

## Where Do We Believe God Is?

*In mid-June, architects, clergy, acoustical consultants and others gathered in Montreal to explore the critical issue of acoustics in the worship environment. This two-day Interfaith Forum on Religion, Art, and Architecture conference was filled with educational talks and site visits that gave the attendees many opportunities to learn about and experience the art of acoustics.*

Rev. Richard Vosko opened the conference with the keynote address. A part of his exploration of how we go about building a sacred space, he posed the question: **“Where do we believe God is?” Fr. Vosko asserted that the design of sacred spaces is based on our answer to this question.** Acoustical consultant Dawn Schuette followed Fr. Vosko’s presentation with a brief discussion of the issues involved in the design of an appropriate acoustical environment for worship. A lively and informative conversation between the attendees and the presenters followed.

Over the next two days we explored the question Fr. Vosko had posed. We looked for God in St. John Brébeuf Church, a circular 1960’s Catholic Church with wonderful natural acoustics for speech. We looked for God in the neo-English Gothic Christ Church Cathedral (1856, Anglican), where they are still trying to solve hundred-year-old acoustical problems. We visited the Basilique Notre Dame (1829), an elaborately decorated neo-French Gothic basilica where we could have spent hours looking for God in the intricacies of the nave, the balconies, the stained glass windows, the skylights and the ceiling. We looked for God in Notre Dame de Bon Secours (1771) on the oldest site still used for its original purpose in the entire city of Montreal (to honor the mother of the Son of God). We even looked for God among the dead in the funeral chapels of the Mount Royal Cemetery.

As part of this “pilgrimage”, we spent an afternoon at Casavant Frères, one of the premier pipe organ builders in North America. During that afternoon, we learned about and saw the entire process of building a pipe organ—from the initial concept designs, to the fabrication of the pipes and windchests, to the finishing of the finely crafted consoles to the final tuning and

voicing of the instrument. The afternoon concluded with a recital by one of the principals of the company on an organ they had just completed and were getting ready to ship out. They continued to extend their hospitality after the recital with a gracious (and delicious) reception.

Throughout the conference we listened to a liturgical design consultant, several acoustical consultants, organ builders, organists, clergy, historians and researchers. Each one aimed to teach us something about the design of sacred spaces and help us to learn about, and perhaps to rethink, some of our ideas about Acoustics in the Worship Environment.

What was clear was that space and acoustics are major players in the spiritual experience. We learned that when designing for a spiritual experience, designers must consider the shape, scale and arrangement of the room and its suitability to its intended purpose; the flexibility of the space; the decor of the space; and the factors affecting the environment’s acoustics and, if required, the sound reinforcement system.

Over and over again the necessity of engaging the assembly in the experience of worship was emphasized. Fr. Vosko talked about sociopetal or centralized (not necessarily circular) seating arrangements as a means of engagement. Dawn Schuette talked about engaging the congregation by letting the sound of the people fill the room, rather than relying on amplified sound. Fr. Walsh talked about how St. John Brébeuf Parish is trying to engage the community through its liturgies and its social work. Dean Pitts spoke of Christ Church’s endeavor to engage parishioners in a more dialogic and less hierarchical liturgy, made more difficult due to the design and configuration of the church. Finally to tie it all together for us, Dr. Bruce Wheatcroft, D. Min. described engagement as the most basic way through which we encounter music. So the question remains: **“How do we, as designers, consultants, artists and clergy, help manifest the presence of God and that engage those who worship in the spaces we design?”**



Basilique Notre Dame. Photo: James Hundt

We had a great time in the wonderful city of Montreal but we knew we had much work to do when we got home. For it is not enough to know what makes a good environment for worship or how to design for a spiritual experience. No, we must learn how to help others experience God's presence in these spaces through not only our design but through our commitment to this goal. We must be willing to "preach the gospel", if you will, and encourage others to take risks or to experiment or, at the very least, to go outside their own churches and synagogues and visit places where God is present among the people in these spaces so that they may experience it for themselves.

When we are successful, we bring together the beauty of natural materials, light, and more to provide a wonderful experience of an ever-present God for all those who worship in the spaces we design. However, as important as we sometimes think we are in this process, architects, consultants and artists alone cannot pull this off. We need the support of the clergy, the musicians, the liturgists, musical composers, and, of course, the people to do this effectively.



Basilique Notre Dame balcony.  
Pipe organ by Casavant Frères.

In my closing remarks at the conclusion of the conference, I recommended to my fellow participants that we continue to do our part in this process: "Let us continue to learn about, to experience for ourselves, to educate others about, and to preach the message that God can and should be clearly present among God's people whenever they gather to worship." I make the same recommendation to my fellow members of the ACLS who could not attend the conference—continue to do the hard work and the good work. It can make a very big difference to God's people today and in the years to come.