

Your Building and Your Values

Try this at home. Walk through the front door and into your church. Shut your eyes for a good long minute and then open them.

Ask yourself this question: what is the most valuable thing in this space?

Jesus said, where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

I would do this with confirmation classes, and eventually put together a tour of four local church buildings we could visit in the course of a long afternoon.

We would start with a no-brainer. About 30 years ago a suburban mainline congregation built a new sanctuary, a perfect brick and glass cube. The space was oriented corner to corner, and as you walked in your eyes were immediately drawn to the massive pipe organ that occupied the far corner. It took up something like 20% of the floor space of the sanctuary, and its floor to ceiling mass of blond wood stood out against its red brick background. The large keyboard console was just off center to the left and as you approached, you could see the handsomely cushioned chairs for choir members.

The pews were laid out in sweeping curves, again corner to corner, so people sitting in each seat were looking directly at the organ. I would ask my class to look for other church furniture, and they would eventually find a lectern, an altar (on wheels so it could be moved out of the way) and a modest baptismal font that could easily be mistaken for a flower stand. People in most seats would have to turn their heads to view anything happening at these stations.

This congregation spent its money on the king of instruments and the classical musical program that it represented.

Next we would go to a small satellite congregation of a large non-denominational mega-church. Walking in the front door, our confirmands were confronted with an array of standard folding chairs facing a mostly empty stage. There was a piano on the stage, but not a particularly impressive one. There were also a handful of microphone stands and yards and yards of cable.

Eventually, someone would look away from the stage and notice the sound booth, raised up on its own carpeted platform, with an emergency battery backup system and a half dozen locked cabinets. The most valuable thing in the room was the Peavey 24 track sound board! What this congregation spent its money on was equipment to produce music of a very different sort.

Baltimore's Roman Catholic Cathedral of Mary our Queen is a cavernous, heroic, art deco festival of vaulting and buttresses covered in grey limestone inside and out. Built in an era when every priest was required to say Mass every day, the interior is lined with chapel altars in a similar hued marble, each surmounted by a bronze statue of the saint to which it was dedicated. As you continue toward the high altar, just at the point where the décor starts to get boring, there is a change. The space is suddenly divided by transepts north and south, and the one to your right stands out by the bright colors, the polychroming, applied over the stonework. It is the chapel where the "Reserved Sacrament" is kept, the consecrated bread and wine which in Catholic theology does not just represent the body and blood of Jesus Christ, but is literally his presence. The stonework in this chapel is not just carved, but painted as well. The founders of this monumental edifice most valued the physical presence of Christ in their sanctuary, and they spent a lot of their money to show where exactly that was to be found.

The fourth stop was at a Quaker meetinghouse. I would share with the group the importance of silence in this tradition and ask for a few moments of quiet before we discussed answers to our question. In a modest room we sat on plain wooden benches arranged so that we were looking at each other. There was no decoration of any kind, no candles, no symbols of faith, no hymnals or prayer books. It would generally take more than a few minutes of conversation before someone would figure it out. The most valuable thing in the room was us. This tradition spent just enough money to provide a space for our presence, our thoughts, our spiritual insights. We were the point.

Returning to the question we began with, when you open your eyes in your sanctuary, what is the most valuable thing you see?

Jesus said, where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.