Designing Space as a Theological Task
(God Space: A Workshop on Church Architecture)

My last major piece of work before retirement from the Anglican Church of Canada was management of the project which led to the publication of our new hymn book, *Common Praise*. When we began that project, some ten years before, we invited Carol Doran, a noted liturgist and composer of hymn tunes, to come to the first meeting of the hymn book task force to reflect with them. She said words which I have never forgotten. She told the task force that when she is invited to help a congregation choose a hymn book she always tells them that they are about to embark on one of the most important theological tasks they will ever undertake, and she implied that this would be true in spades for a denomination engaged in creating a new hymn book.

I believe the same is true for a congregation designing the space in which they intend to worship. Those who design liturgical space—I include congregation, clergy, musician, and architect—are engaged in a theological process. Please don't be put off by the word *theology*. Many people think theology is a highly specialized intellectual discipline that requires profound philosophical and historical background as well as familiarity with its own texts. But the truth is that theology is anything we do or say to conceptualize our religious experience, our furthest vision, and our deepest aspirations. Theology happens when we create something out of the materials of our living tradition to express and give shape to our hope. Theology allows us to communicate with one another about the things that are ultimate to us.

If you compare the 1938 hymn book of the Anglican Church of Canada and our more recent *Common Praise* which was published just a year ago, you will find a lot of common material. I think you will find that the bedrock of our Christian tradition is there in both of themthe claims of justice, the transcendence of love, the transforming power of self-giving, the need for penitence and the gift of forgivenessbut the theological emphases of the two books are different. They are different because the needs and the insights of humanity change from one generation to another. We must affirm this change and the pluralism to which it leads. There is room for many theologies in the house of faith. What is important is that we strive to express the theology that is appropriate for us in our own time, that we conceptualize the vision we sometimes glimpse.

Buildings are instruments through which we express our vision. We do it in our homes. The kind of house we choose to live in and the way we furnish it are, like the clothes we wear, expressions of who we find ourselves to be and what we want to become. This can apply not only to individuals and families but to whole societies and cultures. Let me illustrate by reference to the theatre, which has more in common with the church than you might think.

We are all familiar with the conventional shape of theatres, the visible parts of which are usually divided into two spaces. There is an auditorium area, which is filled with seats, and there is a stage where actors perform. The stage is framed by the proscenium arch like a gigantic picture, and a curtain fastened to the arch separates the two spaces except during an actual performance. There are, in fact, two worlds in the theatre: the passive world of observation and the dynamic world of imagination and performance. Energy flows between them, but they are always separate.

There are, however, unconventional theatreslike the Festival Theatre at Stratford. The Festival Theatre is actually a single space, not two spaces. There is no proscenium and no curtain. The audience surrounds the stage on three sides, and although the theatre seats more than two thousand people, none of them is more than 19.8 metres from the stage. This radical and pioneering construction is the result of a very interesting event.

Early in the 1950's, Tyrone Guthrie (who later became Stratford's first artistic director) was to have produced *Hamlet* on the ramparts of the castle at Elsinore in Denmark, on the very site where the events depicted in the play were supposed to have taken place. Unfortunately (or fortunately), the event was rained out and had to be moved to a local hotel where the actors performed among the audience without

stage, sets, or curtain. This event seems to have given Guthrie permission to return in imagination to the kind of one-space theatre for which Shakespeare wrote his plays in the 16th century, and to rethink the very nature of theatre design. When he went to Stratford to produce plays in the tent-theatre with which the Festival began, Guthrie took with him Tanya Moisevitch who designed the original "thrust" stage in the temporary structure, and then the permanent stage in the same pattern, as it is now.

Other theatre architects have copied the Stratford stage with its breakdown of the separation of the two worlds of passive observation and imaginative performance. More recently a replica of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre has been constructed at its original location on the south bank of the Thames. I attended a performance there two years ago and noted further breaches in the barriers that have separated audience and actors: the play's clown did not confine himself to his stage role in the drama but actively entertained the crowd before the play began and during the intervals, and actors invited the audience to indicate their approval or disapproval of certain elements of the performance in the style of a children's pantomime. Clearly a new (although ancient) conceptual model of the theatre had appeared.

It is more than interesting that a parallel movement towards liturgical celebration among the people and with much more popular participation developed in the churches at roughly the same time as these innovations were taking root in the world of theatre. Although the roots of Christian worship are to be found in such domestic activities as sharing a meal or lighting household lamps, the actual performance of liturgy had gradually come (like the theatre) to assume two spaces, two worlds, one for a relatively passive audience and another for clergy, their assistants, and the choir. Further, the two spaces had come to symbolize a separation of sacred and profane, the space of God and the space of the people. In various ways the sacred sanctuary area was often cut off from the naveby a rood screen, or by height, or by increased elongation of the building in the west and by curtains and sometimes an icon screen in the east.

A major difference between the theatre and the worship assembly is, of course, that *theologically* there is no audience in church. All members of a worshipping assembly are actorsthey may (and do) have different roles but they all have roles. When plays are performed among the people the people are still an audience even if they are more involved. When buildings are designed so that worship takes place among the people it is because the people should discover and recognize themselves as the actors in the drama of worship. It is not just a matter of bringing the action closer, but of including everyone in the action.

We should note that the movement to shift the centre of worship out of a sacred enclosure and back among the people is biblical in origin and has appeared from time to time in periods of reformation. It is based on the recurring notion that the realm of the sacred is not somewhere else in another sphere of being but is right here, waiting to be discovered. For instance, in an early example, Moses told his people that the law of God was not in heaven or across the sea but in their mouths and hearts. Isaiah celebrated the presence of the Holy One *in the midst* of the nation. Jesus said God's kingdom was *among* or *within* his listeners like seed in a field or yeast in dough.

A basic model of worship which is presented again and again in the New Testament is the shared meal, whether it is the feeding of the multitude, Jesus eating and drinking with marginalized people, the last supper, the breaking of bread at Emmaus, or the fish and bread barbecue on the shore of the Sea of Galilee with which John's gospel ends. The essence of a shared meal is that everyone present is a participant. The essence of a shared meal *as an act of worship* is that it emphasizes the human community as the sphere in which the sacredGod's transforming presenceis to be discovered.

At the time of the Anglican Reformation, Thomas Cranmer attempted to break down the distinction between profane and sacred space and to recover the involvement of the whole congregation in the act of worship. He brought the altars down into the chancel and he intended all those who wanted to receive communion to join the priest at the holy table when they were invited to "Draw near with faith and take this sacrament to your comfort." Unfortunately, his two prayer books gave the lay people very little else to do (there were no hymns, for instance) and less still to say, but the purpose was sound. However, his strategy did not stick and some 75-80 years later Archbishop Laud was busy returning the altars to the

east wall and surrounding them with fences. In spite of this, Anglican architects of the later 17th and 18th centuries did display a remarkable sense of the holy as the "beyond in our midst." One of Wren's earliest designs for St. Paul's placed the altar at dead centre in a cruciform building, right under the dome, and some of his other churches (as well as those of Nicholas Hawkesmore) display an intimacy of people and table in a single one-room space which captures something of the spirit of the gospels and looks forward to the developments of the present day.

A church building is not the house of God. The people are the house of God. The author of the first letter of Peter energetically put it, "Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." A church building is the house of the church and it should therefore look like what the church believes it is called to be, just as your house reflects the way you want to live. All of our worship is an educational process in which we learn the ways of the kingdom of Godthe courtesy, the compassion, the mutual respect and responsibility, the hospitality, the care for children, for handicapped people, for outsiders, for the victims of exploitation and oppression, as well as the love of creation which characterize God's kingdom. The building should express this.

The question is not how far we should pull the altar out from the wall or even the direction the priest should face (although I do like to see the people with whom I am sharing the event). The question is one of relationship and connection. How can we locate the holy table so that it is the focal point of the community's gathering, so that it evokes a sense of the divine presence *among* us, working through our relationships among ourselves and with others? Where should we put the table so that it *connects* us as a hub connects the spokes of a wheel and enables them to realize their purpose? If the table tells us that God's kingdom is somewhere else where we can visit it from time to time, our design has failed. That is the answer of pagan religion. The table, like the main drift of the Bible's teaching, should tell us that God's kingdom is *among* us, waiting to be discovered.

This principle of connection and relationship must be applied to all the elements of the design of our worship space. The three major elements of Jesus' ministry were teaching through parables, healing without price, and acceptance of others without reference to recognized standards of religious purity (even those considered by society to be unacceptable). In our worship these elements of his ministry correspond to proclamation, supportive prayer, and the shared meal. (To the latter we could add baptism's bath of welcome at the moment when a new member cries *Yes!* to the vision of the kingdom.) These elements, proclamation, supportive prayer, and the shared meal, should be accommodated in our floor-plan and decoration in ways which bring the community together in affirmation, challenging and encouraging us to rise to the goal of the kingdom which is already in our midst.

Some Practical Applications

I must emphasize that there is no absolutely right way to do these thingsthere are just examples that "work" and others that don't. It helps to have a unifying idea in mind. One of the most successful renovations I have seen was at Portsmouth in England where the cathedral was entirely re-done several years ago. It was an extremely difficult building, clobbered together over something like seven centuries and never really finished, bringing together styles so different that they might be considered conflicting. I think the renovation was successful because the then Provost decided to take a single theme as the basis of the building's renewal. He chose the Easter Vigil, which reflects a central dimension of the Christian story, and he reorganized the building around that. For instance, he intended liturgies to begin in a relatively uncluttered, open nave, where the readings, sermon, and prayers would take place. To get to the sanctuary area where the eucharist would be celebrated and communion distributed it was necessary for the congregation to walk through a tunnel-like passage which was, in fact, one of the building's faults. It was there that he located the fontan immersion font in a rather tomb-like shapeso that everyone had to pass by the symbol of their baptism in order to get to the eucharist.

I do not suggest that every building should conform to the Portsmouth modelheaven forbid! But I do

suggest that the building "works" and hangs together because it has a unifying theme. There are many great themes in the Biblethe exodus, food in the wilderness, the kingdom which is becoming visible, freedom and consolation for the oppressed and the meek, wine for the forlorn wedding party, the beauty of creation, the mystery of incarnation. Those responsible for designing space should ask themselves what great Christian theme they want to hold before the next generation of worshippers? At least they should explore the question as they make their decisions.

I am not sure the location of the altar and the location of the lectern or pulpit can be discussed separately. They represent the two complementary fundamental themes of our worship: word and sacrament. Medieval Christianity stressed the sacrament and made the altar the focal point, pushing the pulpit and lectern to the sides of the building. Classical Protestantism reduced the table to little more than a token and expanded the pulpit to gargantuan proportions.

Both approaches made the fundamental mistake of asking what piece of furniture should be central. The answer is neither: it is the community, the people of God, which is central and the furniture is there to help them realize it. We come not only to hear the stories of faith and hope but also to become part of the ongoing story as it continues to unfold in human history. We come to find acceptance by God in the acceptance we receive and offer and thus become the ongoing Christ-event in our own time. These actions and gestures cannot and should not be separated, nor should one of them be treated as though it were more important than the other.

In the synagogue tradition there is a large and elaborate lectern called a *bema* right in the middle of the room. Scrolls are taken there to be read. Some eastern Christian churches have never lost this tradition. The convent chapel where I often preside on Sunday mornings has its lectern in the centre of the aisle during the liturgy of the word. All the readings and the sermon take place there. Planners and designers should at least consider that solution, or find some other way to bring the word and table into a more balanced relationship with each other.

Those who are responsible for renovating space are fortunate when the building they are working with is already a single room, without a structurally separate sanctuary area suggesting a separate sacred world. Even so, however, they will often find that such space has been treated as though it were two rooms with a firmly fenced altar and a clear division between the territory that belongs to clergy and their vested assistants, and the territory that belongs to everyone else. The problems are much more difficult where a building was originally constructed with a narrow chancel offering a corridor glimpse of a distant holy table. In some of the great cathedrals of Europe it has been necessary to ignore the traditional chancel except on very special occasions, gathering ordinary congregations around a nave altar in a single space. In other places very drastic renovation of the fabric has been necessary to make an appropriate theological statement. Whatever the shape of the building the liturgical celebration should convey a sense of a circle gathered around the focal points of book and table.

In many places the choir has been given the task of completing the circle by gathering behind and around the presiding ministers and the book and table. This works well so long as it is clear that they are still in the same room as the rest of the congregation; it is less successful if they appear to be the citizens of a more exalted and heavenly realm. The *theology* of the role of the choir is at stake here. I assume that the primary task of the choir is to support the congregation in the common praise that is one of the elements of its connectedness. Both Matthew and Mark record that the last supper ended with the singing of a hymn. Paul and the author of the letter to the Ephesians both tell their readers to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, and we may assume that this was to take place in their worship assemblies. There are, in fact, quite a number of hymns embedded in the text of the New Testament, bearing witness to this dimension of early Christian worship. All of our so-called sacred music is an expansion of early psalmody and hymnody.

In addition to the ideas they convey and the sensibilities they evoke, hymns have a community-building function: they contribute to that sense of mutual relatedness which is so important to congregational

worship. They enable the community to speak with one voice at subliminal as well as logical levels, and thus to become aware of its inner unity. A group of friends singing Christmas carols together can achieve a remarkable sense of social as well as musical harmony. However, one of the problems with communal singing is that it becomes more difficult rather than less as the group becomes larger. Eventually a congregation requires support for its singing, to encourage the shy and contain the enthusiastic and sustain the timing and key. And so we have choirs.

Unfortunately, in the course of Christian history choirs took over the performance of all of the music. I believe there are even traditions in which congregational singing of the liturgy is forbidden. The Reformation challenged and reversed this pattern to a large extent, not least because Martin Luther was himself a musician who was deeply committed to popular hymnody. However, in some traditions a wealth of wonderful music was created for use in the principal churches where it demanded the skill of very competent and often professional performers. This created a somewhat ambivalent situation in which it was often unclear whether the purpose of the choir was to support the musical participation of the congregation in its worship or to perform music to which the congregation could not possibly aspire.

Although the answer to this problem is *both/and* rather than *either/or*, I believe the weight of emphasis must be on music which encourages the greatest possible active participation by the congregation. Some wonderful music has been composed for the "Holy, holy," song which is embedded in the eucharistic prayer, but if you went to a birthday party and a professional choir sang, "Happy birthday," to the guest of honour, it wouldn't be the same as if everyone sang it together. There is no substitute for participation.

I have said little about the font because (it may surprise some) fonts are not historically essential to the worship space. Baptism originally to took place in rivers like the Jordan, and other public supplies of water. Philip the Deacon baptized the Ethiopian Minister of Finance in some body of water that appeared beside the road on which they were travelling. The oldest church building in existence at Dura-Europus in Asia Minor has just two rooms: one seems to have been used for the assembly and the other for baptisms. Early baptismal fonts were sometimes in the porch of the church or even in a separate building. Many European cathedrals (like Florence and Pisa) have a separate baptistery building. Infant baptism and the reduction of water to a small quantity poured over the head of the candidate combined to produce very small fonts which were often in an obscure corner of the church building, usually near the door where their location symbolized baptism as the entry into church life. The inconvenience of the location posed few problems until recent times because most baptisms were very private occasions involving only family members.

In our time there has been a move towards a communal celebration of baptism on important occasions when the whole congregation renews its baptismal vows in company with the new Christians. It is appropriate to have the font in a prominent place if we are going to emphasize the understanding of baptism that the church has affirmed in our time. Some parishes have put table and font side by side (see St. Cuthbert's, Leaside). I am not sure that is always aesthetically successful, and I am not sure that baptism and the eucharist are absolutely equal (as that arrangement suggests) any more than apples and oranges are absolutely equal. But if we are going to celebrate baptism conspicuously, then the font must be in a conspicuous place. If there is plenty of room and especially in buildings with movable chairs, a large font may stand at the west end of the nave, just inside the worship space. A congregation could be encouraged to gather around it at the time of baptism.

When communion is distributed near the table, should we kneel or stand? These questions engage with the fundamentals of long-standing tradition. The truth is that there is no single standard in Christianity. Early Christians felt it was irreverent to kneel at such times as the Easter season and Sundays, but knelt for some prayers at other times. I think that kneeling or standing is a matter of personal comfort, both psychological and physical, and it is a subject on which we can afford to be tolerant of differences. Some people feel more comfortable if they kneel for communion. Others find joy in the affirmation that God's grace has made us worthy to stand and serve in the divine presence. And one strand of Protestant tradition

sits to eat and drink at the Lord's Supper. On a practical level, some people who want to kneel for communion find it difficult without some support. A low bench or rail may be necessary for their comfort. But the table should not be ostentatiously walled as though it occupied a more sacred space where God's people were not entirely welcome. It might be better for assistant to bring out a bench at the time of communion, to help people kneel and get up again, than to come forward and close the gate in a sanctuary fence.

A worship space is an architectural statement of the local community's theology of the church. It is an ecclesiology and no ecclesiology is healthy or complete without reference to the world outside and beyond the church. A church building is a bridge or interface between the community and the world. It is not a hideout. The outside appearance of the building is part of the worship space: is it hospitable? is it inviting? If the natural setting of a church building is beautiful, it should be open to that beauty. At either end of this country there are two seminary chapels, both near the sea and both in lovely locations. One is shuttered against its setting and faces away from it; the other has a wall of glass that incorporates it. What is the theology of those buildings? There should also be an opening to the world of human need and aspiration, in visual art forms, and in the suitability of the space of local exhibitions and concerts. I often find when travelling in France that I can "read" the commitment of a parish community in the posters I find in the narthex and on the walls, especially when they reflect concern for liberation of others from the oppression of war and want.

We have been talking about space and I need to conclude by saying that most of our churches don't have enough of it. We have a tendency to clutter our buildings, to fill all available space with pews, rails, and stallsall of which militate against beauty. Beauty in liturgical space is achieved not so much by ornate decoration as by absence of clutter, by simplicity of line, honesty of materials, by understatement rather than overstatement. Some of the most beautiful churches in Europe are Cistercian buildings of the Romanesque period: they combine integrity of material and design with an intentional simplicity that should still be our ideal. And, of course, they were constructed to house a community and its particular insights and form of worship, which is the primary purpose of every church building.

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