

Beautifying the Church: Loving our Nicaraguan brothers and sisters



The chapel of the Mission Centre in Chinendega, seen during a recent class.

by Harold Ristau

We praise God for the generous donations by Canadian Lutherans in building churches for congregations in Nicaragua. It is a tremendous blessing that our brothers and sisters can worship with roofs over their heads. But while much attention has been paid to erecting church buildings, often little consideration has been devoted to improvements that can be made to the interiors of these churches.

The Chapel of Lutheran Church–Canada’s Mission Centre in Chinendega functions as a sort of prototype for the other Nicaraguan congregations: because it is relatively empty of churchly furniture, banners, images, and the like, other churches now seem to believe that they should remain relatively empty as well. As new Lutherans, without exposure to global Lutheranism, many are

under the impression that Lutheran churches everywhere look like theirs. Newcomers hear about the saving and consoling good news of Jesus Christ from Nicaragua’s Lutherans, but when they enter their churches, there is virtually nothing to reinforce that unique and wonderful message.

We hope to raise funds to make the interior of the Mission Centre beautiful—something to take pride in (“boasting in the Lord,” as 1 Corinthians 10:17 says). The timing is significant, especially in light of the 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Church. The way which we decorate the interiors of our churches matter because it is expressive of our confessional identity. Historically the differences between Roman Catholic interiors and Lutheran ones were that Christ and Him Crucified were made central in Lutheran churches, as opposed to lost amongst numerous images of other saints. But apart

from that difference, the interiors looked virtually the same—a reminder that Lutheranism was not a sixteenth century “invention,” but a continuation of the practices and doctrines confessed and believed by the early Church and the Apostles—teachings which have remained present throughout the history of the Church, despite the false teachings associated with Rome.

It is perhaps not affordable for most Lutherans today to build our churches with the same scope and grandeur of our Reformer counterparts. But it is one thing to be unable to beautify the interior and another to choose not to. Why did Lutherans care about a beautiful interior? The short answer is that we learn through seeing, not only through hearing. This is especially true in less literate cultures and more visual ones.

If we could worship with our eyes closed, and just hear the Word as it

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is expressed through the liturgy and worship, we wouldn't need a beautiful interior. But if you are anything like me, although I try to close my eyes during worship and just listen to the Word since "faith comes from hearing" (Romans 10:17), I still tend to open them a lot—and a beautiful interior adorned with pictures of Jesus and the story of Scripture is better at directing me back to the Word than looking at a white washed wall. Luther loved art, and he asks why we would not encourage placing a picture of Jesus crucified before our eyes, since we already imagine Him in our minds when we close our eyes.

Unfortunately, many Nicaraguan Lutherans have an aversion to anything that looks "catholic." As a result, they don't have a lot of liturgical furniture, crosses, crucifixes, or paintings on the insides of their churches. Their freedom as Christians to worship visually and colourfully is hindered by this prejudice. Some do not even have baptismal fonts, leaving an impression that the sacraments are not essential to our communal and individual life of faith. Imagine saying that you loved your spouse but didn't want to wear your wedding ring! He or she would probably raise an eyebrow. The things that we put before our eyes remind us of that which is in our hearts.

A beautiful church is only an expression of vanity if the intent of making it beautiful was a vain one. Consider the artistry depicted in the Old Testament: the ornate decorativeness of the Ark of the Covenant, the woven curtain, and liturgical furniture of the interior of the Old Testament temple were all intended to teach the Israelites about who they worshiped, and the kind of God that He was: invisible, yet intimately present; a holy judge yet a loving father; a majestic king yet mercifully "on their side" (Romans 8:31).

In the Lutheran church, beautiful interiors were motivated by those same catechetical concerns, so that

God's love for us would be reinforced not only audibly but also visually, as well as driven by the notion that "we ought to do well all that we do," which is what items dedicated "to the glory of God" suggest.

Like Judas, who had a hard time understanding how spending money on perfume for Jesus' feet could be as important as giving money to the poor, we sometimes have a hard time justifying spending money on something that appears non-essential to the mission. But Jesus says that there is money for both.

A beautiful worship space is intended to express His love for you: a beautiful space for beautiful children.

In our affluent country of Canada, we spend money on ourselves fairly liberally. On our wedding anniversary, we rarely ask the question whether or not we will either go out for dinner or go out for a movie. When a new child is added to the family, no parent ever says, "Because we've got to purchase some new items, the other kids don't get birthday presents this year." When a couple gets married, there is never a dilemma in choosing either having a wedding dress or having some flowers. Normally we find a way to do both, because the whole package is important to us.

Sadly when it comes to the Church, we aren't always so generous or sensitive, and it is always to our

own detriment and not the Lord's. For it's not that the Lord needs to be reminded about how beautiful He is; He knows that already. But we need to be reminded of how beautiful He is—and how beautiful we, His precious baptized children, are in His sight.

A beautiful worship space, which the Bible and the Church have always advocated for, is intended to express His love for you: a beautiful space for beautiful children. The beautiful Gospel that made you His children, is reinforced visually in the Lord's house, where the beautiful Gospel keeps you his children. Every Sunday He throws a wedding party for you, and He likes to do all things well (yes He knows how to throw a good party). He "pulls out all the stops" so to speak, and has gifted us all with lots of resources to do so.

Help us do the same for our brothers and sisters in Nicaragua. For those who are interested, please consider making a donation to LCC Missions, designating the funds to "Beautification of the Mission Centre." May God bless you in your giving.

Rev. Dr. Harold Ristau is incoming Assistant Professor of Theology at Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary (St. Catharines) and a member of Lutheran Church—Canada's Committee for Missions and Social Ministry.

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Lutheran Church—
Canada
3074 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, MB
R3K 0Y2