A Collaborative Effort

Every once in a while I am reminded that, though some of the most significant artwork ever created was made in service of the Church, most congregations today are not well acquainted with the process of working with artists. Churches that do have art integrated into their buildings tend to place it there when they construct the buildings, but not on an ongoing basis. That leaves everyone at a bit of a loss when a project does develop.

Much of our knowledge about artists from the Renaissance comes from documents that still exist about how artists and the Church worked together. These contracts were very specific about how long the project should take, what materials were to be used, what saints or scenes were to be depicted, and how the payment schedule would work. While these legal documents give us great insight into how artists went about their business, they also give us a model for how churches worked with artists. Often the artists employed were not necessarily worshippers within the parish that offered the commission. This made things more like a business transaction—a trade of money for services rendered.

I have recently been in negotiations with my home church concerning a mural project. I have kept in the shadows at this church mainly because I only viewed it as a stopping point before I moved on to a new teaching position. I never realized I would be here for two years. Because of this, many parishioners do not know much about me, specifically that I am a professional artist. I had helped with the membership directory last year and some people thought I possibly might be able to complete the mural that had been a topic of discussion at a church board meeting. I was asked to consider it and the process began.

I soon realized that there was no real concept for the mural. I came up with an initial sketch based on the proposed location. The pastor and the main board member working on the project came back with the list of changes that a variety of people had recommended. They were all valid, but there were still no real parameters or specifics for the project. I worked on a new sketch and then it was decided that I needed to meet with the board to discuss everything. This resulted in prolonging the process further. I am not picking on my own church. In fact, I realize that a large percentage of churches in North America would go about this process in the same way.

Because of the subjectivity that most people ascribe to art in our society people easily critique what they do or do not like. The bigger challenge in any artistic collaboration is providing the artist with the key elements that need to be incorporated into the design. The next difficult step is allowing the artist to do the creative work to put life to those ideas. As with any collaborative effort there has to be give and take.

I believe this project can be something that will please everyone. I'm not put off by the starting and stopping of the process. What it does recall for me is how churches tend to work with artists (whether they are part of their congregation or not). For any other project, such as a kitchen remodel or an addition to a current facility, church members come to a contractor with very specific ideas and needs and then let the contractor move forward when a budget is approved. With artists, vague ideas are presented and then everyone gets to voice an opinion. It can be kind of chaotic and that may be one reason artists shy away from such commissions.

My reminder to all churches considering art projects to be led and developed by an individual is, "Do your homework first." What do you really want? How should this work make a statement about the core beliefs of the congregation? What type of scene or symbols should the artist consider? Which format is most acceptable to the congregation? Representational or abstract art? By answering just a few key questions like these you will have already established a framework for the artist and the frustrations that could arise will be dramatically minimized.