

The Book of Worship and the Place of Worship

REV. DR. THOMAS DIPKO AND GARY ROBERTS (EDITOR)



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“The Symbols, Space, and Sanctity of the Place of Worship”

by Rev. Dr. Thomas Dipko

Since publication in 1986, the United Church of Christ *Book of Worship*¹ has become a key resource in the design of United Church of Christ worship. It is less widely understood, but equally useful in the design of worship spaces in the United Church of Christ. It could prove very helpful and even revolutionary if our local churches study it before signing architectural contracts. This paper summarizes the twelve theological principles that inform the texts of that book², and then offer some practical applications of those principles in relation to function and form of worship spaces. These twelve principles are more fully discussed in the resource, “The Symbols, Space, and Sanctity of the Place of Worship” by Rev. Dr. Thomas Dipko.³

1. Christian worship centers on Christ

With respect to the centrality of Jesus Christ, Karl Barth is right. It is through the preaching of the word and the celebration of the sacraments that Jesus Christ remains the effective “head” of the body that is his church. The space of worship, the very furniture in the room, and the patterns of our corporate assembling should make this focus clear.

2. Worship includes everything Christians do

If worship and daily life are inseparable, if liturgy as praise and adoration cannot rightly be separated from liturgy as ethics, then the place of worship should not be a haven from the world, but a harbor for launching the church into the world. The place of worship, in and through God’s presence in a people, is the place not where earth is cut off from heaven, but where

heaven and earth, now, already meet. What happens here is what God in Christ wills to have happen everywhere.

3. There is a distinction between God and our language about God

If language about God is both relevant and relative, the very church building should admit the same relevance and relativity in terms of the meaning communicated by space. Said another way, just as no human word can exhaust the meaning of God, neither can any one architectural statement! No church building will ever “say it all” with respect to the Christian gospel. Space, in this sense, is an extension of human language and is open to all the same splendor and shame.

4. Inclusive language is central to an inclusive church’s worship

Related to the language issue is the question of inclusiveness of all sorts. If our buildings exclude because they are not barrier free, we have made a statement that presumes to limit God’s grace as surely as when we speak words that deny existence to women or dignity to people of races other than our own or compassion to the poor.

5. Liturgy is the work of *all* the people of God

If worship is the work of the whole people of God, then isolated officiants on a distant dais doing everything for the assembly, except a few hymns and the Lord’s Prayer, are a contradiction in terms. The very room should say to those who enter, “There are no spectators here! This house is a home of a family in which every member is a cherished person with privileges and responsibilities. Come take your place among us. You, with us, are the temple of God’s presence in this place.”

6. Liturgy involves *all* the senses

If liturgy is the response of total persons to the loving initiative of God, no part of us should have to be checked at the door. In the United Church of Christ we are proud that we do not ask people to check their minds at the door. We are a little less sure about their artistic appreciation, their emotions, their feeling, their bodies!

7. Worship is both here and now, and then and there

If our worship is to be ecumenically catholic, then the here and now congregation needs to see its kinship with the people of God across the street, across the seas and across time. Here, the arts can be of special help to us. The very space needs to announce that we are one assembly of God's people, but not the only one, not the first one, not the last one. We are not alone! We are "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1).

8. Worship includes both Word and Sacrament

If Word and Sacrament are the means by which Christ's headship is continued in the church, then they ought neither to be separated nor subordinated one to the other. The space and furnishings of the room should speak eloquently of their complementary relationship. Font, pulpit, and table are not important because we determine their use. They are important because their use is determined by what God has done in Jesus Christ. In that sense, the very furniture of the room reflects the scandal of the incarnation in all its particularity.

9. Liturgy is both a calling and a recalling

If liturgy is both a recalling and a calling, then the room is in no sense at all a museum. Entering this space is not a trip backward in some time machine. It is the space in which the past is made present so personally and powerfully that we hear today, as surely as Mary or Peter or Andrew or Lydia heard long ago, the call of God to service here and now. The space, in other words, should speak of the timeless in timely ways.

10. Today's liturgy is the liturgy of the church of Pentecost

If the church that assembles here is the church of Pentecost, then the immediacy of God's presence in the Spirit among us deserves appropriate expression. This means that there is indeed a place for symbols and mystery and awe in a house of worship. A vigil lamp flickering a message of divine presence does not make us fire worshipers! It announces, as plainly as the written text of Acts, that the invisible presence of God, like as to tongues of fire, is in this assembly of the faithful as surely as it was at the first Pentecost. The arts may be abused, just as preaching and the sacraments may be abused. But that is no ground for eliminating the arts any more than it would be for eliminating preaching and the sacraments. The prophetic response to abuse is repentance, not the rejection of God's gifts.

11. Today's Christian liturgy is cosmic in the scope of its concern

If liturgy is cosmic in the scope of its concern, then perhaps we can learn from our Eastern Orthodox sisters and brothers. The space of our places of worship can and ought to remind us that we are part of creation, and that even the creation groans for the day of its redemption (Rom. 8:22). If our buildings spoke more kindly and gratefully of nature, perhaps our environmental sins would find correction.

12. Christian liturgy takes history seriously, but is also anticipatory

Finally, if our worship both takes history seriously and looks to the day of God's consummation of all things in Christ, then our buildings will point to eternity without trying to imprison eternity. My appeal is for space that is indigenous to our time and place, but flexible to the very changes that time and place bring upon us. Although it may be heresy to some, I remain convinced that buildings inherited from the past should not dictate how we should worship God today. Nor should present needs mean that we have no choice but to abandon such buildings. If human ingenuity was competent enough to create a church building for the felt needs of one generation, then present human ingenuity surely possesses adequate vision to reorder the space for present pilgrims and their needs. Otherwise, we will find Robert Adolfs's prediction to be true—our cathedrals will become the tombs of God and the very houses built to honor God's living presence in a living people will become God's grave.⁴

Notes

1. *Book of Worship: United Church of Christ* (New York: United Church of Christ Office for Church Life and Leadership, 1986).

2. The Office for Church Life and Leadership, at the time of the publication of the *Book of Worship*, invited Rev. Dipko to summarize the theological guidelines that were used by the committee that prepared the contents of the book. The ten persons on the committee, plus three members of the staff of the Office for Church Life and Leadership, began their work in 1979. Their mandate originated in a General Synod action in 1977 that reads tersely as follows: "The Eleventh General Synod of the United Church of Christ directs the Executive Council to request the Office for Church Life and Leadership to develop, if feasible, a book of worship for the United Church of Christ, using inclusive language."

3. The full text of "The Symbols, Space, and Sanctity of the Place of Worship," and other resources for churches planning a construction or renovation project, are available through the Local Church Building section of the Evangelism Team, Local Church Ministries.

4. See Robert Adolfs, OSA, *The Grave of God: Has the Church a Future?* trans. N.D. Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

Thomas E. Dipko, with a Ph.D. degree from Boston University in Ecumenical Theology, was the author of the first draft of the United Church of Christ's Book of Worship. After twenty-two years of local church pastorates in New England and eight years as Conference minister of the Ohio Conference of the United Church of Christ, Dr. Dipko was executive vice president of the United Church Board For Homeland Ministries, the predecessor organization to Local Church Ministries (A Covenanted Ministry of the United Church of Christ) from February 1992 until June 2000.

Gary Roberts is Minister of Evangelism for Local Church Building, in the Evangelism Team of Local Church Ministries, UCC. His primary duties are twofold: Administrator of Church Building Revolving Loan Fund, a fund with a 150-year history of starting new UCC Churches, and also technical support and advice to UCC churches about building-related issues. Gary came to Local Church Ministries from Central Pacific Conference, where he was an active volunteer in lay ministry, church development, and in his local church for 30 years before joining LCM in September, 1998. Professionally, Gary has 30 years experience in commercial real estate sales, development, and financial analysis. He is a realtor, a Member of the Appraisal Institute (MAI), and a graduate of Central Pacific Conference's Licensed Ministry Training.

For more information, contact:

Arthur Clyde
Minister for Worship, Music, and Liturgical Arts
United Church of Christ
Phone: 216.736.3870
E-mail: clydea@ucc.org

Sidney D. Fowler
Minister for Worship, Liturgy, and Spiritual Formation
United Church of Christ
Phone: 216.736.3869
E-mail: fowlers@ucc.org

Gary Roberts
Minister of Evangelism for Local Church Building
United Church of Christ
Phone: 216.736.3822
E-mail: robertsg@ucc.org

UCC Fellowship of Architects
Ann Vivian
E-mail: av@gvvarchitects.com



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