

DESIGNING A WORSHIP SPACE FOR INTIMATE PREACHING AND WORSHIP

By Vance Breshears and Jeff Miller

INTIMACY

Intimacy – very close association, contact or familiarity; informal warmth.

It is a state that many pastors today are looking to attain within the context of worship and preaching. As we aspire to greater intimacy in our personal relationships with God, how can we increase intimacy and connectedness during the corporate worship service experience? With a great many hours spent every week in planning and preparing for the execution of a worship service, it quickly becomes apparent that most church staffs are faced with impossible challenges in what they can do, simply due to the limitations of the facilities in which they worship.

In today's society, many people are looking for a deeper connection not only with the Creator, but also

with other like-minded believers. For some, the door to this connection often originates within the context of a worship service. If a greater connection is the goal, how can we design our facilities so that they improve our ability to achieve this connectedness or sense of intimacy? Conversely, what mistakes are we making in the design of facilities that will actually detract from our ability to achieve a feeling of intimacy during preaching and worship?

In designing a room for intimacy, we begin the process by looking at how the room will be used as well as the relationships that will exist within the room. By taking such an approach we are using the philosophy that form follows function. This seemingly simple statement means that we are going to figure out the functional requirements of the room first, look at how it all goes

together, and then aesthetically 'dress' the resulting form when it appears. This is what we mean by designing a room 'from the inside out.'

To take it a step further, intimacy for a worship space would include a sense of connectedness where the participant connects with not only the leaders of the function, but other observers/participants in the room as well. As if there is a common focus or purpose that is shared by everyone in the room.

Perception of Intimacy Through the Senses

Intimacy can manifest itself in how we perceive our surroundings – our perception of our environment through the senses of sight, hearing and touch. For example, easily seeing the pastor, musicians and other congregation members; hearing and understanding music lyrics and preaching; being physically and emotionally comfortable in the environment; all these seemingly obvious issues are often overlooked in the facility design process. Setting a person at-ease in a room can be a function of the finishes, color temperature of the lights or room acoustical characteristics. The visual perception of closeness to the pastor or to other congregants is also a factor. When you sit in a seat in the room, do you easily see what is taking place on the platform, or do you need to look around the person in front of you? Can you see other congregation member's faces, or do you just see the backs and sides of people's heads?

Perception of Intimacy Through Participation

Our perception of intimacy can also be influenced by how we interact with our environment or how we participate in what takes place around us. For example, the presentation of the musical program and the ability of the room acoustical environment to encourage participation will often contribute or detract from our perception of intimacy. Does the acoustical environment allow people to hear themselves and each other creating a sense of ensemble during congregational singing? When it comes time to move about the room, is there a sense of physical intimacy where there is a connection with others in the congregation as well as the platform?

Reduction of Intimacy Through Distractions

While looking at the factors that contribute to a sense of intimacy, we should also look at the factors that are a distraction. Are there seats that face toward a wall and not the preaching location? Do you have to look around people in front of you in order to see? Is there a problem with the lighting

quality – uncontrolled ambient light or a mismatch in lighting color temperature? Does the lighting washout projected video images? Is there excessive background noise in the room, either mechanical noise from air conditioning systems or intrusive noise from classrooms or restrooms adjacent to the worship area? Is there intrusive noise from outside sources? Is the room too hot or too cold? Is there air blowing on you from the air conditioning system? Is it difficult to get in and out of the space? And does the room feel empty when not filled to capacity?

Design Criteria for the Facility

In order to prioritize intimacy in the design, the factors that contribute to intimacy should influence the major design criteria for the facility. These factors should be outlined before design begins, and be constantly reevaluated throughout the design process.

Design criteria should be focused on the goals or objectives of the ministry. What functions are important in achieving the goals that the church leadership has outlined whether they are

drama, worship, concerts, or preaching? The room must provide for all the functions that will take place in the facility, both now and in the future.

What is the ideological focal point of the church? Who makes up the congregation and how do we communicate to and participate with them? Functionality must drive the design in such a way that the ministry goals can be accomplished – then the aesthetics should be accommodated. Not only should all these functions be accommodated in the facility, the manner in which they are accommodated will determine if they contribute to the feeling of intimacy.

Today, many pastors would like the congregation to feel like you're in their living room for a bible study. In this setting, effective two-way communication can take place. Likewise, a worship facility should provide for two-way communication which will enhance the worship experience. With every decision in the design process, the question should be asked – will this enhance or detract from the worship experience?

Design Criteria for Intimacy

In addition to looking at the functions that will take place in the worship space, we need to look at the various relationships that should be evaluated. First there is the congregation's relationship with the focal point of the room, which in most churches is the preaching location. Then there is the pastor's or worship leader's relationship with the congregation. We also have the relationship of members of the congregation with each other. And finally, in today's world where technology plays a significant role in presentation methods, we have the relationship of the congregation to production elements such as control locations, video screens, speakers and cameras.

With the congregation's relationship to the preaching location, there must be visual intimacy through good sightlines. All seats must easily have eye contact – if not directly, then through the use of image magnification (projection of the action on the platform onto video screens). Through the use of image magnification, the perceived distance to the platform can be reduced. But regardless of whether or not image magnification is used, sightlines from all

seats to the preaching location must be unobstructed. Acoustical intimacy through adequate sound reinforcement for both music and speech must be achieved. Also, a sense of physical intimacy, where people have a physical access route to the platform, should be accommodated. Some worship spaces are placing the preaching location at the lowest point in the room with the congregation arranged in a stadium or amphitheater configuration, rather than the platform being high above (and perceptually superior to) the congregation.

With the pastor or worship team's relationship to the congregation, there should be good visual connection the other direction. From the platform, good sightlines into the congregation will help connect the leadership to the people. Seeing the congregation is important and cannot be achieved if platform lighting is too bright, if the room is too dark, or if the sightlines don't work. An environment where the worship team can hear participation from the congregation will help to achieve a sense of acoustical intimacy. Access from the platform into the seating area will provide for a sense of physical intimacy.

The relationship of members of the congregation to one another is interesting and one that is often overlooked. Seeing other worshipers' facial expressions can provide a remarkable sense of intimacy during worship. Conversely, seeing only the backs of the heads in the row in front of you can create a sense of isolation for worshipers. An environment where the congregation can hear themselves and each other sing is necessary for acoustical intimacy. Physical access throughout the seating areas will help to connect worshipers to one another.

Finally, the congregational relationship to production elements is critical. Worshipers should easily see screens, but shouldn't see cameras. The sound control position should be in a location where the mix engineer can adequately hear and make good mix decisions, but should not be a visual distraction. Access and circulation throughout the space should provide for meeting the production requirements without detracting from the intimacy of the congregation's environment.

Specific Design Issues

Seating Layout and Sightlines

A large part of the physical intimacy of a space is directly related to the layout of the seats and their relationship to the preaching location and each other. A preaching location that is elevated above the main seating area tends to cause separation between the preacher and the congregation, whereas a preaching location that is at a lower point in the room removes the psychological barrier.

Seats should be oriented so that a seated person is looking at the preaching location (room focal point). In addition, seats should not wrap so far around the preaching location that some people are looking at the side/back of the preacher. Actual physical distance from the preaching location is not as important as the perceived distance. A seat which is 10' from the pastor, yet behind him, is perceptually much less intimate than a seat which is 120' from him yet looking him in the eye. All seats must have unobstructed sightlines to the preaching location, as well as to video screens, and any other visual

area or item that is important to the program of the church.

Great advantage can be had from introducing vertical offsets to the seating layout. This means that sections of seating are placed in the room at differing heights. This helps to alleviate the 'sea of heads' syndrome caused by large flat/sloped floor layouts as well as providing acoustical benefits (more later). Also, by introducing vertical offsets in the room, there is the ability to make the room seem smaller and more intimate when not completely full. Seating sections can be easily roped-off and architectural lighting can be zoned to darken seating sections not in use.

In designing the seating layout the issue of platform access must be addressed. If an altar call is given, for example, a clear path should be available for someone in any seat to make his or her way to the front of the platform. The clearer and more direct this path, the more intimate the perceived connection to the platform, and the shorter the perceived distance to the platform.

Acoustical Qualities

The basic acoustical characteristics of a room are determined at the point that a

room shape and dimensions are put on a piece of paper. The room size, room shape, and dimensional relationships need to be determined based not only on the seating requirements, but also on the need for visual and acoustical intimacy. The acoustical requirements of the room, and therefore the size and shape, are determined by what will programmatically take place within the space.

The balance of early acoustical energy (energy that is 'near' in time) to late acoustical energy needs to be planned in order to provide good support for congregational singing, while maintaining characteristics required to have intelligible reinforced sound. This is an area where vertical seating offsets are beneficial since short wall surfaces can be planned to reduce the acoustical 'width' of congregational seating areas and provide a higher level of early acoustical energy for congregational singing. One side benefit to this process is that wall shaping that is beneficial for acoustics tends to also be architecturally and visually interesting. Also, careful and innovative design can resolve the otherwise apparently incompatible requirement

for a 'dry' acoustic environment that is desired for preaching and reinforced sound, and the requirement for a 'live' acoustic environment that is beneficial for congregational worship.

The last item to be considered in the acoustical planning process is the interior finishes and materials to be used on walls, floors, ceilings, etc. Architectural finishes along with the size and shape define the room acoustical characteristics.

Sound

For the sound reinforcement system to be a partner in creating an intimate environment, it needs to provide a consistently good sound reinforcement experience to all seats. One key is that speaker systems be designed to provide consistent tonal response throughout the listening area. There must be a minimum number of direct sound arrivals at any seat, and irregularities in the coverage must be avoided. Any problems can dramatically reduce both the clarity and intelligibility of reinforced sound. In addition, the highly produced nature of most music programs today calls for sound systems to provide stereo imaging that can help to 'envelope' the

listener in the auditory experience.

Video Projection

Screens must be positioned where every observer is no greater than 45 degrees off-axis. Screens should be rear projection if facilitated by the architecture of the building. Rear projection will improve contrast and make images less susceptible to washout in a high ambient light environment. No direct architectural lighting should fall on the screens. Screens should be located off-stage far enough to avoid the "big brother" syndrome, but close enough for minimal eye deviation from all seating locations. Also, a large center projection screen can be utilized as a platform backdrop that can be easily changed with projection and lighting.

Video Production

If video cameras are required, camera locations need to be designed into the seating layout so that they can be functional without being obtrusive or distracting to the congregation. In order to get good camera shots, the cameras need to be within a reasonable distance of the platform and at roughly the same height as persons standing on the platform. If cameras cannot be placed close enough to the

platform, a more expensive longer focal length lens will be required for a close-in shot. A camera located at the rear of a 120' deep room will require a lens that costs \$50,000 or more, and the depth of field will be highly compressed.

Architectural Lighting

The architectural lighting of the room should provide consistent illumination of the seating areas. It must be dimmable in order to provide illumination levels appropriate to the activity taking place. Control panels at entry locations must be capable of being locked-out during services in order to prevent accidental changes in lighting at inappropriate moments. The architectural lighting of the room must also be consistent in color temperature, and the color temperature should be coordinated with the requirements of the theatrical lighting and video production systems. Natural light can add to the overall warmth of the room but must be diffuse and controllable.

Theatrical Lighting

The theatrical lighting system needs to provide fixture locations and angles that will provide good illumination of people on the platform. A mixture of both standard and automated lighting fixtures will provide added flexibility in creating a warm and intimate worship experience if properly used and controlled.

Mechanical Systems

The overall ambient temperature of the room should be comfortable with little perceived airflow. There should not be hot or cold spots and the room should be free of any "arctic blast" locations. Also, the mechanical systems should be able to sufficiently cool or heat the room without creating excessive background noise or vibration. Noisy or ineffective mechanical systems can quickly defeat our goal of achieving a sense of intimacy and will create an environment where people can never get comfortable and focus on the worship service.

The Big Picture

In a worship facility there must not be any bad seats. Unlike a performing arts venue where everyone knows that the cheaper the ticket price the worse the seat, a church does not have the option of designating some seats as "the cheap seats." Inevitably it is the first time visitor who ends up sitting in a back corner of the room somewhere. If he or she can't see, hear or feel connected with what is going on, the odds are they won't be back next week. Because of the shortcomings of the facility, the ministry goals are left unaccomplished. The objective is to create an environment where regardless of where you sit, you can feel connected and be a participant in something much greater than what you could ever experience alone.

When all is said and done the design team needs to provide a room that minimizes distractions and provides as much intimacy and functionality for the program as possible. After that, it is up to the ministry staff to take advantage of the facility –for in the end, a worship space is simply another tool for ministry. Intimacy is not only determined by the look and feel of the room, but it is just as much about what takes place within the space and how those functions take place.

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