



# First Presbyterian Church

## Our Church Building's Architectural History

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*Compiled and Researched by organist Jack Rain*



The following is an edited version of an article series which was published in occasional issues of *First News* from 2007 to 2008. It originated with a series of articles, titled “Architectural Notes,” which were written by renowned Philadelphia architect Harold E. Wagoner, who designed the church building. They appeared in the summer “Bulletins” of 1968 in answer to the many questions asked by members and visitors with regard to their new church. This piece begins with Mr. Wagoner’s philosophy on architecture and why our church was designed the way it is. Two other notable examples of Mr. Wagoner’s work include the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D. C., and Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, seen weekly on television.

### Architectural Philosophy

The basic church form sprung from a study of its relationship to the site, and particularly its relationship to the beach and two apartment buildings which are a part of the structure.

Consideration was at one time given toward creating a “front” door on the beach side, rather than on Beach Drive, as is now the case. This posed too many traffic problems, and was particularly undesirable because of the many steps which would have been required to bring one from the beach side up to the main floor level. Further, it would have been difficult to arrive at the front entrance by automobile.

Having determined the exterior traffic flow and the interrelationship of the buildings, the architects then began to study the seating and the choir arrangement within the church proper. It was agreed that the tenet of “gathering around” was desirable and it was for this reason that the church was made quite wide from the chancel back to approximately the center of the edifice. The decision to place the font in the center made the building even wider at the central point.

Although a balcony seemed a necessity simply from the standpoint of accommodating the number of people, it was desired to create a unicameral or one-room space. Thus the balconies were divided into two areas so that one has the sense of being in a great room immediately upon entering the front door. In many churches this entrance experience is marred by the necessity of being under a low ceiling of the gallery. Of some architectural interest is the sculptural form created by the introduction of the double galleries.

The exterior of the structure became simply an exercise in cloaking what had been agreed upon in plan in a sensible fashion. Thus form followed function, and the sloping walls and pitched roofs created an interest which made it possible to practically eliminate all ornament, with the exception of the great burning bush window on Beach Drive.

### Development of the Main Façade

The desired purpose was to create an integral sculptured wall in deep relief on the exterior, and at the same time incorporate a successful faceted window on the interior including a night effect on the exterior when the window was illuminated from the inside.



*Exterior detail of Burning Bush window*

After collaborative study and planning of architect and artist, a final model was produced.

The solution called for techniques not used before involving polyester and acrylics. To solve the problem, a team consisting

of an architect, an artist, and a formulator was set up to write specifications and formulæ and to supervise the execution.

The 28' x 30' sculpture was constructed in one piece, made up of carved laminated Styrofoam patterns impregnated with a resinous sealer to form a vapor barrier. The sculpture of varying depths up to 20" was covered with a carefully tailored fiberglass skin. On top of the skin is an epoxy resin paste applied by trowel to create a textured surface.

The completed sculpture was cut into sections roughly 5' x 8' for handling, shipping and assemblage. The foundation of the sculptured window was 52 sections, each 4' x 4'. These were erected in a massive iron grid embedded in the masonry wall.

When installed, the sculptured sections were attached to the window with buried anchor pins. The sculpture joints and edges adjoining the masonry wall were covered with sunken sections of skin to insure a seamless surface.

The entire wall was painted with a latex/acrylic paint to give an appearance of oneness to the façade of the church.

## The Pulpit

As you know, the Presbyterian Church is a branch of the Reformed Faith. Doctrinal tenets of the Reformed Church place great emphasis on the importance of the spoken word, a fact which is quite patent to any of you who may have visited any of



*The Pulpit*

of the exciting Reformed Churches of Europe, particularly in Holland. It is the architect's task to create a physical expression of the theological tenets.

With this thought in mind, the architects designed the Pulpit with a great "tester" above it. This serves two purposes. In the first place, it is an

acoustical adjunct to speaking and, in the second place, it makes a strong statement in the ensemble as to the importance of what takes place here.

The Pulpit itself is made from Botticino marble and the tester is composed of polished terrazzo. The whole unit stands as a great piece of sculpture which attests its Presbyterian purposes.

## The Font

The importance of the Font in Protestant worship has very often been minimized. In many instances, the Font was small, and it was located in an inconspicuous place.

Baptism is intended to signify spiritual rebirth. In the Episcopal Church, the Font is generally located at the narthex or entrance



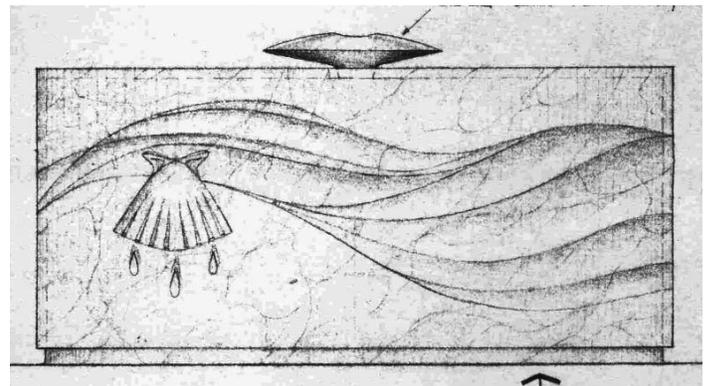
*The Baptismal Font, foreground*

end of the church, in order that the symbolism of physical entry into the building might coincide with the symbolic entry of the individual into a new life in Christ. Episcopal congregations traditionally rise and turn in the pews in order that they may witness the ceremony, or the baptisms are privately held.

In the Roman-Catholic church, the baptism is generally a private affair witnessed by friends and relatives. The Font is sometimes placed in a separate room called a Baptistery.

By contrast, baptism in the Presbyterian Church is a rite which derives its basic concept from the opportunity which the service gives to permit the entire congregation to welcome the child or the person who is being baptized into the church family. Presbyterian Rubrics call for the service to be witnessed by the congregation unless there is some unusual circumstance such as sickness.

In view of the many criticisms which had been advanced concerning the lack of architectural emphasis upon the Font in many churches, the building committee, together with the ministers and architects, decided that the Font itself should be



*The carving on the sides of the baptismal font indicates an scallop shell with water drops, symbolic of holy baptism.*

placed in the center aisle where there could be little doubt as to its importance. Thus those who enter and leave the building are constantly reminded of the purpose of baptism. Here, in this most central position on the Nave floor, the Baptismal Font declares that this is a steppingstone into life with Christ and into the heart of his people in this congregation.

It may be noted that the whole church grows wider at the point where the Font is located so that its location is architecturally emphasized in the structure as well as in the pew pattern.

The Font is made from botticino marble and the carving on the sides indicates an scallop shell with water drops, symbolic of holy baptism.

## The Table

When Christ celebrated the Feast of the Passover with his disciples at the time of the Last Supper, he presumably did so at the table laden with food and drink. This custom was evidently continued for a while, and St. Paul admonishes temperance in the act.

As the early Christian Church emerged, the concept of a table seems to have been lost, and an “altar” form emerged. In some cases it was actually a reliquary or sarcophagus. Some say that no respectable early church of consequence could really consider itself as prominent if it did not have the bones of a martyr deposited in the altar!

How did the change from the table to altar to sarcophagus take place? Why was it done? No one knows. Some say the tombs in the catacombs generated the idea—others strongly disagree.

It seems quite possible that the metamorphosis was simply the result of the subconscious “borrowing” of the altar of Abraham and Isaac. This is a universal religious trait.

The Jews adopted some worship methods used by the Assyrians: contemporary religions, especially Protestant denominations, have been borrowing freely from each other since their inception. As little as 40 years ago, the appearance of a cross in most Protestant churches in America was forbidden (Episcopal and Lutheran Churches excepted). Now we see a welter of crosses in Protestant work; door peepholes, handles, decorative motives, all these reflect a new-found freedom.

Thus what is “right” and appropriate and liturgical and theological varies with the cultural climate. Certain doctrinal aspects, however, cast long shadows over the interpretations of time, and the “table” concept is doubtless one of the strongest images in the reformed faith.

The Table at First Presbyterian Church, St. Petersburg, is quite obviously a table form as opposed to an altar (see page 4). It is a strong form which speaks adequately of its purposes. Visually it is quite large (12' long, 2' 7" high, 4' wide). This unusual bulk was a design tenet necessitated by 3 factors: a.) Its bulk was scaled to produce a satisfactory visual relationship between it and the interior space as a whole; b.) It was necessary that it be proportioned to take care of the large number of Elders who gather around it, and; c.) It needed a certain mass in order that the choir and console area would not dominate it from an

appearance standpoint.

The table is made from Perlato dolceta, an Italian marble.

## The Organ

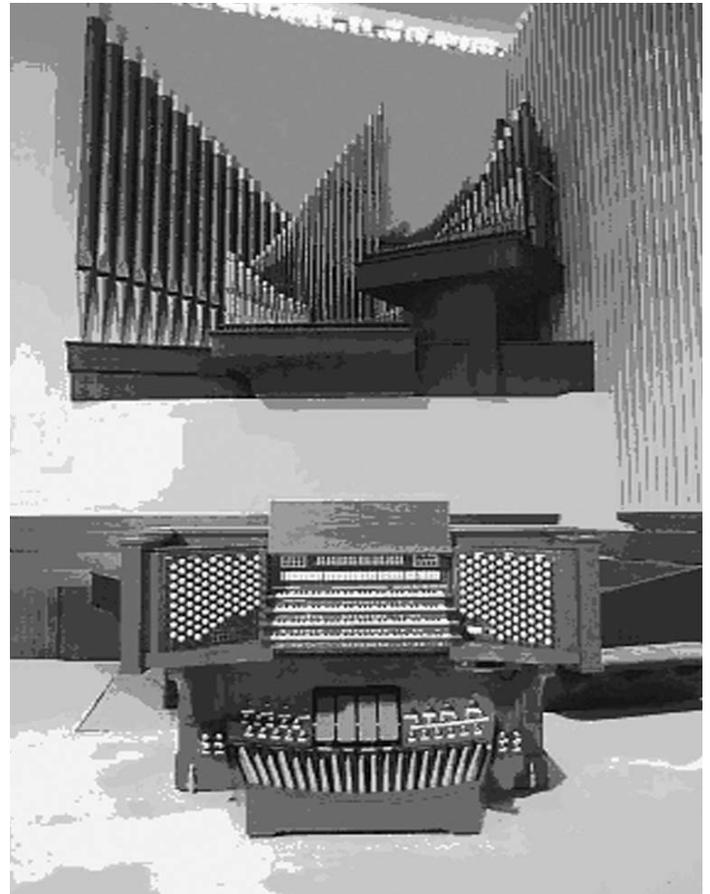
For a good many years, organs were often placed in the front of the church in an exposed position with “show” pipes which did not “speak.” Thus the organ became the focal center of the entire structure, in many instances.

About 1920, the cycle changed and organs began to be completely hidden. They were placed in rooms, generally at the side of the chancel. Sometimes these rooms were inadequate, and the tone could not properly reach the congregation.

In the early 1960's, there was an increasing emphasis placed upon the concept of actually exposing the organ in church work, a concept which is prevalent both here and in Europe. In such cases, the pipes which one sees are “speaking” pipes. Organ builders have been emphasizing the tenet that the organ should be seen if it is to be properly heard.

When organs were placed in chancel areas, particularly areas which contained divided choirs facing each other, and when the organs were divided and placed in two sections, one behind each part of the choir, the sound which reached the listener was largely a reflected sound, as voices and organ music blended together.

In modern exposed organs, the sound of the exposed pipes reaches the listener in a clear and crisp tone. To those who like





*The ribbon of stained glass just below the ceiling creates the “floating roof,” shown here at the northeast corner of the sanctuary. The screened vertical grill on the right (east) wall in this photo hides many ranks of pipes.*

the sound, it is “brilliant,” to those who do not like it, it may sometimes be termed “harsh.” The preponderance of current opinion seems to favor the “brilliant” concept.

When the organ pipe is exposed, its sound cannot be made louder or softer. No matter how the key on the console is pressed, the sound always emerges

with the same intensity. This poses some problems in interpreting modern music, particularly the accompaniment which is necessary for singing.

In order to make certain musical passages sound loudly or softly, it is necessary to place a part of the organ in a “swell” box. The pipes are completely enclosed. One side of the box is fitted with “swell” shutters which open and close at the will of the organist.

At the First Presbyterian Church, St. Petersburg, Florida, the organ consists of visible exposed pipes at the side of the chancel, together with a great many other ranks of pipes behind the vertical grille which is on the left rear wall of the chancel as one faces it from the congregation.

The console which controls the organ, that is, the keyboards, is located in a pit with an elevating mechanism in it. On normal Sunday occasions, the console remains out of sight insofar as this is possible, by being lowered into the pit. When concerts are given, the console is raised and moved out into the center of the chancel.

The relationship of the organ, console and choir to the rest of the structure was given a great deal of study by the architect and building committee. It is to be hoped that the installation will reflect the wisdom of the choices which were made, since music is such a very corporate part of the life of this particular church.

The two Antiphonal organs, one on each side of the nave just above the stairs to the galleries, consist of wind chests and ranks of pipes removed from the former First Presbyterian Church.

“Relevant Classic” might best describe the architectural design of this church. Its lines are basically vertical and straight, as in the tradition of classic cathedrals. Yet a freshness of clean lines, functional angles, open massiveness and simple refinement characterize much of the best of contemporary architecture.

The Nave, or worship room with all of its grandeur, manifests a quiet splendor where God is found and experienced with our fellow worshippers. Symbolism is not found in overtness or overpowering figures, but through the subtleties of line and form.



*The Chancel, showing the Table, Pulpit and Cross.*

## The Chancel

Though the Chancel area is raised five steps above the Nave floor for functional reasons, it does not represent the “separate” sanctuary for clergy and choir. Rather, it is open and accessible to all. It remains an integral part of the whole room. No rail or screen separates the ministers from the “royal priesthood” of all believers. The communion table is predominant. Its central and forward position silently speaks to this accessibility. As

in Calvin’s day, the service is conducted from this table which symbolizes not only the central act of the Lord’s Supper but His continuing presence around which we gather to worship and place our sacrifices. The pulpit, high and lifted up, represents the importance of the proclamation of the Word of God. The choir, to one side, rather than the oft-times central position, keeps the worshipper’s attention upon more important symbols, while yet permitting the singers to carry out their ministry through color, form, visual mood and sound. Even the empty cross is dominant while remaining in the shadows, reminding us of the Divine Sacrifice for us and of our Lord’s resurrection victory that makes contemporary worship possible.

## The Windows

The “floating roof” is effected through the ribbon of stained glass that seemingly diffuses the upper walls around their entire circumference. God is not solely contained here, but the roof of this edifice symbolically reaches to heaven itself. Even the clear glass windows along the south wall remind us that worship within the church is not an escape from the world, but rather a time for reflection and guidance after which we can view the world with a new perspective. Moses’ “burning bush,” one of the first Old Testament symbols of God’s presence and sustaining power, is depicted in the façade wall. It is a universal symbol in Presbyterianism, depicting the church being consumed and not yet consumed.

One of the tenets of contemporary architecture is “honesty and integrity in design.” Form must come out of function; function determines design as it expresses itself in aesthetically pleasing form. Decoration and ornamentation to their own end are not justified. The display of organ pipes in the Chancel exemplifies this philosophy. These are real speaking pipes—not artificial ones for decoration. They are freestanding so that they will be free sounding.

Everywhere one looks, long lines, often bending and arching, pull the eyes to a new vision which abstractly carries the mind to new creative thoughts that lead to uplifting, relevant, classic worship.