

Why a Sanctuary at Chapelgate?

When it comes to whether or not to build a sanctuary, we have to begin by asking the question, ‘Who are we?’ I don’t intend to go into this exhaustively, because I’m driving to a particular point. But suffice it to say that we stand somewhere doctrinally (Reformed). We share a mission (we are committed to living out the gospel in Word and Deed both inside and outside our doors). We are committed to our greater community and region (through church planting, ESL, servanthood, and acts of justice and mercy). We are a worshiping community (we were created to worship and believe that all things in ministry flow from worship).

In answering this question, we have to say that there is a physical element to defining us as well. We are a large congregation with an Academy, that worships and ministers on 63-Acres of property. Somewhere in our history we chose to be a large church, and perhaps more to the point, a regional church with a large church plant. We chose to leave a neighborhood to be at the crossroads of the two most important major roads in Howard County, and the region.

Because of this, we have to go a step further and ask if we would be the better, or the lesser by building a sanctuary. Would it make us more who we are intended to be, or less? My hope is that this paper would argue that a sanctuary would make us more.

Below is a list of considerations for such construction – some of them intangible, that is, things one may assume to not need when they don’t have it, but once acquired, realize their importance. Finances are not included below, but pragmatically, finances and people are those impossible-to-prove metrics that always require faith when endeavoring to build. What I would say is that I have never seen a healthy church **not grow** when it has built a sanctuary. And I have never seen the money dry up as a result. Churches grow when sanctuaries are constructed. It’s terrifying, I know, but to those who expect a church to be a church, sanctuaries do not put them off – they validate their view of those particular churches.

We can’t pretend that such a venture would not be costly. It will be. What does this mean? It means that we will have to wrestle through this and make decisions and consider creative and sound strategies as to what we would want to have in the bank before construction, and how we would raise funds – that kind of thing. If the vision is real, the money will come.

Perhaps a good example is our Counseling Center. We firmly believed that in order to effectively counsel the multitude of people who come through our doors each year that we would need to create a lovely and private space. People were waiting to see our counselors out in the open, and then when they met, the space was cold and impersonal. Now it is both lovely and highly discrete for those who desire confidentiality. Counselors from the region come and use the beautiful conference room in the center – to talk, fellowship and learn. We have added counselors that we never would have dreamed having to serve our region, and churches are asking for guidance and help in their ministries as well.

How did this happen? Vision. We endeavored to build a space we couldn’t afford, and a week after we announced it, a check for \$10,000 was given, specifically for that purpose by someone who had never spent a second in counseling at Chapelgate. But he believed in the need and the vision.

You see, I believe that if God gives us a vision for a sanctuary, then He will provide the resources. It is the way He works.

What will a Sanctuary bring to the life of our church?

Communal Life – ‘I don’t really feel part of this church – I often hear these words from people who attend Chapelgate. Many have not grown up at the church, or they came after the initial construction of the current structure. It would be easy to put the burden on them, saying things like, ‘Well, if they would get involved, they would feel connected.’ To some degree this may be true, but it is a more common statement than we may think, and it is a mistake to completely dismiss our physical plant as a factor.

Though filled with many warm people, our worship takes place in a cold and isolating space. Those up front are removed from those involved in worship. The natural barriers of the gymnasium seating segregate worshipers from those who lead. Our people sit in separate stadium seats, not a common space, such as a pew, or seats with enough in-between-the-aisle space to feel other than squeezed in like sardines. It is unnatural in our gym for people to come forward for any reason, much less the Lord’s Supper. The lack of warmth in the room makes folks feel isolated rather than gathered together in communal life. There is little about our worship space that draws folks towards one another. It is a space you must ‘get used to.’ The sound of chairs snapping when people stand is something one has to be okay with until they learn to not hear it any more. The room isn’t warm. It doesn’t inspire community. It discourages it.

There was a day when it did inspire such things, because it was assumed to be the beginning of something the church was becoming, architecturally. So folks were excited about the first phase of a shared vision, which means that it wasn’t the space that inspired community, but the excitement and newness of it. But then those who initially entered the new space became used to what they were part of constructing, and this institutional structure was fine with them – but not especially for others.

Without a vision for a sanctuary, those who come now are asked to fit into a mission and ministry that they have not been part of helping to forge.

Beauty – Beauty is a value in the scriptures – It is actually a value of the Gospel. It is a theological value. When God commanded the construction of the Temple, it was not merely designed for ‘function,’ but for beauty as well. In the meticulous and detailed beauty of the construction God’s greatness was seen and known and remembered as people came to worship and make their sacrifices.

The Temple was the most magnificent of all the structures in Jerusalem, and the highest. It inspired awe, and it was intended to. God wanted His people to know that the most important and beautiful expression of their communal life together was what they did with one another in worship. And He wanted them to worship in a space that reminded them that in the gospel there is always something more beautiful that is yet to be. The Temple was redemptive in its elements.

Beauty is part of ‘the way it was meant to be.’ Jesus demonstrated this when He turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana (John 4). It wasn’t merely to provide the best wine, but to inaugurate the era in which He has begun to make all things new, and that this newness involves the most beautiful of God’s intentions for heaven and earth.

But what do people see and feel and experience when they enter into the gym? In answering this question, maybe it would be good to begin in the lobby. Until we redesigned the lobby, people saw cinder block and function. The lobby was an area you had to pass through in order to get

somewhere else. In some way it still is, but now it is beautiful, and people actually gather there and stay to fellowship and enjoy one another, as though it is as important as where they were initially headed. Beauty does this.

The same could be said for the office. When folks used to see the office they were presented with a maze of file cabinets, stacks of paper, cluttered cubicles, and a circuitous route to the actual offices – again, function. It was ugly. And it left the impression that we didn't care. But now it is beautiful and folks feel invited and welcome when they come to the offices, not to mention the many who meet and gather there.

No one complains where we have spent money on architectural beauty. It brings the opposite response. And that beauty does something good to the 'feel' of the church community. Just think of what a sanctuary would do!

We not only want people to be impressed by the beauty of the gospel in what we say and sing, but also in where we sit, and in what we see, both inside and out. We want the sheer beauty of the space to cause folks to take a breath in awe, and then to be even more awestruck by the beauty of the worship.

Along the lines of beauty is another factor, and that is 'setting,' though I keep it in the same category. Think of the setting we will offer to accommodate what we do in worship. The beauty of the music, the joy of baptisms, the loveliness of the Lord's Supper, Maundy Thursday, Easter, Christmas – Just think of what this setting would bring to our weekly experience!

Even more compelling (to me) is that God uses the beauty He has woven into nature, in particular, to communicate whom He is to an unbelieving world (Psalm 19:1, Romans 1), as well as to those who know Him. What is important here is, as John Frame puts it in his, Salvation Belongs to the Lord, is that while God reveals Himself in nature, it isn't enough to save, "it doesn't tell us how to be saved." He writes, "We learn the gospel from other types of revelation, specifically from preaching..." Now here is my point: What better setting than for God's creation and the preaching of the Word, to dovetail as God's people worship?

Completion – If we were worshipping in a warehouse downtown, or in a shopping center in Columbia or Ellicott City, we would understand and accept the nature of our space, and this wouldn't be an issue. We would make the best of space we were leasing. We would make classrooms, offices, and then back to classrooms again – that kind of interchanging of spaces for the sake of finding places for people. And it would be exciting as long as we could squeeze into such a space. But we aren't. We are situated on 63 acres, in the suburbs, and we meet in the least beautiful of the phases of completion for this property.

To someone who doesn't automatically know who we are, or whom isn't connected to this church, it appears to be an institution, such as the Academy, with a church attached, only, except for the sign, folks can't tell that there is a church.

The community around us is developing, but we are not. Sadly, in my opinion, it should be the other way around (the paragraph below could be applied to this and the next category).

I had to think about this a lot, because it could be argued that this will always be the case – that we could always say that there are more buildings to build – and I understand this, and there may be, because our needs may grow, as they have with the Academy, in the past. But here is my question in regards to the broader community we minister in: What is it about our current church

facility that **leads**? Because the sanctuary ‘piece’ isn’t there, we don’t lead and we don’t inspire. No one says, ‘Let’s build a development that measures up to the standard of what Chapelgate has constructed.’

There is more to this than meets the eye. Having led a congregation that built a sanctuary that had to move due to growth, I can tell you that there is a trust involved – with those who are older. When a church sells and moves away from its sanctuary a sacrifice occurs. To move is to invest in the future with the belief that one day that congregation will once again have a sanctuary. Older people not only see future weddings and worship services, but they also see their loved ones’ memorial services as well. They firmly believe in the church’s mandate to minister ‘from the cradle to the grave,’ and they take this seriously. Let me put it this way: Had our older people been told that moving from St. Johns Lane would mean that they would never again have a sanctuary where they were moving to, in all likelihood the move would never have occurred. The vote was taken in the context of a trust – that one day, though the move was necessary, there would once again be a sanctuary.

Mission – But what about our mission to plant churches, enter into the City of Baltimore, to love the weak and care about a broken world globally? Doesn’t this detract from our mission – spending this money where funds could be sent around the world, to pockets of Baltimore, to City ministries, etc.?

I would argue that we would minister more intentionally to our surrounding world – our Community – our City – our Region – our World – by adding such an element to our property.

Why? Because at the end of the day, Mission is all about a vision that you see, and then see realized. It is a building in some way – a task you take seriously, pray over, scope out, design, engineer, step out in faith, commit to, and then build and build on. A building is the physical version of the missional ‘thing’ we do in a church.

A beautiful sanctuary lends greater weight to a beautiful vision. We take ourselves past the bottom line and the natural limitations we think that our community has – for this plant – and for ministry outside of ourselves.

Now some would say, ‘But think of the ministry we could do with that money,’ and I understand this. But ministry never grows because you don’t do something. It grows because you do. Horizons expand. Vision enlarges. The boundaries of the Possible spread in every direction.

The Broader Community – At some point we have to ask what the world around us sees when they drive past our church, or around the parking lot. Do they see an inviting church community or a foreboding structure? Is there anything about it that leads people (friends and strangers) to think that we have a high view of God?

And what about our facility and setting says to our broader community that we will be here through the ages? When you drive past **St. John’s Episcopal Church** you see something that has been there through generations. It is an abiding presence in the community, and it has been through the years, and it appears to belong to the setting, the community and the ages. Is this what we desire of Chapelgate? If not, then we really should reconsider my original idea of selling the property and redistributing the church throughout the region – in smaller ‘pieces.’ Then we can have folks do ministry on a less regional and more local level. Those churches could determine if they are ‘warehouse’ churches, ‘gym’ churches or ‘steeple’ churches. I don’t mean to be sarcastic here – We have to determine what we are and want to be, and become that.

In the 'Broader Community,' we also have to consider those on the fringe – those who have a more symbolic view of God and faith. To the unchurched, or those who are outwardly religious, but not spiritually minded, we offer no front door, because they are looking for what appears to them to be a church – beyond what is actually true of the Faith, and beyond what we all agree is most vital.

We're pretty good at retaining those who visit, but very few visit just because there is a church here – because it doesn't appear to be one – and I believe this is part of why Redeemer Church in NYC felt the need to build a sanctuary for many more millions than we ever would need to spend.

One Person – I offer one last argument for constructing a new sanctuary. The best way to set this up is to say that the churches I've had the privilege of serving in have beautiful sanctuaries. As a pastor I had the added joy of being able, throughout the week, to go into those places of worship – alone. Others did as well, by the way, but I did with regularity. In those beautiful spaces there was a sense of transcendence. It wasn't a gym the rest of the week, or a 'hall.' It was a place of and specifically for worship. It was a space that, when one entered, they were transported.

The temptation is to claim that a sanctuary is the biggest waste of space for six of the seven days in a week, and that it is rarely full of people other than on Sunday, and therefore a huge waste of money, but I would argue the opposite – that a sanctuary, if it is truly a legitimate place of worship, will truly be one if just one person were able to walk in, sit in a pew, or seat, and sense the beauty and majesty – and mystery – of God, and in fact, have an encounter with the Lord.

I want a space that is both beautiful and inspiring to the extent that our folks will come throughout the week, just to sit and talk with God, to reflect on Him, to quietly weep, to pray – you name it – it should be as personal as it is beautiful.

Hey, there have been moments when the inside of my car, common spaces, or outside watering working on the lawn, have all truly been transformed into sanctuaries of sorts – in the moment. But none of them are where I intentionally go – to worship, whether with the entire church community – or alone.

Conclusion: What if it were Already Constructed? – Obviously we would not be having this conversation, but something is worth considering here. If we already had a sanctuary, we would be enjoying it each Sunday as though it had always been there. Women and men would have scheduled their weddings. Every week's worship would occur in this space. Our Youth would have their special sections (they always do). Young families would utilize the Cry Room. Pastors would have their behind-the-scenes spaces, and the community would have a landmark in the region that would seem to be as important as each development and neighborhood.

In other words, every sanctuary was built somewhere in the history of a church. Every facility we enjoy was built on the backs, sacrifices and generousities of someone else. That too is part of the story of a church. It isn't a bad thing, but a good one. It isn't just a facility. It isn't merely the place where we engage in a weekly Christian activity. It is a presence that is intended to endure through generations.

And then one day it will be part of what seems to be the historical landscape of the region. And all those years down the road, the people who worship in it won't have any idea who did the sacrificing or the giving or the planning or the voting – but they will be glad someone did.

A Few Scriptures with Added Comments

2 Samuel 24:24 – *“But the king said to Araunah, ‘No, but I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing.’ So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver.”*

This passage comes towards the end of David’s reign. It is his response to a subject who, out of respect for his King, offers the property to him at no cost. But David wanted the land, on which the Temple would one day be situated, to bear the dignity of the King of Kings, and so it would need to come at great price.

Haggai 1:8 – *“Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the LORD.”*

Here, God has pronounced judgment on His people for allowing the Temple to be a ruin while their homes are plush and well cared-for. He also exposes their wastefulness and reveals that this has manifested itself in a low regard for His ‘house’ and a poor sense of priorities.

John 2:9-11 – *“When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.’ This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.”*

Jesus does not merely change water to wine, but He also makes this wine the finest wine. It is His inaugural act to signal that the Kingdom of God had come in Him, and that it was not a ‘bargain-basement’ Kingdom, but one in which God brings beauty, taste and joy. It also is one that man could not produce.

Genesis 1-2 – The Tabernacle & Temple – John 1 – 2 Corinthians 5:17 – Revelation 21

These passages form a flow of Creation. The heavens and earth are created with lush beauty. The Tabernacle and Temple reflect this beauty in their furnishings, their finishes and their images. The New Creation (John 1, 2 Corinthians 5) is the reason. What God does in us is beautiful with no holds barred. The final vision we see in the scriptures is of a restored beauty – the renewal of all things, with the imagery of the new heavens and the new earth – Once again, nothing but magnificently beautiful imagery.