

An essay from

St. Paul's' Epistle

An unofficial blog about parish life at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Mt. Lebanon, Pa., in the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh

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Managing Change in a House of Worship

After writing my last post, "Clutter" [<http://www.stpaulsmtl.org/2011/01/clutter.html>], it occurred to me that some might consider my observations petulant. This led me to think more deeply about the nature of my distress at the state of the church. It seems only appropriate that I should share some of those thoughts here.

The Church and the People

The term "house of worship" is a telling one. It not only indicates a building but suggests a relationship of people—a congregation—to that building. Those who regularly attend a church develop a strong and intimate relationship with the physical structure, as they do with the buildings in which they live. Partly, this relationship grows from simple familiarity, just as a frequent moviegoer might feel a special affection for a favorite cinema.

A parishioner's affection for his or her church transcends familiarity, however. The church building becomes a physical manifestation—a stand-in or symbol—of the intangible spiritual world. This is clearly seen in the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages. Those magnificent Gothic structures were more than examples of civic hubris—though they surely were that—they also represented attempts to make God's glory manifest to the people.

A church is a place of refuge, of solace, of renewal. It is a source of stability in our lives, and, as such, change, whether involving liturgy, personnel, or physical surroundings, can be disconcerting. We all know that change is an integral part of life and that it is required for growth, or even survival. But we want to feel that we have something to say about change, particularly when it involves our home or our church.

It is one thing when a church embarks on a major renovation or even builds a new building. It is quite another when changes—even positive changes—occur with no warning and with no obvious consultation with the congregation.

The changes visited upon St. Paul's as a result of the initiation of the 8:45 and Refuge services were not anticipated by parishioners and are unwelcome intrusions into the 10:30 service, for which the extra speakers, music stands, instruments, and other audio equipment are only distractions. Moreover, the clutter in the south transept suggests to the worshiper at 10:30 that the principal Sunday service is not where church leaders are focusing their attention. Yesterday, for example, despite our reputedly large corps of acolytes, we only managed to find two, not the standard seven, to serve. Excellence in worship had long been a hallmark of St. Paul's, but many long-time parishioners would argue that, with the exception of music, the worship experience at our church is much impoverished from that of times past.

A Suggestion

I have long thought that no significant changes to the physical plant of St. Paul's without the approval of a person or committee responsible for the overall appearance and integrity of the church property should be undertaken. Ideally, one might like to see a committee headed by a parishioner who is an architect and whose members might include a representative of the Vestry, a member of the clergy,

and a select group of parishioners. The goals of forming such a committee are twofold: to assure that changes benefit the parish globally, rather than simply filling a local need that could conflict with other needs; and that parishioners feel that their concerns are considered and that they will not encounter unpleasant surprises.

Hundreds of members move through St. Paul's every week, and, collectively, they are aware of many small details of which any one person might be oblivious. Ideally, changes to the building should take advantage of our collective knowledge of how the church functions and where it is deficient.

Recently, renovations, some small, some not so small, were made to the restrooms at St. Paul's. All the changes represented improvements, but I'm not so sure they represented optimal improvements. Consider the men's restroom nearest the choir room. Choir members have long been frustrated by the lack of a place to put their hymnals and folders while using the restroom before the service. The updated restroom now has a vanity that offers some flat surface on which objects can be placed, but an added shelf would have been much appreciated. Of course, no one in the choir knew that changes were going to be made, so they had no opportunity to express their need for a shelf. Why could not a facilities committee have posted a notice outside the restroom soliciting ideas and concerns for a renovated restroom? Not only would this have resulted in a renovation that better filled the needs of the parish, but it would have made the users of the restroom feel better about their church and more cared for.

St. Paul's used to have a Property Commission, which, although it did not really function like the facilities committee I have suggested, at least was a group of people thinking about the physical plant. Certainly a Property Committee could oversee all physical changes to the church. My understanding is that now, however, the junior warden and assistant junior warden function largely on their own and are concerned mostly with fixing things that are broken.

St. Paul's has a history of some renovations being financed privately. This has sometimes led to complaints that the tastes of the donor, not the needs of the church, determine what is actually done. Such objections would be minimized if all changes had to be approved by a facilities committee. Moreover, the committee could build a list of desired changes and their priorities. It could even make the list public and subject to discussion. When someone wants to make a major donation to the church for physical improvements, we could pull out the list and say, "These are our needs. What can you help with?" Similarly, when we are considering a capital campaign, we should have a list of possible projects available without having to do additional analysis. At least we would have a starting point, even though a capital campaign might support more ambitious plans not on our incremental improvement list.

The South Transept, Again

Of course, there are other concerns for the attractiveness of the building that have nothing to do with architectural changes. We pick up trash from the pews in the nave and north transept; why do we not do so in the south transept? Is there no way to keep the south transept neat?

If we were convinced that bands were to be a permanent part of worship at St. Paul's, perhaps we could make architectural changes to accommodate them less obtrusively. Personally, I hope the bands and the less-than-popular services they support will eventually go away.

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<http://www.stpaulsmtl.org/2011/01/managing-change-in-house-of-worship.html>