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The Methodist Church of Southern Africa
DEWCOM
ORDERING OUR SACRED SPACE
Considerations for Building and Refurbishing Church Spaces

1.1 INTRODUCTION

One of the most formative experiences of a congregation's life is when the community engages in the process of building or renovating a church. Such a process invites the congregation to study the Church's theological teaching, denominational and congregational history and liturgical practice. These factors, amongst others, inform and clarify the decision-making process behind the architectural, artistic, and aesthetic considerations for designing and ordering church space. Church space in this paper refers to the dynamic interaction between buildings and the human, denominational, and environmental aspects that create a congregation's life.

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) does not have a distinctive tradition regarding church buildings, the arts, and architecture. Most of our church buildings have been influenced by historical religious architecture and practical factors of economics and usage. Current shifts in visual arts and building styles as well as postmodern theological currents have seen the emergence of new church models influenced by technology (e.g. sound amplification systems and mass media devices). These developments influence how congregations think about building and renovating church spaces. Often, due to lack of education about the historical, theological, and contextual variables that affect the process of transforming and renovating church space, churches have been hurt in the process. In some cases transforming or refurbishing church premises has led to vibrant communities and magnificent church spaces while in other cases it has led to disgruntled communities feeling as though they have been stripped of their ecclesiastical flavour and dignity. The question is, as the MCSA, do we have any theological, ecclesiastical, and practical principles for building and renovating our church spaces apart from the legal considerations in our Laws and Disciplines?

The primary aim of this discussion paper is to **(Section 1.2)** recognise the challenge facing the MCSA (and other churches) when it comes to thinking about refurbishing and transforming church spaces. Secondly, **(Section 1.3)** it is to provide a brief overview of the dominant ways of viewing church spaces. In the fourth section **(1.4)**, I outline the theological, pastoral, and aesthetic considerations as a way of developing a methodology for evaluating church space. I hope that the discussion stimulates an informed conversation about how we plan for new churches and refurbish old church spaces.

1.2 RECOGNISING THE CHALLENGE

Notable within our current practice in the MCSA is the lack of a clear theological methodology for thinking about church spaces. Currently it seems that we delegate our responsibility to theologically and liturgically

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apply conscious thought to how we order church spaces to the clergy, architects and trust property conveners in our churches. In doing so, we miss the opportunity to engage and teach our congregations about important aspects of our ecclesiology and liturgical practice. In addition to lack of knowledge about church spaces, some of the common tendencies that inform the resistance to change include:

- a) **Marginalisation** – being content with being left out of the mainstream of adaptation and refurbishment under the notion of “creating an oasis of stability in a changing world”.
- b) **Eccentricity** – the church as the only thing that stands out in the community almost like an exhibit in a folk museum.
- c) **Inconsistency** – because every Christian generation has ruthlessly adapted its church buildings and practice to suit their historic time, churches that stop evolving consistently with their theology and context are unfaithful to their own tradition.
- d) **Unfaithfulness** – central to the gospel tradition is the idea of new life through total change - *metanoia* – any community that seeks to become an island of no-change in a sea of change despises its own birthright - its tradition, its message and its theology. As a result, the message and aesthetics do not match.
- e) **Spiritualisation** – sometimes churches spiritualise their inability to change their environment, almost making paying attention to their church space a secondary feature to prayer and service.

The above factors are general attitudes that often go unquestioned. I now turn to some specific issues affecting the MCSA.

Firstly, buildings and spaces do not exist in a vacuum. Every church space is shaped by a number of influences from “inside” (clergy and laity, between men and women, members and adherents) and “outside” (non-members, media, economics and politics). These influences shape some of the decisions about the shape of the church in relation to its mission within the broader community. Some of the factors that have influenced the shape of our churches within the MCSA include: land distribution, settlement and immigration, economics and our political heritage. Our churches are used as community centres, places of worship, a home for the homeless, places of refuge for asylum seekers as well as safe havens for those who want to retreat from the noisy world. Some of these roles happened as a practical consequence of the relationship between the church and society rather than a missional choice.

Secondly, church buildings and spaces are not static. Like any other church in the world, congregations within the MCSA modify and remodel their buildings to address changing social or liturgical requirements, changing understandings of worship and its role in the Christian life, changing technological advancements, changing trends and styles, and the like. Churches get torn down. New ones are built. Interiors are remodelled. Exteriors are altered. Congregations do not always welcome these changes. In some cases it is just a matter of nostalgia and some cases it is a lack of education. It is vital that every congregation uses the process of refurbishment and planning for new church building as a place of dialogue about theology and the usage of church space.

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Thirdly, there seems to be no alignment between our structures, properties, and missional objectives within the MCSA. Put differently, our attitudes towards church space do not necessarily exhibit the spirit of our mission. In some cases, churches are poorly managed and inaccessible to those who need them the most. When you enter the church, the message that we preach and the aesthetic language of the building go in divergent ways. Often the church spaces are trapped in the past and yet we call people towards God's future.

Lastly, the MCSA is not exempt from the broader issues of land redistribution and economic disparities of the past. It is therefore essential that when thinking about church buildings we consider the broad spectrum of our Connexion. Our places of worship range from cathedrals, auditoriums and theatres to house churches, shacks, school classrooms and meeting places under trees. Some of these churches are steeped in our Methodist tradition, while others are hardly recognisable as Methodist churches. In some churches, there are no altars or pulpits and sacraments are served in the most awkward of places. All these issues highlight the need for education on our ecclesiology, theology, and liturgical practice for both clergy and laity alike.

1.3 WAYS OF LOOKING AT A CHURCH SPACE

Space is nothing but the inscription of time in the world, spaces are the realisations, inscriptions in the simultaneity of the external world of a series of times, the rhythms of the city, the rhythms of the urban population...the city will only be rethought and reconstructed on its current ruins when we have properly understood that the city is the deployment of time.... of those who are its inhabitants
(Henri Lefebvre, Writings on Cities 1967,p.10)

Scholars suggest a number of ways for assessing church spaces. I limit this discussion to three helpful approaches:

1.3.1 Church Space as a 'Container' of Power

Christian space is both dynamic and powerful. To understand the dynamism of Christian space, we must understand the function of power— divine, social, and personal—within it. Power, comes in three different categories:

- a) **Divine or supernatural power** (or that attributed to God) – a combination of our images of God and God's self revelation -'the presence and experience of the real or metaphorical presence of God';
- b) **Social power** – the power pertaining to a variety of social factors (could include economic, political and cultural),and hierarchies, particularly clerical ones; and
- c) **Personal power** – the influence of the individuals who utilise that space, their spiritual journey, and their vision for the future. The outworking of individuals' relationship with God, others and their world.

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This categorisation of power provides a basis for evaluating the various elements that constitute church spaces. The location of particular elements and features within a church carry theological, ecclesiastical, and practical meaning.

1.3.2 A historical perspective

According to Giles, a number of churches are a delightful evocation of a harmless pastime nurtured by the timeless temptation to retreat into being a 'heritage cocoon'. In the process of planning to change and refurbish church space, Giles suggests the following questions:

a) **Where do we come from?**

This question relates to our Biblical, historical church origins, and the missional roots of our church.

b) **Who are we?**

This question relates to our present culture, church (people and buildings), our strategy, and the liturgical elements (baptism, proclamation, Christian nurture, mission, and sacraments) that orient our life.

c) **Where are we going?**

This question inquires into the projected future – specifying where you plan to depart from history and which elements of that history you want to keep.

1.3.3 Meaning, Form, and Purpose

Lastly, church space can be evaluated using two basic questions: how is it used, and what sort of reaction is it meant to elicit? Kieckhefer suggests that these questions can be divided into two more specific questions relating to four functional issues – spatial dynamics, centering focus, aesthetic impact and symbolic resonance.

a) **Use of church space – purpose of the church**

- **Spatial dynamics** - How is it shaped, and how does its design relate to the flow, the dynamics of worship?
- **Centering focus** - what is the visual focus, and how does it make clear what is most important in worship?

b) **Reactions the space evokes – immediate and cumulative**

- **Aesthetic impact (form)** – if you walk into a particular church what immediate aesthetic qualities come to the fore and do they condition the experience of the holy?
- **Symbolic resonance (meaning)** - how does sustained exposure to a building and its markers of sacrality lead to deeper and richer understanding?

In the following table, Kieckhefer summarises these questions.

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Basic Patterns of Church Design

	Classic sacramental	Classic Evangelical	Modern Communal
Liturgical use			
Spatial dynamism	Longitudinal space to allow for procession and return (kinetic dynamism)	Auditorium space for proclamation and response (verbal dynamism)	Transitional space for movement from gathering to worship areas
Centering focus	Altar for sacrifice	Pulpit for preaching	Multiple and movable – depending on specific focus for the season or celebration
Response elicited			
Aesthetic impact (<i>immediate</i>)	Dramatic setting for interplay of transcendence and immanence	Dignified setting for edification	Hospitable setting for celebration
Symbolic resonance (<i>cumulative</i>)	High	Low	Moderate
Relationship Factors	Multiple functions, none of which govern the others	Converging functions, governed largely by the centering focus	Converging functions, governed largely by spatial dynamic

1.4 METHODOLOGY FOR EVALUATING CHRISTIAN SPACE

Southern African Methodism has its roots in Protestant evangelical (Armenian) Chalcedonian Christianity. Such a statement is enough to confuse any member of our church. If our Wesleyan heritage is anything to go by, it is evident that our approach towards church space is based on a 'practical' spirituality rather than any particular subscription to a specific tradition. Wesley seems to have drawn from patristic, eastern mysticism and other contemporary sources of knowledge. The outworking of our spirituality as it relates to church spaces suggests an integrative approach to church practice. Using Keickhefer's approach to church space, I reckon that our ecclesiastical temperament fits within the communal model of church. We hold a Trinitarian faith discerned through *Scripture*, sustained by our adherence to *church tradition, classical and contemporary reason, and experience*. Our **spatial dynamics** integrate as our **centering focus** the *sacraments* (Lord's Table) and the *proclamation of the word* (pulpit) as well as our inclination towards spiritual *music* and the arts.

The challenge that often creates unhelpful tensions is what should take central focus: is it the pulpit, the Lord's Table, or the musicians and the choir? In our current practice, our church exists in all three categories:

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- churches built longitudinally for procession purposes with large sacramental altars, tables and baptismal fonts with the pulpit taking the right corner (sacramental focus);
- churches built with a giant pulpit at the centre with communion table as an appendage in the corner - with or without baptismal font (evangelical focus); and
- churches built as a flexible hall or auditorium taking dynamic shapes and aesthetic as necessary.

I suppose every congregation has the right to decide the character of the church space. What is important though is that our spaces should hold in creative tension our missional inclination, the importance of personal and corporate acts of worship, pastoral issues, avenues for practising private acts of piety and public acts of mercy as enshrined in our mission imperatives. I concede that our theological, pastoral, and missional goals should inform how we plan and refurbish our church spaces.

Whilst making these suggestions, I am aware of the diversity and dynamism of church space. Each church (i) is replete with religious and theological meanings, (ii) is often informed by the cultural, economic, and political factors around it, (iii) evolves and changes over time, and (iv) has the power to orient the nature of people's relationship with God, others and the world. In the remaining part of this section, I use our Wesleyan theological methodology as a framework for guiding the planning of church refurbishments and building new church spaces.

1.4.1 Scriptural (Biblical principles of worship)

- a) Does our church space reveal God's self-revelation as witnessed by the canon of Scripture?
- b) Does it extend God's invitation to all creation to worship?
- c) What Biblical principles of worship do we need to consider?
- d) Does the space/environment exhibit a sense of sacredness as both God's house and the congregation's place of worship?

1.4.2 Tradition (theological and liturgical developments)

- a) Do liturgical centres encourage encounter with the mysteries of God (preaching, baptism, holy communion, etc)?
- b) What facilities for practising personal and corporate worship do we need to provide (means of grace)?
- c) What historical and ecclesiastical rituals, artefacts, and symbols do we need to incorporate?
- d) Does the space/environment reveal Christ? Is it evangelical (encouraging a relationship with Christ)?

1.4.3 Reason (contextual appropriateness)

- a) Does the space/environment form Christians in greater understanding, lead to deeper discipleship?

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- b) Does the space have appropriate signals for sending people to mission?
- c) Does it promote a dynamic interaction with the community around us (community outreach and service)?
- d) What cultural, socio-economic, environmental, and political factors affecting our community need to be considered (ethical considerations)?

1.4.4 Experience (pastoral and aesthetic issues)

- a) Have considerations been made for children and people with disabilities?
- b) Does the space encourage inclusive and holistic worship?
- c) Does the space/environment encourage people to gather graciously and with hospitality?
- d) Does the quality, taste, and style of this space exhibit beauty and connection with creation?

The above questions highlight the important liturgical centres of action that constitute our church space – the place where body (people) gathers, the place for sacraments (holy communion and baptism) and the place of proclamation. In addition to these, the congregation needs to consider in consultation with professional people the cost/price, scale/size, and materials. In our technological generation, congregations need to think about the use of mass media equipment as part of shaping church space.

1.5 CONCLUSION

Notable in this discussion is the resistance to being prescriptive about church space and usage. Instead, I have chosen to tease some of the foundational issues concerning church spaces. It is reasonable to conclude that the above discussion highlights the need for every church to carefully consider the theological, pastoral, and aesthetic before it starts refurbishing or building a new church. I also find Giles's three questions helpful in thinking about church spaces: (i) *Where do we come from?* (ii) *Who are we?* and (iii) *Where do we go from here?* I hope the paper provides a practical starting place for thinking about church spaces within the MCSA.

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