ARCHITECTURE & ART

A picture containing indoor, floor, room, wall

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UNIVERSITY CHRISTIAN CHURCH is a study in diversity.

Located in the University District of Seattle, the church reminds us that the Christian Faith is called to relevant witness and mission in every age. Its architecture belongs to several different eras; yet it offers a message and a ministry strikingly up to date, speaking to universal and enduring aspirations lodged deep in the human spirit and challenging any tendency to live narrow and provincial lives.  Begun in the early days of the University District, University Church was founded in 1889-1890 as a Sunday School mission of First Christian Church. The new congregation occupied a frame building on 42nd and Latona; and we have the photograph of that handsome, early building.

The first building at the present location was constructed about the year 1914-15.

The church provided worship and classroom space together with offices and a social room. In 1993 George Graham, a member of the congregation sketched, from his remembrances, several interior drawings of this building. As other buildings were added, the first building was remodeled many times and currently provides permanent and occasional space for major religious organizations in the city and state, community groups and a co-operative school, in addition to significant space used by the congregation. The very interesting symbols displayed above the entrance of this building, show the open book, or a Bible, what is probably meant to be the rising sun, torches, the symbol of knowledge, and the caduceus, a symbol of healing. These healing symbols, usually associated with the medical profession, in combination with the Bible, the sun rise, and torches could well represent the essential ministry of the church. This total healing, reconciling ministry is again represented in the stained glass of the center building and certainly could be one of the interpretations of the contemporary glass in the chapel.

The middle, sanctuary building was constructed in 1926-27 and formally opened on June 3rd, 1928. This building recalls the Gothic tradition with its tower, stained glass and carvings. Although some modifications have occurred over the years, it originally seated approximately 1500 people. One would need to spend extra time in this center building in order to fully appreciate the beauty of the art, and the work of the artisans. In fact, the craft of the artisans is usually overlooked on the assumption that what one is seeing is real, not illusion. Much of what appears to be woodwork is in reality faux wood, surfaces painted to resemble wood, as in the reredos, or molding around the baptistery. The balcony surfaces as seen from the main floor and the stairway surfaces from the main floor to the balcony–all are the carefully molded and painted work of the artisan. All of the stonework of the sanctuary is molded and painted surface. The narthex was originally painted to appear as travertine marble. Unfortunately it was simply painted over many years ago; but one still can discern the original careful work of the artisan. The narthex is highlighted by original stencils on the ceiling beams and on the corner moldings. The massive wooden doors, pulpit and organ screen harken back to an earlier era of wood carving and finishing.

The sanctuary windows are the work of Hungarian painter Anton Rez and suggest his Roman Catholic background. One has to be amazed that such windows ever were allowed in a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), especially in those years, because of their distinctive Roman Catholic imagery. They seem to have been accepted virtually without question all these decades and today, more than ever, remind us of our ecumenical mission. Another brochure, related to these stained glass windows describes them in detail. Let us just say here that the astonishing feature of these windows is they are intended to be understood or interpreted across the nave, or sanctuary. There is no chronological sequence, or any other kind of sequence. The windows are intended to be viewed as pairs, with the understanding that because this happened, then this became possible.

One starts on the west side. For example, the first window near the front portrays John the Baptist announcing Jesus to the world. The window opposite, usually thought to represent Paul as the first missionary, is the result of Jesus ministry and his command “to go into all the whole world”. In 1994 the photographic likeness of Archibald McLean was replaced in order to make the windows more aesthetically pleasing. McLean served for 40 years as the president of the World Mission Program of the Christian Church; and, during that time commissioned every missionary who went overseas. The window provided an accurate historical reference; but simply did not fit aesthetically with all the others. The new window of the ship is an early Christian symbol and conveys a similar theme of the mission of the church in the world. The Greek word ECUMENE means (the whole inhabited earth ). All of these windows contain the same variety of colors.

The main chancel window, even though it is artificially lighted today, contains colors which are different from the sanctuary windows, but which match the one large window which cannot be seen from the sanctuary. This other window may be viewed from a hallway off the chancel. It depicts Jesus’ healing ministry. Together with the chancel window where Jesus offers both blessing and welcome, and connected by identical colors; and recalling the symbols above the entrance of the first building, this “hidden” window again depicts the church’s healing, reconciling ministry in the world.

The Communion Table in the sanctuary displays carved vine and grapes, the traditional IHS, and two small crosses. After much research about a replacement cross for the Communion table, it was decided to ask one of our members, David Leak, a wood worker, to create a larger wooden cross matching the two on the Communion Table.

The carving on the pulpit depicts the cross above the chalice. The irony of this symbol is that 50 years after it was done, the denomination accepted as its symbol the chalice with the St. Andrew’s Cross upon it.

The newest building, in a contemporary style, was dedicated in 1960. It provides a chapel, seating 150 people, offices, classroom spaces and a Lounge. The dominant features of the chapel are the cross and the large glass installation created by James Fitzgerald. A dove, symbol of peace, is carved in the pulpit. As described in a separate brochure this window was constructed as a fused glass screen. Viewing this glass from the inside, one is impressed with the tremendous diversity of color and form. Yet, taken altogether, it forms a unity of brilliant beauty. Someone has suggested that this singular beauty coming out of such diversity could well represent the mission of the church in terms of reconciliation and healing. All the different pieces, colors and shapes work together as one. The mosaic work of the cross was done by Genevieve Monson Klovee. The mosaic work of the matching candlesticks was done by Marjorie Thomas. The building was designed by the firm of Narramore, Bain, Brady and Johanson with George Graham of the congregation as project architect.

In addition to the architecture and art of the buildings, the congregation is enriched by numerous other works of art. In the Parlor of the first building two original posters represent the church’s witness for peace. One is a product of the 70’s in the University District. “Go Fly a Dove” is an artist’s proof by David Turrill. The other is the artist/photographer’s proof of a poster, “Peace”, winner of numerous awards, by ( ).

In the middle building a painting by John R. M. Wilson was given to the church. The original owner asked the artist for a religious painting; but was somewhat taken aback by this work entitled “Christ and anti-Christ”; and even had the title painted over. None the less, it makes for interesting discussion about which is which. Two Chinese silk creations were the gift to the church by early missionaries.

In the newest building the handsome bronze tree in the entrance hall suggests the concept of unity with diversity and is the work of Seattle artist, Norman G. Warsinske. A special brochure describes this work. In the conference room a seven panel enamel depicts the various stages of “The Family”. Seattle artist Virginia Kobler created this work and a separate brochure provides further explanation. In the main office two posters created for a 1983 stewardship program are the work of Seattle artist and member of the congregation Mojuana Tolon.

An enamel abstract by Marie Eyres has been given to the church to be placed in the main lounge.

Two major instruments provide the congregation with great music of the pipe organ. A four manual 65 rank Casavant is in the Sanctuary and was installed when the building was constructed. The dedicatory concert was played by Marcel Dupré, organist at the Cathedral of Notre Dame, Paris. In the chapel there is a two manual Balcom and Vaughn.

Outside the newest building and somewhat concealed from the street, the flowering trees and planting of the patio provide a retreat from the sidewalk and the clamor of the University District. The main lounge opens to this lovely area, offering a handsome, outdoor locale for wedding receptions and Sunday morning coffee hour. Children play here during the week. People from the area gather to enjoy the space and to lunch and rest.

In its history the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is known for having avoided symbols and most churches were built without external or internal crosses as a part of the architecture. The only external cross on University Church is a very small one above the main sanctuary entrance. Neither the first nor second buildings have crosses in the internal architecture. The newest building, in contrast, features a dominant cross above the Communion Table in the Chapel.

University Christian Church most certainly is a study in diversity. From its pulpit the gospel is preached and represented in its building. The ancient word of the apostle Paul is artistically portrayed, reminding us of our calling. “Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to God and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.” From these buildings and in our personal lives we continue this ministry as servants of Christ.

(Compiled and written by James E. Stockdale – 1994)