

FRONT and CENTER

A NEW ORGAN HOUSED IN THE CHANCEL, A RESHAPED INTERIOR — IT'S ALL PART OF AN ENHANCED WORSHIP SPACE IN BOE MEMORIAL CHAPEL, AND JOHN FERGUSON COULDN'T BE MORE PLEASED.

By Amy Gage

THREE EVENTS WILL CONVERGE AT ST. OLAF this fall that will both serve and showcase the institution's identity as a college of the church.

The convergence begins with the release of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, the first comprehensive new hymnal published by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America since 1978. The student congregation at St. Olaf will be among the first congregations to begin using the hymnal — in a redesigned and acoustically improved worship space that now positions a magnificent new organ and every St. Olaf choir up front in the chancel of the church.

"It is a wonderful coincidence that the same year we have a new hymnal, we also have a new organ and a reconfigured worship space that reflects some of the values demonstrated in the new hymnal," says John Ferguson, the Elliot and Klara Stockdal Professor of Organ and Church Music. "The kind of physical changes we're making have been done in cathedrals and churches all over the world."

Given his position as a teacher of organ and church music and as conductor of the St. Olaf Cantorei, Ferguson is excited about how the new organ will enhance his professional work. "We're not interested in building a monument," he says. "We are interested in providing a servant — a resource that can contribute to our worship life and be a tool for the teaching of organ and church music."

He also is anticipating the ways in which the renovated chapel will help St. Olaf express itself more effectively as a college of the church. "Boe Memorial Chapel is the symbolic affirmation of who we say we are," Ferguson explains. "When people walk from the library through Buntrock Commons and then to the chapel, the chapel will now communicate the same care and concern for its structure and usability."

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— JOHN FERGUSON



Q: Anyone walking past the chapel this summer might have been unnerved to see the grounds so torn up. Tell us what's been happening inside.

This project began with our need to address an aging and failing organ. That has precipitated a major renovation of the chapel. Conversations about renovation and improvement of Boe, especially because of its poor acoustics, began before the chapel was dedicated in the early 1950s.

Q: Why has it taken so long?

Any attempts proved insufficient to address a problem that basically comes from the shape of the room. Our acoustical consultant, Robert Mahoney, taught us that because the stained glass is porous as far as sound is concerned, the room has very little wall space in comparison with the huge ceiling. Because the room is also so wide, the sound is not sent back quickly enough to people. That creates a poor acoustical environment for congregational song.

Mahoney, who's a renowned acoustician from Boulder, Colorado, proposed that we reconfigure the inside of the room — put in a reshaped ceiling structure and walls. Mahoney and lead Buntrock Commons architect Norris Strawbridge developed the design concept during construction of the Commons. Steve Edwins '65, principal of SMSQ Architects in Northfield, refined the concept thoroughly for the project. Edwins developed the dramatic color scheme as well.

Q: Acoustically, how has the space been improved?

The acoustical tiles that were placed in the ceiling in an attempt to fix the excessive echo have all been removed. The ceiling and the new walls have all been made harder, so they will reflect the sound more uniformly. They will send the sound back to people in such a way that it will encourage their singing and make the performance of music and the spoken word seem clearer and yet warm.

Q: Doesn't this reconfiguration risk blocking the beautiful, historic windows?

Not at all. As I see it, the exterior promise of the building, a contemporary expression of Norman gothic architecture, is now more honestly reflected inside with a nave that has side aisles where people may walk and look at the windows. A major concern was to preserve the windows, the single most valuable aesthetic dimension of the chapel. So far, folks who have visited the chapel tell us this goal has been realized. Meanwhile, this redesign also has allowed us to insulate the ceiling and address a major concern of worship leadership.

Q: What is that concern?

Where should the choir be? We're singing more global songs, which traditionally are led visually rather than from an organ bench or a piano bench. How can we lead those songs if the song leaders are behind the congregation? The northern European tradition of the choir and organ in the rear gallery is not as old as originally thought. We now know that at Reformation time in Lutheran worship, the choir was up front.

Q: As a conductor, have you felt limited by having the choir behind the congregation?

This is a visually oriented culture, and the invitation that comes from seeing someone happily engaged in song can energize the singing or experience of anyone present. Any time we lead an unaccompanied song, we feel disconnected from the congregation. Because the building is so long and large, choir



BEFORE



AFTER

Colonnades on the sides of the new worship space (right) appear to be carrying the weight of the new walls down to the floor. But they actually are a key part of the chapel's new "acoustical envelope," says Professor of Organ and Church Music John Ferguson. The colonnades reflect sound back more quickly to worshippers and give the windows "various surfaces where the colors of the glass can play. They come alive in a way they never have before," he says.

members feel like spectators. Placing the choir up front is going to change their experience of worship as well.

Q: We lack a large music performance space at St. Olaf. Will this renovation help?

The main reason for redoing the chapel is to address its inadequacies as a place for worship. But if the work results in the acoustical improvement we hope to see, any music made in the space will be so much better.

Q: Let's learn more about the organ.

The organ is a new instrument that incorporates approximately two-thirds of the pipe work from the existing organ. That organ was installed in 1960 and has had an amazing amount of use. It has also sustained regular water damage, and wood doesn't like water. Cracks in the wood had begun to compromise the mechanical efficiency of the instrument. So we decided that it would not be good stewardship to rebuild the organ, especially if it was to be moved.

Q: Did the college consider selling the old organ?

Since we're replacing it because it is mechanically unreliable, we felt it would be inappropriate to sell the organ as a whole piece. Instead we decided to re-utilize the pipe work, retain the central cases in the rear and use the console, which was new 14 years ago, as key components in a gallery organ. That will be installed later next spring.

Q: So that organ will stay in back and a new organ will be installed up front?

When we are done, we will have what some people call a double organ — a large instrument in the front and a smaller instrument in the back. The entire double organ can be played from either location. This will allow us to place ensembles in either end of the church and accompany them. It will also allow the organ to produce sound that envelops and supports congregational signing and that better complements the enormous sound that our orchestras and bands can make.

Q: The soaring pipes and massive structures of some church organs are visually stunning. Will this new instrument have that effect?

If the lights are on the organ when you come in the church,

it will look impressive. But we've tried to design the new organ to complement the gorgeous central window in the front. And the worship leadership elements — pulpit, font and table — all will be far enough in front of the organ during worship that the visual impact of the instrument will recede and become a part of the whole space.

Q: How will it affect your work with students?

Both my colleague Cathy Rodland and I are concerned that we teach our organ students not only how to play the big tunes but also how to be sensitive and skillful leaders of congregational song from the organ. The organ in Studio A is fine for teaching the big tunes. But if we're going to learn about congregational song, we need a congregation to sing with us. We need a good church music laboratory.

So Boe Memorial Chapel and the rich worship life on this campus become very important to what I do. Former students have written to me to say, "We now realize that we learned about church music because we sang in a choir that sang for worship or simply because we attended worship. And now that we are expected to lead worship and music, we have something to fall back upon."

Q: Will this refurbished worship space draw more people to daily chapel?

I hope so. Boe has always felt huge and somewhat cold, and the new space will have a different aesthetic feel. Although we are not losing too much seating capacity, because we are adding seats in the former choir loft, the room will seem more intimate. So smaller gatherings of people will feel better, and they might be more inclined to come back.

Q: It's been decades since the college required chapel attendance. What is the benefit of daily chapel?

There is something to be said for the monastic tradition of daily worship. And that daily worship happens no matter how many people are there. The lesson we learned on 9/11 was that because we had daily worship, we didn't have to schedule a time for this community to gather. The chapel is there whenever you need it, and I think it will be a more spiritually significant space than it was. 🙏

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