

REREDOS and LITURGICAL FURNISHINGS at ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH
By Pastor Richard Little

The reredos and all chancel furnishings were designed and created by Ernst Schwidder, an architect and liturgical consultant living in Steilacoom, Washington. When we built the sanctuary, he came to discuss with us the evolution of the altar, pulpit, and baptismal font over the centuries of Christendom. He then talked with groups of people here at Advent to get a sense of who we are as a congregation and what our name “Advent” meant to us.

In the conversations that ensued, he encouraged us to place at the center of our worship space a “big” table indicating to all who come into the facility that something significant was to happen there, namely meal, or Holy Communion. He also encouraged us to design the chancel area in such a way that those communing would gather in a circle around that table, symbolizing that this Holy Communion has both a vertical (communion with God) and a horizontal (communion with each other) dimension.

We invited him to submit to us his designs for the liturgical (chancel) furnishings as well as to work with our local architect to design the layout of our new the worship space. Desiring to retain the intimacy that we had had in our smaller worship facility, he sought to use the semi-circle style rather than the traditional rows. This way even the “back pews” are not that far from the center of our worship.

What we have is the result of his suggestions and our conversations. The table (altar) is “front and center,” and it is massive. The pulpit is off to the right but still a part of the chancel area. Therefore WORD and SACRAMENT are shown to be central to this congregation’s worship. In contrast, the baptismal font is located near the main entrance door to remind all of us that we enter the Church (the Christian community) through our Baptism in Christ Jesus. It is also positioned there so that worshippers can, upon entering the sanctuary, dip their finger in the water of the font and trace the cross on their forehead as a way to remember they are baptized! It was designed with wheels so it can be moved to the front of the worship space for baptisms and/or for those times we want to focus on the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.

The large cross on the wall (reredos) behind the altar was designed and built specifically for this congregation. It is a “one of a kind” and incorporates both the name of this worshipping community (Advent) and the mission of this congregation (servanthood and outreach). Advent is the first season in the church year, the four weeks prior to Christmas. The theme for this season is “watching, waiting, anticipation.” Advent season has a two prong focus – preparing for the Second Coming of Christ (at a time that we do not know!) and preparing for the celebration of the first coming of Christ at Christmas. It is the first theme - the Second Coming of Jesus – that Mr. Schwidder focuses on in the furnishings. The quote on the altar is this:

*Jesus Christ Ruler of the Kings of the Earth
Loves us and has washed away our sins
with his blood and made us priests
to serve + It is He who is coming on the clouds.*

It is a paraphrase of Revelation 1:5-7. The words on the pulpit are:

I am the A and O

(the first – alpha - and last- omega - letters of the Greek alphabet)

Who was, who is, and who is to come and on the pulpit from Revelation 1:8.

The body of Jesus on the cross is not a crucifix – the dying body - but a “risen” Christ. Although we can see the stigmata (marks showing where the nails were driven and the sword was pierced in his side), this is a risen Christ – clearly post-Easter - who lives and dwells among his people. His hands indicate a servant posture as he returns to serve all the world which is reflected in the circle behind the cross. At the top of the circle are clouds, reflecting the words on the altar, that Jesus “is coming on the clouds” and proclaiming that Jesus is the bridge between heaven and earth.

Above the cross in the arch are 8 stars. The center, and largest, star is the “morning star” found in Revelation 2:28 (also II Peter 1:19). The “morning star” is the Venus star, heralding the dawn, the first light of the morning, again representing the resurrection of Jesus.

The other seven stars represent the Christian churches in Asia Minor to which John was directed to write letters in Revelation 2 and 3. These letters give us a glimpse into the dynamics within the earliest Christian congregations as John is instructed to what God likes and what God doesn’t like about these congregations. Two thousand years later, congregations today can often see in these letters aspects (both good and bad) of our life together. These 7 stars remind us to ponder and reflect often on what God would have John write to Advent Lutheran Church in Charlotte, NC.

The designer and creator of these liturgical furnishings has since died, so that these are not only unique to Advent, but there is no way they can be replaced. Although Advent is a relatively young congregation and these pieces are relatively new (crafted in 1990), they have become for us a powerful proclamation of who Advent Church is – a congregation who is waiting expectantly for the return of our Lord and who at the same time is involved in service and love to this university community in which God has placed us. Every week in worship we are reminded of our mission to LOVE GOD – SERVE OTHERS until that time when Jesus will return on the clouds!