



How to Make an Entrance

Too often when people think of liturgical design or aesthetics in worship the concepts that come to mind are of grand and extravagant displays. These are the dynamic and beautiful elements that help usher worshippers into a transformed experience—an experience that takes them out of the ordinary, day-to-day circumstances of life. Those type of projects are certainly important and necessary, but I learned a valuable lesson about what any body of Believers can do to make a start at reconsidering how they approach worship.

In the summer of 2007, while I was the Director for CIVA, we held weeklong art and design workshops on the campus of Gordon College in Massachusetts. One of the workshops was on the elements of design in worship. The participants assembled came from a wide range of church backgrounds and levels of experience. Some had prior ideas about specific projects they wanted to design while in the workshop. Others were new to the process and open to alternative directions and approaches. Once gathered, the group began to realize that a new set of eyes looking at their worship environment was helpful in pointing out design problems that they had come to live with—things that they now overlooked and disregarded. The following are two different approaches to a similar problem.

One participating congregation represented a church plant that was renting space from a local movie theater. Obviously, their challenges were far different from congregations that owned a building. Any visual elements they used had to go up and down quickly and incorporate a display method that would not harm or change the walls and fixtures of the rented space. Eventually, they realized that the biggest hindrance to getting people in the door was literally *getting them in the door*. The doors appointed for entering the theater while the church was meeting were actually exit doors and were clearly marked “**Exit - Do Not Enter.**” Talk about an obstacle to overcome!

Instead of starting with changes to the environment of the actual theater room where the congregation met, it was decided that making the entrance obvious and inviting was the primary task. A series of banners that would cover the Do Not Enter signs on the doors, attached with suction cups that would leave no marks on the glass when removed, was proposed and designed. The colors complimented the interior color scheme of the theater lobby while still accomplishing their purpose of getting people in the doors.

One of the professors at Gordon College and one of the Chapel staff members had a similar challenge in their project. They did work on some specific designs for the chapel building, but the workshop instructor—with a set of fresh eyes—noted a similar problem to the congregation meeting at the movie theater. Gordon College has a sidewalk that essentially runs from one end of campus to the other. Just as it approaches the entrance to the chapel the sidewalk divides. That fork produces two paths that again converge at the porch entrance to the chapel building. Where they divide, a small quadrangle of grass flows into a hedge of shrubs.

The subliminal message one received after walking along a continuous path from the opposite end of campus was of hesitancy. The visual sight line was blocked with the shrubs in front of the chapel. Even worse, people headed to the chapel on that same path were actually forced to divide and separate before they entered. Where people should be coming together as one body in an act of unified worship there was a subconscious message of division. The plan devised an alteration of the current design. It was decided to at least begin by pulling up the shrubs so that there seemed to be a direct route to the central doors of the chapel façade.

In both cases, these longtime design elements had been accepted and were unquestioned by the established body of worshippers. However, the psychological effects the elements produced in people coming to these settings for the first time could have been avoided. Sometimes we have to step outside of the established way we enter our places of worship and begin to see things with a fresh set of eyes. If we want to seem inviting to others then the front door is often a good place to begin.