What is a beautiful church building for?

What my bad sermons made bland, our sanctuary made sweet.

by Zen Hess in the June 3, 2021 issue

St. Peter’s First Community Church in Huntington, Indiana (Photos courtesy of Zen Hess)

In the summer of 1903, a newspaper headline boasted of what would become my congregation’s building: “Plans Are Here: They Show the German Reformed Church to Be Fine.” A year later, as the building neared completion, another newspaper article celebrated the new structure for “adding beauty and refinement to this part of the city.”

More than a hundred years later, college students from the local university came to shoot a short film in our building. When I opened one of the roller doors to our sanctuary, one student’s delight was audible: “Oh my.” The newspapers were right: this was an enduringly lovely structure.

But what is the purpose of all that beauty?

I did not grow up in a churchgoing family. For the first years of my life in Christ, I worshiped and served in relatively uninteresting church buildings: a simple and deteriorating Brethren building and a lumber warehouse turned evangelical worship space.

But in a providential plot twist, just as my wife and I were about to get married, the lumber warehouse caught fire—a Pentecost-worthy sermon illustration. We needed a place to make our vows. We found a church and asked about using it for our wedding. As the pastor showed us the building, he said, “There really is such a thing as sacred space.” We intuited that he was right.

Several years later, I was serving that same church as pastor. I began using elements of the sanctuary as illustrations in my sermons. One Sunday, I translated the German phrase on one of our central stained-glass windows: *Ich bin das brot des lebens*. “I am the bread of life.” These words appear on an open Bible framed by a grape cluster and wheat stalks, reminding everyone that the heart of worship is encountering Christ in scripture and communion. “Thank you for pointing that out,” a congregant said in the exit line that day. “I’d never thought to ask what those words meant.”

I was astonished. It had not occurred to me that people might not know that our space’s decor was deeply meaningful. More than a century earlier, the sanctuary’s fineness had been a point of pride for the congregation. But my congregant’s confession raised a new question for me as well: What is our building beautiful for? It wasn’t a crudely utilitarian question but a theological one. How does God use the beauty of our sanctuary in the work of sanctifying his people?

Contemporary artist Makoto Fujimura suggests that artists help us with deep questions “by presenting an expansive vision of life that reveals beauty in ever-wider zones.” This idea is particularly relevant for faithfully composed sanctuaries. In a more literal sense than Fujimura perhaps intended, the Georgia pine ceilings in our sanctuary are perfectly symmetrical, with arched beams creating a visual effect that makes the world feel larger. It’s a room that urges you to imagine life with God as an abundant life.

If a small, dark room used for solitary confinement depletes the soul—even causing physical damage to the brain—then a sanctuary does the opposite: it expands the soul. Our sanctuary, and thousands of others, are spaces where it feels almost

obligatory, as Calvin says, to “raise our minds upward and seek Him in heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father.” In this way, God uses the beauty of a place to open our minds and hearts for an encounter with something beyond us, something holy or sacred.

The work of sanctification, however, requires a step beyond openness. If God uses beauty for transformative purposes, then beauty must change us. Ellen Davis observes that in the Old Testament, the only material creations that receive extended, detailed descriptions are the tabernacle and the temple, communal places of worship:

> A sanctuary has a kind of creative capacity of its own. Specifically, it has the capacity to shape the people who spend time there, to form them (us) as believers. . . . The sanctuary itself deepens religious experience and insight. The physical space that we inhabit as worshippers may itself contribute to our awareness of new possibilities for living in the presence of and to the glory of God.

Davis suggests that sacred spaces form people. The tabernacle and temple formed worshipers by greeting them day after day with images and smells and sounds that caused their hearts and minds to dwell on God’s presence and commands. Sacred spaces impose upon our habits of mind and processes of understanding by echoing heavenly beauty into our imaginations. The world within a sanctuary shapes the way we understand the world outside it and the way we act in it.

The way a beautiful place shapes us is a one-two punch. The beauty of the place captivates our imaginations, which softens us to whatever the beautiful thing may teach us. This is common human experience, isn’t it? A person who smells a wonderful aroma pauses and asks, “What’s cooking?” A brilliant line in a song leads the listener to wonder what the song is about. Beauty is a catalyst, drawing our mind, spirit, and heart to attend to that which our body encounters. The church has long known the power of beauty to draw people to dwell on divine truths and actions.

Inattention to beauty, on the other hand, can cause even a true and good thing to become less compelling. Fujimura again: “A lack of attention to beauty in presenting a truth hampers its appeal and adoption.”

Take, for example, the gorgeous rose window on the southern wall of our church, in which the “burning sun with golden beam” often causes the vivid red and purple of Jesus’ robe to explode with brilliance. Its placement and design suggest it teaches us something about Christ’s ascension. This doctrine is fundamental to many significant elements of Christian theology and practice: the church, prayer, mission, and eschatology, to name a few. Yet the minor role Christ’s ascension plays in the Gospel narratives leaves it overshadowed by his death and resurrection. For many Christians, the ascension may seem abstract and even secondary to more important matters.

The beauty of our rose window, however, makes the doctrine more appealing, and its presence in our place of worship anchors Christ’s high priestly role in our doxological imagination. With Jesus just over our shoulders, we are taught that he keeps watch over our worship, as well as our coming and going. The beauty of this window draws the grandeur of Christ’s ascension—perhaps understated in the Gospels and implicit in the Epistles—into focus in a unique and formative way.

Every detail I have studied in the sanctuary has some biblical root. From a tedious detail about the temple’s design to the irresistible story of Christ walking on the water, our building is an imaginative commentary on the scriptures. What books and bad sermons have mostly made bland for my congregants, the sanctuary makes sweet.

As my congregant’s confession reveals, however, students may need a tutor to understand the teacher. Even if its beauty opens our hearts to God in a unique way, the strange language, symbolism, and imagery are not always intuitive.

Fortunately, I found my congregation was wide open to exploring the familiar aspects of our sanctuary. In the summer of 2019, I put together an interactive workshop in which we discussed the architecture and artistic elements of our building. Nearly half of our congregation showed up—a surprising turnout after our first two workshops on other subjects drew only a handful of people. Children asked questions, congregants beamed as long-loved relics became newly meaningful, and I realized just how connected everyone felt to our shared space. Judging by the way people busily wrote on the handouts—something they never do during my sermons!—they were eager to learn from the building and grapple with the beauty they enjoyed every week. I am confident that many who gathered for that workshop became more attuned to the aesthetics at work around them on Sunday mornings,

creating a deeper engagement in worship.

So it’s no wonder that my congregants, like many the world over, felt such a deep sense of loss when COVID-19 exiled us from our sacred places. Like having to move from a beloved home without warning, the thrust into an unknown way of worshiping was an alienation that forced us to ponder questions we thought we’d already answered. What is worship? How do we pray together? What does the communion of saints mean? On the first Sunday after suspending in-person services, I came to the sanctuary to keep vigil and sit beneath the comforting image of Christ ascended above all principalities and powers. I did it for myself and for my congregation, many of whom I knew longed to be in that place in the comfort of the beautiful ordinary.

I quickly realized that I would need to let go of the idea that worship could carry on normally. For all that is possible in the age of digital content creation, digital spaces are inherently smaller and thinner than physical spaces shared with physically present people. How can a room with 50-foot ceilings have the same effect on a 13-inch screen? The goal could not be to keep things as normal as possible, because things were not normal.

As I asked what we could do in this new strange season of worshiping in exile, I found that the sanctuary’s beauty, which had shaped our understanding of worship, could still guide us. Worshiping in our sanctuary taught us that God encounters us through our whole being, not just in words spoken during worship. So, on Sunday mornings, I invited congregants to throw open their windows or light a candle. I wanted them to realize that worship was not happening on the screen but all around.

Our sanctuary is thoughtful in its small details and in the way that every part flows together to create a breathtaking whole. Initially our worship videos felt choppy, one part abruptly moving to the next. As we acquired skill in composing them, we began to implement techniques that made them more cohesive—with help from Lester Ruth’s edited volume about the flow of ancient worship.

The book reminds us that liturgy is not a list of items to do and check off. Rather, our communal prayer should flow together, imitating the unbroken praise of heavenly worship. Simple decisions, like lengthening a piano intro and putting it quietly under the conclusion of a prayer, bind these actions together and allow digital worship to feel less like a slideshow and more like a prayerful journey together.

The pews offer another example. We take them for granted, but they imply that whatever we do in the sanctuary requires many different people; congregational worship needs a congregation. So, we included as many people as we could in every service.

From time to time, we utilized elements from the sanctuary because, pastorally, they offered comfort and a familiar foothold. We could not re-create the sanctuary on the screen, but we could follow the instincts we acquired from weekly worship in our particular space.

During the summer and fall we worshiped together outside. Then, after a month of indoor worship, COVID-19 surged and we returned to virtual-only worship. This time around, we explored new possibilities and pushed ourselves again and again: How does our sanctuary teach us to worship? And how might we present the truth beautifully to our congregation and the visitors exiled with us?

During the Babylonian exile, there was always an urge to return to Jerusalem, to worship again in the comfort of the temple. But the prophets began to shift the focus from the temple itself to the purpose of the temple in God's work of making the people holy. They taught that God does not exist for sacred spaces; sacred spaces exist to open us to an encounter with God and teach us to live with God in ways that will sustain our faith beyond their walls.

The temple became an integral part of the Christian imagination, as the people came to understand themselves as the temple of God, both as individuals and as the holy catholic church. The beauty of the place is absorbed by and reflected in the people.

At the cornerstone ceremony for our building, in 1903, a former pastor of St. Pete's encouraged the congregation, saying, "May you, members of St. Peter's church, finish this temple and also build a spiritual house in which God may dwell. Build on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ. God must be that divine architect." I like to think the work we've done during the pandemic is part of finishing the temple that is our sanctuary. Only time will tell whether what we built in our digital services created a context in which my beloved congregation encountered the divine architect. I am, nonetheless, comforted once again by the rose window on our southern wall, in which Christ is ascended above the congregation, reminding us that he watches over his church, leading her into beautifying worship in whatever season and whatever

sanctuary they gather.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “What is beauty for?”