

“Converting Spaces”

(a 2011 NAAC Gathering workshop leader: Daniel Benedict)

Description: Architecture, furnishings, light, acoustics, and spatial relationships shape us into the Body of Christ. We will consider the impact and potentialities of liturgical spaces for welcoming, forming and initiating persons to life in the sacraments and in the mission of God’s people. Participants will look at their congregation’s current liturgical space with an eye toward changes that more faithfully reflect the gospel and conversion of life in and with the church.

Outline:

1 Assumptions:

- Liturgical space has a formative power related to making disciples that may be positive or negative.
- The Spirit demands spaces that convert us.
- Both the unbaptized and the baptized need conversion—initial and continuing.
- We have to go beyond the minimalism “validity” suggests (water, bread, wine, oil).
- Most liturgical spaces were designed for Christendom churches; not churches that are missional.
- Missional churches focus on singing, proclaiming and enacting God’s story that welcomes, forms, initiates, and sends persons to witness to God’s love and justice in daily life.
- Conversion orients and claims people for the in-breaking reign of God; not church membership.
- Conversion of space will take seriously where the space is located.

2 Five strong liturgical centers: congregation meeting around bath, story, and meal in its context

3 Most current spaces built on skewed assumptions: minimal water, exaggerated focus on word, non-table altars, passive members/active leaders, divorced from contextual setting

4 Liturgical renewal:

- centrality of Easter (Great Three Days)
- basic order (ordo) for Lord’s Day—gathering, proclamation and responses, thanksgiving and communion, sending forth
- strong symbolic centers for robust actions—bathing, story telling, eating, sending
- strong proclamation of God’s story (Pasch at center)—Christian year and lectionary
- other ?

5 Converting space (short-term and long-term)

- Shift from font to pool
- Shift from double focal points (lectern and pulpit) to ambo (single space)
- Shift from altar of sacrifice to table of communal feast
- Shift from auditorium space to active space—balancing hearing and seeing/proximity/action

Conversation:

How have you experienced unconverted space?

How does such space affect conversion? (the formation of congregation and the way the congregation welcomes, forms, initiates and sends seekers)

What changes has your church made (short-term or long-term) to unleash the converting power of the liturgy? What conversion of space will seek to implement when you go home from this event?

A Case of Robust Converting Space

(Grace Episcopal, Allentown PA--found at <http://associatedparishes.blogspot.com/>)

When the recent economic crisis struck North America, having an extra impact on the already struggling people of Allentown, The Rev Dr. Patrick Malloy and the congregation of Grace Church decided to renovate their building's liturgical space. This was not the action of a parish out of touch with the surrounding community. Rather, it flowed from Grace's normal pattern of worship doing justice doing worship.

For a number of years, Grace has navigated the treacherous waters of economic downturn and social instability which have been characteristic of Allentown since long before the recent crisis. At one time on the verge of closing, the congregation decided not to follow in the footsteps of other churches and flee the core of the city. Instead, it found renewed vitality by engaging in ministry in/with/to the area in which its building stood. Over time, this congregation of only 55 people has developed an active food bank, a Montessori school, an AIDS services center, an employment agency, free legal counseling service, a rehab program for young offenders and a shelter for chronically homeless people.

What is telling is that all of this missional activity fuels and is fueled by the liturgical life of the church. As one member of the congregation put the matter, "In liturgy, we don't just sit around here and watch somebody do something; we do it. So during the week we do it, too." It's not so much the words of the liturgy that form the parish, then, but enacted rites. The Christian life is not something passive; it's about doing something. The congregation finds that there is no need to import texts focused on an economic-justice agenda to form people in and for God's Reign. Instead, Grace has discovered that the 1979 Prayer Book liturgy has the capacity to "sustain and compel a Church as it confronts an inequitable economy...the layering upon them of justice-themed texts from outside the BCP tradition is, at best, unnecessary and, at worst, a distraction from the real business of enacting in ritual form life in God's Reign."

One key element in all of this was the liturgical renovation of the church building. Not only has this proved formative to the congregation through liturgical enactment, it has also provided purpose, economic stimulus and a show of stability to the surrounding area.

APLM plans to post further reflections and video clips of Patrick's inspiring and enlightening presentation on our website and Facebook pages over the coming weeks and months. Please stay tuned...

We also encourage you to visit Grace Church's website: www.graceallentown.org

Suggested Resources for further reading:

Re-Pitching the Tent: The Definitive Guide to Re-ordering Church Buildings for Worship and Mission (Third Edition) by Richard Giles (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2004)

Church Architecture: Building and Renovating for Christian Worship by James F. White and Susan J. White (Akron: OSL Publications, 1998)

God's House Is Our House: Re-imagining the Environment for Worship by Richard S. Vosko (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006).