate sound system will need to be designed according to the planned use of the space. A projection system can also be added with screens located at either side of the altar on the wall or close to it

### **Concluding note:**

A dangerously deteriorated building has caused you to consider not only where your church will worship, but even more how you will be church in the years to come. I encourage you to enter this moment of crisis sensing the opportunity that is set before you. Financial considerations and the way you have historically worshiped should not be the only factors shaping your decision. Be open to the Spirit's prodding and realize that the church is what remains after the walls of the building collapse. Your need is to provide a space for the church to assemble for its most basic task of worship. All of the options under consideration allow for that goal to be met. How you choose to meet the goal will depend on what it means to be the Church of Christ engaged in ministry in this time and in the place where God has set you to serve. Bricks and mortar are simply a means to that end.

#### Note 1

Consult a professional in the selection of a projection system. Consider both your current needs and future applications. Projectors vary greatly in price depending on the brightness, and quality of image at a given distance. The longer the distance from lens to screen the brighter the projector and higher cost. You may want to consider a rental, or purchase of used equipment as a temporary installation.