

REPORT AND PROGRAM STATEMENT

LAUREL AUDITORIUM STUDY COMMITTEE MARCH 4, 2017

*H*ISTORY AND GOALS

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THE LAUREL BUILDING ON KINGSTON PIKE WAS OCCUPIED FOR THE FIRST TIME IN SPRING, 1968. IT REPLACED A MUCH SMALLER BUILDING AT THE CORNER OF SEVENTEENTH STREET AND LAUREL AVENUE. SIGNIFICANT UPGRADES WERE MADE IN 1992 WHEN THE FOYER WAS ENLARGED, NEW CLASSROOMS AND THE LAUREL ROOM WERE ADDED ALONG THE FRONT OF THE BUILDING, AND THE FELLOWSHIP HALL AND KITCHEN WERE ADDED.

In 2004 the Laurel elders appointed a committee and asked them to respond to this question: “Can the quality of the worship experience at Laurel be improved by reconfiguration of the worship space?” The committee represented a range of backgrounds and was composed of Sandy and Mark Berryman, Dr. Grady Bogue, Muriel Brown, Dr. Harvey Carter, Lynn Roberts, Jean Slayden, and Jim Spencer, chair. The committee answered the question in the affirmative and presented some preliminary design concepts for a reconfigured space. A preliminary cost estimate was \$250,000. The elders did not want to borrow money at that time or divert money from existing programs, and so members were asked to contribute to a special fund. \$59,000 was raised and used in 2008 to build the new screen in front of the baptistry and set a new pulpit several feet in front of the old location with chairs on each side of it. Piecemeal improvements to the sound system were also made. What was done at that time was a modest response to the recommendations of the 2004 committee.

Laurel members continued to comment on the limitations of existing audio and visual equipment, demand for class space continued to grow, and seating remained inflexible, so a new auditorium study committee was appointed in the spring of 2016. The elders asked the committee to take a fresh look at the same question addressed by the 2004 committee. The members are Greg Bell, Toria Boyd, Chris Davis, Cindy Ingram, Chandra Milam, Jim Spencer, Scott Stewart, Anthony Todd, Ashley White, and Jon Russell, chair. Members of the new committee have invited members to share your thoughts about the auditorium with us and many of you have come forward with comments. There is one issue on which there is almost universal agreement. The sound system must be improved. Generally, it works pretty well in the auditorium for our acapella worship service, but there are problems in hearing a speaker. There seem to be “dead spots” in the auditorium and it is difficult to hear at the back of the room. The committee agrees that improvement of the audio/visual system must be a priority in any improvement effort.

On other matters, Laurel members’ opinions are not so uniform. People are generally comfortable with the appearance of the room and some would rather leave it as it is and put our efforts toward other things. But there are others who see shortcomings. While not agreeing on all points, they do fall into general clusters of concern. Some see the room as too formal, a situation that can be intimidating to some visitors. Some find the room too long, that is, the distance between the pulpit and the back of the room almost detaches the back of the room from the front. Some feel the arrangement of the room is inflexible. It is designed for one purpose and is almost limited to one purpose: worship. It is almost never used for anything else except weddings and funerals. It is currently the most underused space in our building.

The committee concurs with these concerns. Except for Jim Spencer, the current committee had little information about the work of the 2004 committee and did not see a copy of its report until after being at work for over four months. Yet, the new committee has come to many of the same conclusions as the earlier committee. The program statement and specific proposal which follows is in some ways an extension of work that began more than 12 years ago, with independent verification by the current committee.

THE COMMITTEE AGREES THAT THE CONGREGATION SHOULD MOVE FORWARD WITH THESE OVERARCHING GOALS:

- Improvements to our building (both in the auditorium and foyer) should help us be a more welcoming church to those who come our way.
- Improvements to our building should enhance the sense of community among us as we worship.
- The sound system must be improved and as part of that effort, we should address audio/visual and technology needs throughout the building.
- We should make the auditorium more useful by making it a more flexible space.

*P***ROGRAM STATEMENT**

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The primary purpose of our auditorium is to worship God. This includes the worship activities of the congregation in assembly, communion services and baptisms. The space may also be used for other kinds of activity. It should be adaptable for such things as: Vacation Bible School assemblies, one-on-one exchanges between conversation partners in our Wednesday night international class, use as classroom space, area youth group assemblies, college student classes, seminars and classes for the congregation, meetings of Knoxville area congregations in joint assembly, weddings, funerals, community-based public service activities, and choral or dramatic presentations. It is anticipated that once the space is available for multiple uses the congregation will discover other uses for it.

THE DESIGN OF THE WORSHIP SPACE SHOULD ADHERE TO THE FOLLOWING OBJECTIVES:

- There should be visual and functional harmony between the major elements of the room. The arrangement of seating, design of the pulpit area, use of color, material and lighting should all be in harmony with each other and with the structural enclosure.
- The design of the worship space should not be a “jarring” departure from the design of the exterior of the building.

TO THE EXTENT POSSIBLE THE SEATING SHOULD ADDRESS THE FOLLOWING OBJECTIVES:

- The seating should be more comfortable to everyone, especially our visitors and senior citizens.
- Adequate space should be provided, front to back, to allow people to move easily to or from “middle of the row” locations without undue disturbance to those who occupy the end of the row.
- Provide spaces for wheelchairs, service animals, and other worshippers with special needs.
- Provide a more engaging arrangement where members can better see the faces of others in the auditorium, not just the backs of heads.
- Provide flexibility that will allow the room to be used for different kinds of events.
- Reduce the distance between the pulpit and most of the seats in the room.
- Improve the sight lines from most seats to the worship leaders.
- We believe these objectives can best be met with upholstered moveable chairs.

TECHNOLOGY SHOULD BE THE SERVANT OF OUR WORSHIP, AND AS UNOBTRUSIVE AS POSSIBLE:

- The sound system should deliver consistent high quality sound throughout the entire auditorium. Words spoken from the pulpit area should be understandable throughout the room.
- Projections of visual content (video, text, song lyrics and musical notes) should be reasonably visible by all members and visitors, regardless of where they are seated. On some occasions, it will be desirable to project images to two screens at the same time. We believe these objectives can be adequately met with two screens at the front of the room and one screen on each side of the room.
- The internet and networking infrastructure of the building should be an enabling technology rather than a hindrance to the missional vision of church members and staff. As such, the church network architecture and technology infrastructure should be updated to support things such as the live streaming of church services, displaying information and services on multiple screens throughout the church building, and should support the use of apps for member engagement as well as the development of a more informative and useful church website.
- Wiring and cabling needs to be safely located, easily accessible, not a tripping hazard, and scalable and capable of supporting future church needs for technology solutions for video, lighting, and sound.
- Lighting intensity should be adjustable to create variable ambience; provide for enhanced lighting of the pulpit and communion table(s); and flexibility to serve the unique needs of weddings and other special events.
- The selection of furniture and equipment should reflect principles of sustainability and stewardship; they should be long-lasting and maintainable.

SPECIFIC PROPOSALS

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A package of improvements is proposed that includes four major elements: reconfiguration of the auditorium, improvements to the AV system in the auditorium, improvements to the IT systems throughout the building, and improvements in the foyer to make it more serviceable and visually consistent with the auditorium.

The auditorium would be reconfigured by bringing the pulpit area forward approximately 20 feet, by removing the pews and replacing them with moveable chairs, by the installation of a new sound system, by the removal of the center screen and the structure that supports it, by the use of two wall screens at the front and two wall screens on the sides of the auditorium, by refreshing of the baptistry, and by the replacement of lighting fixtures with energy efficient units. Much of the structure that defined the original pulpit areas would be removed, leaving the existing stage area and the return air ducts that are built into the stage. New carpeting would be installed throughout the room. The AV booth in the rear of the auditorium would be enlarged and fitted with new cabinets.

Solving current sound problems involves more than installation of a few new speakers. After consultation with an acoustical expert the committee is recommending an upgrade to the sound system, not only to meet current needs in the auditorium, but to address current and future needs throughout the building. It is our belief that this approach will yield superior results now and be financially prudent in the long run.

We are also proposing improvements in the foyer. These include new carpeting to match the auditorium carpet, new furniture for a visitors welcome station, improvements to the coffee bar, as well as some casual seating. New monitors would also be installed to inform visitors and members of schedules and locations of events as well as for live streaming of worship services.

It is important to recognize that these recommendations constitute an integrated package of improvements. Moving the pulpit forward reduces the distance between the person speaking at the pulpit and the listeners. The arrangement of the chairs is tied to the position of the screens in the front and sides of the room. The upgraded sound system will make the sermon more audible throughout the auditorium as well as in other parts of the building. The improvements in the foyer will not only make the space more functional, they will visually integrate the foyer and auditorium. We are recommending the list of improvements as a package because deletion of one item impacts the utility or appearance of other elements. A detailed presentation of the proposed improvements, including cost estimates, architectural drawings and perspectives, will be provided separately by Brewer, Ingram, Fuller, Architects.

*C*OMMENTARY

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The current building has been a huge improvement from the old and outdated building on Laurel Avenue. It has served us well, but we are changing, and our circumstances are changing. When we first occupied our present location, we were a growing church and by far the largest congregation among Churches of Christ in our area. We had an active student ministry on the UT campus and most students who identified with the Church of Christ attended Laurel. In the years since 1968 Knoxville has moved to the suburbs, first to the west, now to the north and outward with people commuting from Maryville/Alcoa, Lenoir City/Tellico Village, Oak Ridge and other locations to work and worship in Knoxville. The church has also suburbanized with larger and new congregations in outlying locations. We are increasingly a city church with a large population of senior citizens. We still have an active campus ministry, but students now attend several churches in the Knoxville area. We have a growing number of young families, but our classrooms are filling. If we want to be a vibrant and growing church, we must think about the challenges of our changing circumstances. Our mission statement says that we want to make a difference in the lives of those “who come our way.” One of the things we can do is think about how to be a more welcoming church. The way we act as individuals toward visitors who come into our assemblies is the most important element in our being a welcoming church. Nothing will be more important than a smile, a warm handshake and a sincere greeting. But we should not ignore the way visitors react to and are affected by our physical setting. We enjoy a beautiful building. But our building sends a message about us to those who observe it. Visitors and newcomers may not see our building the way we see it.

The Laurel auditorium has design features that trace back to European churches built in the middle ages. The footprint of the auditorium was designed to form a cross with a long linear form, reinforced with a center aisle. The original pulpits at the front follow an authoritarian tradition, the speakers talk “down to” or “at” the congregation, rather than “with” the congregation. The very high ceiling and absence of low cross beams creates an awe-inspiring sense of space. The overall impression is of a formal space with significant distance between the speakers “up there” and the congregation, “out here.” People who come to us from other religious experiences or from socio/economic backgrounds different from what most of us enjoy may not feel as comfortable in this circumstance as we assume. We try to be a restoration church. We try to pattern our faith, our teachings, and our worship on what we see in the church of the New Testament. There are obvious limits to the extent to which we imitate first century Christians. We do not wear the same clothes they wore and we do not sing the same songs they sang. What we do try to do is adhere to the substance of New Testament faith and practice. Let’s think about first century Christian worship spaces.

In the immediate aftermath of Pentecost, the church membership was almost entirely Jewish. They were to some extent also a fugitive organization. Even before open persecution started they were opposed by Jewish authorities

and watched with suspicion by Rome. For a while they met in synagogues. These were relatively small buildings. Large ones might accommodate 200 people. They were basically a rectangular room, almost square, with a small elevated platform at one end, and with bench seating around the outside walls and room for those in the center of the room to stand or sit on the floor. As the congregations became more Gentile in composition and less welcome in the synagogues they met in houses. Since most houses were small simple structures this meant that they often met in small groups standing around the walls of a room. When the scripture encouraged them to “speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph. 5:19) or to “teach and admonish one another with all wisdom ... singing to God” (Col. 3:16) it seems to be describing gatherings in which members were more than observers, they were participants. They were participating in settings where they were often facing each other and could observe the reactions of each other to what was happening. We believe our church could be a more welcoming place and our services more participatory if the auditorium were reformatted with moveable chairs that could encircle the pulpit area. In short, the committee is of the view that the way our worship space is arranged can contribute to a richer sense of community in our fellowship. The committee is not proposing or anticipating changes in the way our services are conducted. We believe the rearrangement of our physical space can enrich the way we experience the services we have now.

WE BELIEVE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- Allow many of us to see the faces of our brothers and sisters as we worship,
- Provide seating that is more comfortable for everyone,
- Make the worship leaders more visible by reducing the distance between them and members of the congregation,
- Improve the quality of our audio experience by introduction of new equipment and by placing speakers closer to the audience,
- Improve the quality of the visual experience by having an improved and more flexible lighting system and by having better quality AV equipment, and
- Enhance the flexibility of the space so that it can be used more often and for a broader range of purposes.

The committee is aware that the total package being proposed is not the most economical approach that could be taken to improve our auditorium. Some might advocate just improving the sound system and putting pads on our pews. We do not believe such an approach is the best course of action. It would address some issues in the short term, but would not be a genuine update of our facility to meet long term needs that are clearly before us. We have consulted with an acoustical expert about our sound system and looked carefully at the recommended furnishings to try to get materials that will be functional and durable. New lights may seem extravagant, but they will pay for themselves over time with significant reductions in power use. Our circumstances and our needs are changing and we need to be open to new ideas and new possibilities about our future. The upgrade in our auditorium that was made in 2008 was helpful, but it did not address many of our fundamental needs. Let’s be as bold and forward looking as we were in 1966 when a small band of believers in a small outdated building on Laurel Avenue had a vision for this facility.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED:

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| Greg Bell | Chris Davis | Chandra Milam | Jim Spencer | Anthony Todd |
| Toria Boyd | Cindy Ingram | Jon Russell, chair | Scott Stewart | Ashley White |