

Pews, Mission, and Worship: a Pastoral Letter to a Parish by Philip Carr-Jones

This article has been slightly edited/adapted from the original letter.

The way we gather for worship is indicative of:

- our mission,
- our subordination to the Life of Christ, and
- our obedience to the integrity and design of our specific liturgical space.

The earliest Hebrew worshipers were nomadic; the Ark of the Covenant was moved around and a tent was pitched. The Israelites were people on the move. Their God was moving with them – leading them, guiding them, purifying them, blessing them. Only much later did Templebased worship develop. Similarly, the first Christians worshiped in borrowed places, which they then adapted. Only a century or two later did they build places specifically for their own worship.

With every passing cultural moment, the norms for church architecture change drastically, but we forget this. For instance, some believe that churches built in the Victorian era are in some way normative for Christian worship. But according to Richard Giles' seminal work on liturgical space, *Re-Pitching the Tent*, the Victorians were actually retrievalists who dragged the Church kicking and screaming back into an imagined version of the Gothic period of four centuries earlier. The diverse buildings created by these different cultural moments leave us with a rich array of architectural styles to debate and prefer. For many, Gothic is the epitome, the way it should be. For others, Romanesque is more their archetype. I prefer the Orthodox: lush (some say littered) with iconography and liturgical ornaments; why have one censer when you can have three?

What about seating? The very first purpose-built as such made no provision for seating. After the initial era of home churches and adapted spaces, no churches – and certainly no Cathedrals – cluttered up their open spaces with pews, let alone chairs. The seating for the Gothic style was developed after the Medieval period. The boxed pews of the colonial era were primarily developed for the comfort of heat containment and a neat way to orchestrate pew rentals; if you did not pay your dues, the pew door was locked! As a result, pew-sitting is a relatively modern invention. One could speculate that seating took on more importance with the spread of Protestantism, whose emphasis upon the Word made listening, and therefore sitting, more of a necessity. If one is to listen to a two-hour sermon, one best have a place to sit.

Since over time Protestants diminished the role of the Sacraments in worship, there was little need for congregational movement. (This excludes the extremists, such as the Shakers, who – unlike their understated, neat furniture – were most excessive in their praying, shaking, barking like dogs, and rolling down the hill.) In the main, listening became the congregant's principal activity in much Protestant worship; the Church might have done better with a little less of the Reformation than it wound up with, but that's another story! Worship cannot become a spectator sport. Liturgy that is too wordy and passive inadequately embodies the Word-made-Flesh. We know the very first thing the New Testament Church did when it gathered was to break the Bread and share the Cup; this involves movement and an active response by those who are gathered.

Movement and response can be stifled by pews. One of the best contemporary insights into the potentially obstructive role of fixed pews was at St. Paul's Chapel, Ground Zero, in the two years following 9/11. This colonial church became a relief center for thousands of workers at the World Trade Center site. That ancient and venerable church – where Washington worshipped and which had become in many respects a museum – was converted into a true place of ministry. It became a place of living liturgy as the Eucharist was sung even as people were being fed and clothed at the same time and in the same space. The biggest challenges to this service and worship were the pews, which had to be worked around (despite the place of rest they offered many); they failed to facilitate any kind of optional and, in this case, necessary, use of space.

Like the members and staff of historic St. Paul's, who last year courageously removed their pews to bring back movement and openness to their experience of worship, we must consider one last imperative for our worship layout: we must discern the missional legacy given to us in the design principles by which our

space was originally built. A group of parishioners has articulated such a vision, and it is perhaps the most compact and profound statement about Christian liturgy and architecture as I have ever found:

A simply ordered and focused church; offering the worshiper an uplifting experience of the transcendent power of God in balance with the democratic and welcoming nature of the Eucharistic gathering, maintaining flexibility, ease of use and warmth along with an essential elegance, serenity and drama.

The members of the Early Church, like the Israelites, were a people on the move. We, like them, are a people on the move. We do not worship at a museum, but as part of a living Church, the Body of Christ. Bodies move; we are on a mission. As we move through the year, our Church seasons create new opportunities to re-discover that mission, manifesting the symbolism of our tradition in a variety of ways. Each season we express, in our Scripture readings, music and prayers, different aspects of Christianity; therefore, we will experience our missional movement in our inherited worshiping space in different ways throughout the Church year. To do so, we will reconfigure the way we gather for worship – including our seating – according to the four main parts of the Church Calendar which follows the life and ministry of Christ:

- The combined Advent/Christmas/Epiphany cycle expresses the nature and glory of the God-with-Us, Emmanuel. Our seating is antiphonal, or collegial, each half of the Body facing a central axis aligning Word with Sacrament.
- The Lenten Season is distinctly penitential, and calls forth a season of reflection and renewal. An asymmetrical arrangement puts us in mind of the way in which we are out of touch, out of synch with God and each other, un-centered. Our seating reflects this brokenness, and reminds us of our need for repentance and re-centering our lives in Christ.
- Easter is the glorious season of Christ's victory over death, and is the principal season of new life. The Font becomes a central point in our worship, more so than in other seasons.
- The Season after Pentecost is the longest of the Church year, and is often referred to as Ordinary or Common Time, since it does not follow any chronological or theological aspects of Christ's life. We shall have the three-sided arrangement as has been our custom for the past two years, emphasizing our Trinitarian understanding of God.

In these four patterns, we can be re-shaped according to the theology of the Church, and physically gather ourselves with a freshness and enthusiasm for the different seasons of the year. This re-arrangement admittedly has the initial effect of unsettling change; but all of these arrangements are deliberate, even to the point of the intended consequence of being unsettled or uncomfortable. Each seasonal layout is carefully planned, carefully executed, and thoroughly considered by the Worship Committee and clergy. Long hours are invested, and I believe the cost worth the outcome even if the outcome, involves some discomfort. I do not believe the role of the priest is to make it entirely comfortable for us. Even while I am in favor of certain comforts, such as heat and light, and maybe even padded kneelers and cushions (the Bible never says that pews should be hard and cold), it is still a worthy aspect of our spiritual community to be challenged. Our goal is to fulfill the presuppositions about worship space design stated at the beginning of this letter:

- We follow the traditional model of the Early Church that was shaped for mission – the first worshipers were on the move, and so are we.
- We are gathered according to the pattern of Christ's ministry as revealed throughout the Church year.
- We maintain the integrity of our building's design in our worship.