

Altering worship space:

St. Mary's strives for consensus on interior renovations

'We shape our spaces; thereafter, they shape us.'
Winston Churchill

By Emily Morrison

At the first parish "community forum" convened in the cavernous yet majestic Gothic/Romanesque interior of St. Mary's Church in downtown Rochester, members of the Worship Space Committee wore buttons proclaiming a humorous legend. "I'm From Space" might have caused an uninformed outside observer to read more into the proceedings than was intended, but it didn't matter.

The initial impact of the buttons, followed closely by warm greetings and handclaps from Father Jim Lawlor and process consultant Bill Brown, did more than break the ice with a moment of unexpected levity. More than 100 St. Mary's parishioners had come together that May evening for the first in a series of meetings convened to achieve parish-wide consensus on the possibility of renovating the church building's interior. If anything, the informal atmosphere may well have helped defuse what could be a potentially divisive issue in the heart of any parish community.

Altering the space in which a congregation worships can be a very personal matter, among the diverse group of individuals who happen to comprise a parish. Whether parishioners belong to a church because of history, geography, ties of family or marriage, social bonds, common commitment to ministry, ideological similarities or spiritual interconnections, the fact remains that people's individual perceptions of their worship space vary widely. And a historic downtown church nominated for landmark status may reflect even more diversity than usual.

For some parishioners, the mere mention of interior renovation sets off a complex welter of emotions, among which defensiveness may rank higher than most. Bill Brown, the South Bend, Indiana, architectural consultant hired by the parish to lead the series of six workshops held during May and June, emphasizes that simply considering such a change can lead to anxiety and even hostility.

"There are two situations that can overcharge a spiritual community's emotions: a change of pastors and building renovations," said Brown at the first workshop May 6. "Some parishes come apart at the seams."

Brown, formerly a member and partner in an Indiana architectural firm, now makes a career of helping parish communities around the country to arrive at such momentous decisions. He explained to St. Mary's parishioners that the fact that they were engaging in the process of making a decision didn't mean they had to decide ultimately, once the process was completed, to do anything. The result of the process would be either a decision to make changes in the building's interior, or to leave things as they are.

The process itself, rather than hinging on parliamentary procedure or majority rule, was devised to revolve around consensus. More conventional methods of decision making, Brown explained, might be considered to stem from a "benevolent dictatorship."

"Some parishes' actions are akin to modern warfare," he noted. Voting, by its very nature "creates two sides," he added. "What if you end up with an 80 percent 'mandate?' You've emotionally disabled the 20 percent who were opposed, so that some might eventually leave."



Bill Brown poses with blueprints in the courtyard of St. Mary's historic downtown church. The South Bend, Indiana, architectural consultant specializes in helping Catholic parishes achieve consensus on how or whether they will alter their church structures. Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

The consensus method, St. Mary's pastoral leaders agreed with committee members, seems to be the only method of decision making that makes sense for a truly "catholic" parish assembly. "Doesn't everyone agree that indoor plumbing is a good idea?" Brown offered, by way of illustration. "You might say, if we make decisions by consensus, we end up with the least common denominator, nothing original or outstanding or even memorable," he theorized.

"Yet the very process of consensus eliminates the 'us and them' mentality that often mars even the best-intentioned democratic procedures. "It gives you the opportunity to become an 'ambassador' of the decision, within the community," said Brown. "It's very possible to make high-quality, detailed decisions by consensus — decisions that don't come apart later."

Renovation decisions made by committee often lead to a similar spirit of divisiveness, Brown cautioned. "Architecture is like dog food," he continued. "The purchaser and the consumer are not the same. This building is a facility that serves who you are as a community. While we reverence the historicity of the building and the liturgical quality of the space, we don't want to lose sight of the community that worships here."

"We don't want to hear from the architect until we've heard from you," Brown declared.

With that statement, he set in motion a complicated process that began with a detailed demographic breakdown of the background of American parish life. Since 83 percent of parish leaders are lay people, and lay trusteeships were the historic foundation of parish community life, he argued, consensus at the very least makes good statistical sense.

The project, he went on, would involve four major categories of steps: discovery, design, construction and operation. During the six-part series of meetings, participants explored a variety of ways to discover what, if anything, they wanted to do with the church building. The discovery phase, Brown warned, is the time to make changes. "While the concrete is being poured for a square foundation, it's too late to decide you want a round one."

Decisions on altering worship space, said Brown, involve canonical requirements, considerations of ownership, guidelines drawn up by the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Liturgy on "Environment and Art in Catholic Worship," and both the wishes and the wisdom of parish members of all ages. Young people, he noted, tend to make practical suggestions (such as cushioned seats) as well as whimsical ones (glass pillars and gold collection plates).

"They'll be responsible for stewardship in the parish before you blink an eye, so give consideration to their ideas," said Brown, who noted that very few teenaged parishioners were present at the first workshop.

"Some of you may have come to make sure it doesn't get botched up, to 'stop the crazies'

from doing this or that," he suggested. "Some of you may want to see that it's better heated or lighted, or gets a different carpet. The goal of these sessions is to give you a deeper set of eyeballs with which to look at the entire issue."

Brown enumerated the different types of church construction, pointing out that St. Mary's forward-facing pew layout makes it quite conducive to processional events, yet the congregation might also consider laying out the seating in a choice of radial, antiphonal (facing) or juxtaposed formats. Such post-Vatican II issues as installing full-immersion baptismal tanks for adults have the potential to cause a great deal of dissension, Brown advised. "We are too large, too rich in tradition, too diverse to expect sweeping change to happen very fast."

Six types of spaces fall under the aegis of worship space, said Brown, who cited secular spaces (parishioners' homes, parking areas), institutional spaces (parish halls and rectories), chapel spaces, support spaces (usher's rooms, restrooms, sacristies), Eucharistic worship spaces and gathering spaces (both indoors and outdoors).

Spatial, liturgical and pastoral needs also must be taken into consideration when planning renovations in worship structures, Brown added. Worship life, sacramental life and devotional life form three overlapping layers of the total equation that makes worship spaces function for the good of the community as a whole.

Near the end of the first workshop, Brown passed out index cards to the assembled group and asked each participant to write, "I think

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