the transformation
of the John R. Mulder Memorial Chapel
2011-2012
We understood early on that the power of the design would reside in a strong relationship between what had been and what would become. To completely obscure the original details would be to disrupt the continuum of memory and meaning elicited by the chapel space.

We determined to make our design a sort of ongoing dialogue between the old and the new in which both had something beautiful to say. It is that sense of transformation as redemption rather than replacement that drove the design process and which we hope lingers in the hearts of the chapel’s users.

James E. VanderMolen, AIA LEED AP
Principal Architect, Elevate Studio
The John R. Mulder Memorial Chapel
Daily chapel worship has always been a key element of seminary life. During the first three decades of Western Theological Seminary’s existence, worship took place on the grounds of Hope College, which is where classes were held also. In 1895 Semelink Family Hall was built to house the seminary, and it included a chapel. In 1954 the familiar colonial structure of the seminary was built under the leadership of President John R. Mulder.

The original architecture of the chapel, with its raised chancel and center pulpit, reflected the Reformed emphasis on the primacy of the Word of God. The long rows of wooden pews gave the chapel the same look as many of the churches Western students would be serving. The rectangular design and columns leading to a large red curtain behind the chancel was reminiscent of the tabernacle described in the book of Exodus.

In September 1964, following his death that July, the chapel was named the “John R. Mulder Memorial Chapel.”

The original layout of the chapel and narthex

The proposed changes
why the change?

After half a century, the chapel began to show significant wear. Students and faculty became increasingly reluctant to use the facility because it was physically uncomfortable, poorly insulated, inflexible, and not equipped with appropriate technology.

Furthermore, changing worship styles brought into focus elements of the chapel design that served to emphasize, rather than bridge, gaps of separation between God and the people, between clergy and congregation, and worshippers from one another. Physically the space was no longer reflecting the types of church settings the students were being prepared to serve.

At their February 2010 meeting, the seminary’s Board of Trustees instructed President Timothy Brown to raise necessary resources and employ professionals to renovate the chapel into a flexible, energy-efficient, beautiful, and theologically sound worship center.

To creative types—artists, writers, composers, architects—a blank sheet of paper can be intimidating, even frightening. What to make? Out of all possible ideas, what? Creativity comes most freely when there is something inspiring to respond to, something that stimulates the designer’s imagination. Fortunately, in the design of Mulder Chapel, we were not faced with a blank piece of paper. Not only did the existing chapel have “good bones”—solid infrastructure, historic design elements, and a magnificent organ—but the committee had prepared reflections that were thoroughly researched and which eloquently expressed the theological importance of spaces for worship. The committee had a vision for transforming the chapel that integrated the practical, the pedagogical, and the transcendent.

James E. VanderMolen, AIA LEED AP
Principal Architect, Elevate Studio
Upon seeing the space, reading the reflections, and listening to the aspirations of the committee, we were struck by the image of the ceiling opening up to create a luminous vertical axis and the walls of the chapel inflecting toward the light in a spatial embrace.

James E. VanderMolen, Architect

Much theological thought and planning went into the renovation. Perhaps the most dramatic change is the removal of the pews, giving seating flexibility, but there is much more going on than that. The new chapel helps to shape our theophanic expectation in particular ways. It encourages us to look for God to “show up” primarily in the central things, located in the center: Pulpit, Table, and Font. Secondarily, we expect to meet God in the very people gathered around these central things, surrounded by God’s good gifts in music and in creation (communicated in part by the art glass).

The most significant element is the alignment of the horizontal and vertical axes of the building. The former space functioned on a horizontal plane, focusing attention on the raised chancel. By curving the walls, dropping the ceiling four feet, and adding a carved oculus emanating warm light, attention is focused on a central circle, where most often the pulpit, table, and font are placed. The horizontal and vertical axes of the building converge on the center, and the community is simultaneously focused on Word and Sacrament, where we meet God and neighbor.

This sanctuary is not silent; it is not inert. Like all sanctuaries, it speaks. It reaches out and touches those within it. The shape of this worship space shapes the worshipper; the form of this place forms the people who are gathered here. This sanctuary speaks an ancient and abiding truth: Immanuel, God is with us. All who enter are invited to experience both the presence of God and the reality of community.

The vertical axis speaks of God who is not far away but near to us: the horizontal axis speaks of community—we are not autonomous but together form the church, the body of Christ. In this sanctuary, these two axes come beautifully and seamlessly together: Immanuel, God is with us.
During our first celebration of the Lord’s Supper in this renovated space, I sat there as the bread was broken and the cup poured. I was delighted by the sun shining through the east windows and shimmering upon the highly polished table, until President Brown broke the loaves and scattered breadcrumbs across the table. The messiness distracted me. It shouldn’t have. Those crumbs are evidence that the table is for us—and we’re messy, clumsy people who don’t quite know how to handle God’s abundant gifts. Fortunately, we have one another to help hold this grace—to cup this food—and in so doing, to share the love of God with one another and with a clumsy, messy world, hungry for Christ.

A communion table, built by Professor Garret Wilterdink, was added to the chapel, pairing Sacrament with the traditional emphasis on Word. The most common position was for the pulpit to be on the raised level in the center and the table on the floor in front of the pulpit.

Communion was celebrated intermittently until the mid-1990s, when Timothy Brown, then Professor of Preaching (who also had responsibility for chapel worship), instituted a regular Friday celebration of communion led by a faculty member.

In 1997, after a vote of the faculty, a baptismal font was added to the chapel. Although the seminary is not a congregation that baptizes, the font was added as a visible reminder of membership in the family of God.

Over the past several years, the table and font have become significant symbols of the identity of the seminary community, reflecting what one faculty member has called “a sacramental view of reality.” The weekly communion celebrations have impacted students, faculty and staff in profound ways as they experience the presence of Christ in the breaking of the bread.

This sacramental view of reality is discussed throughout the curriculum, not just in theology and church history classes, but also in ethics, biblical study and pastoral care.

Dr. Dawn Boelkins, Instructor in Biblical Languages
Chapel Dedication, January 18, 2012
Holy and eternal God,
All the earth proclaims your glory,
And the host of heaven sings forth your praise.
We dedicate to you the music of our worship
And every instrument employed to make it.
In Christ, perfect our hymns of faith,
Our canticles of praise,
Our psalms of lament,
Our songs of hope.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Psalm 108:1

The elevated chancel was eliminated, and a musicians bay was created in that space. Perhaps no element in worship has changed more over the decades than music. While the seminary regularly uses the van Daalen pipe organ, it is not unusual for a grand piano, guitar, string bass, violin, and drums to be used in worship. In a nod to the past, the two columns that stood at the side of the old chancel have been retained in the new design, now framing the musician’s bay. The columns evoke the colonial design of the original structure as well as the tabernacle motif.

Special recognition goes to Lloyd Zoerhof, the finish carpenter who built and installed the beautiful woodwork in the musicians bay.

My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast;
I will sing and make melody.

*The Big Sing* - March 18, 2012
how did they curve those walls?

The walls are unusual because they are radiused. All of these radiuses butt into other angled walls or arched surfaces. We used a track bender to crimp the bottom and top tracks to a desired radius. The drywall and reveal beads flexed enough to follow the stud framing, creating curved side walls and arched window wells ready for painting.

The ceiling system is actually a floating metal stud framing system supported by cables. A specialty contractor (Radius Track) bent the metal to our specifications, and we put together the puzzle on site and then lifted it into place. It was filled with a 4" linear wood ceiling system (Rulon). You will notice that the two angled sides have no trim at the edges. This was a tedious task and a definite challenge.

The center dome arrived in eight pie-shaped pieces from Custom Castings and MacAire. These pieces fit inside of the metal stud framing system and are supported by additional cables. The joints of the dome were finished using drywall tape and mud for a seamless bowl shaped appearance.

— Keith Bomers
Intext Concepts
Zeeland, MI

What a unique project! Lots of detail in a small space. It took a total team effort with a crew of six men on site for six weeks. It was a challenge from the beginning...fun and frustration during...and lots of satisfaction at the end.

— Keith Bomers
Intext Concepts

...and that ceiling!

photo by Rich Meiererus
The project to create stained glass for the newly renovated John R. Mulder Chapel at Western Theological Seminary was both exhilarating and challenging. Exhilarating because of the unique and imaginative architectural setting and the depth of knowledge and experience of the people I was working with; and challenging—for all the same reasons. How to tie it together? The committee offered ideas about inspiration, exploration, and the continuum of memory, making it clear that the artwork was meant to inspire spiritual meditation and generate discussion, not copy well-known images. The idea of “continuum of memory” resonated most with me. I knew this would provide an invitation to explore and learn.

The window designs draw on the strong connections between the seminary, human and religious history, the local community, and the surrounding landscape. They include local imagery of Lake Michigan, trees by the lake, sand dunes, and even the town plan of Holland, Michigan. As part of the exploration of the continuum of memory, the windows include subtle impressions from the past—created by pressing historically and spiritually significant shapes and symbols into the plaster bed that supports the glass when it is shaped and fired in the kilns. The theme “Gifts of Grace” takes form in the symbols of Alpha and Omega, a key, symbols of the Passion, grapes, wheat, a star, a fish, a shape symbolizing the Hand of God, and many others. All throughout the windows there are yellow “bricks” which represent God’s grace in action.
In the narthex we encounter the City of God window. Here the Tree of Life is transformed into an arbor where delicate white branches intertwine and invite us into another world.

An impressionistic grid based on the street plan for the Town of Holland intersects the tree branches, creating a new layer. Memories and impressions merge and emerge as new images and combinations: garden and city, nature, water, our built environment along with the heavenly trees in the New Jerusalem.

Fabricated in Glasmalerei Peters Studios, Paderborn, Germany the glass arrives. Details of grapes and wheat represent God our Creator, we bring the art glass adorning this space before you today. It is breathtaking and thought-provoking; it looks like liquid and space and fire and stars and vines and trees and cities and great lakes and sand. We see blue and red and green and orange and gold and pink in it. It looks like you, in some way we can only feel, but we know it is nothing compared to you.

Help us daily make your Word into flesh in this place. Let these works of art and glass point us to you, the true creator, who works in colors beyond our imagination and makes all things new.

Make yourself new in us today. Make us new people who boldly point others to you.

Purple and red symbolize the Passion and Christ's sacrifice. Golden wheat and grapes flow into the windows, representing the sacrament of Eucharist. Fragments of golden glass emanate from the Cross and from the Star of Bethlehem and move through all of the panels. They bring to mind the human communities that have kept the Word of God and the message of Christ alive through the centuries—expressing the spiritual communion of all believers.

Rev. Jeffrey Munroe, Vice President of Advancement and Communications
Chapel service, April 19, 2012

The Star of Bethlehem hovers above our blue planet. The 28 individual “Gifts of Grace” chapel windows are experienced as a connected journey through a series of spiritual landscapes. The colors flow around the room with images and textures evoking light, wind, water, fields, and the heavenly dome.
Dana Daniels, Associate Director of Advancement, is joined by Alex, Madalyn, and her husband, Rev. Jim Daniels, as they take turns reading the Bible in the chapel.

Prior to our first time worshiping together in this space, it was fitting to bring the sacred in, allowing the newly finished porous walls to be washed with the words they will hear for many years to come. For generations the Word was proclaimed aloud in this building, soaked into every small crevice. The new walls are an extension of the past into our present, and they, too, were soaked with the Word as the Western Theological Seminary community participated in a continuous reading of Scripture, Genesis to Revelation, from November 28-December 14, 2011.

washing the walls

many hands that labored

General Contractor – Stan Hamstra, SDH Construction Services, Inc., Holland, MI
Architect – James E. VanderMolen AIA LEED-AP, Elevate Studios, Grand Rapids, MI
Architecture and Design – Elevate Studios, Grand Rapids, MI
Art glass artisan – Sarah Hall, Sarah Hall Studios, Inc., Toronto, Canada
Art glass fabrication – Glasmalerei Peters Studios, Paderborn, Germany
Art glass installation – Glass Images, Holland, MI
A/V/Acoustical consultant – Acoustics by Design, Grand Rapids, MI
Excavating/earthwork – A.J. Excavating, Inc., Hamilton, MI
Masonry – Masonry Arts Company, Holland, MI
Structural/misc steel supplier – Steel Systems, Inc., Kentwood, MI
Structural/misc steel erector – Rigid Steel Construction, Wyoming, MI
Custom millwork/cabinets – B&W Woodwork, Inc., Holland, MI
Attic insulation – Holland Insulating Co., Inc., Holland, MI
Membrane roofing – Great Lakes Systems, Jenison, MI
Concrete walls and flatwork – Compagner Concrete & Construction, Zeeland, MI
Rough and finish carpentry – Lloyd Zoerhoff Construction Services, Hamilton, MI
Rough and finish carpentry – Countryside Builders, Inc., Holland, MI
Doors/hollow metal/hardware – Architectural Openings & Access, Grand Rapids, MI
Window & glass caulking – Premier Caulking Inc., Grand Rapids, MI
Liturgical furnishings – StudioCraft, Kentwood, MI
Interior glass doors & aluminum glass systems – Vos Glass, Grand Rapids, MI
Exterior chapel windows – Pella Windows and Doors, Grand Rapids, MI
Wall and ceiling systems – Intext Concepts, Inc., Zeeland, MI
Painting and finishing – H.L. Bolkema Decorating, Wyoming, MI
Finish floor installation – Commercial Flooring & Installation, Holland, MI
Motorized window blinds – Triangle Window Fashions, Wyoming, MI
Hot and chilled water – Bert Reimink Plumbing, Holland, MI
HVAC contractor – Peerbolt’s Mechanical Contractors, Holland, MI
Electrical contractor – Parkway Electric, Holland, MI
Technology contractor – Ascen, Holland, MI
Final cleanup – Final Phase Cleaning LLC, Holland, MI
The renovation of the John R. Mulder Chapel has been given as a grace gift from the living God through many and various lovely contributions. We bless the Lord for the faculty, staff and students who carefully articulated our deepest theological commitments concerning worship, for the designers and artisans who gave shape to those convictions, and for a long list of dear friends who so generously gave of their financial resources. Collectively we express “a more profound alleluia” as we dedicate this place of worship to the glory of God and the flourishing of our life together!

Dr. Timothy L. Brown
President and Henry Bast Professor of Preaching
Western Theological Seminary
in appreciation

...to the following donors for making this special project possible:

Anonymous Donors
Jon & Delores Bechtel
J. Kermit & Sallie Campbell
Captrust Financial Advisors
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Mark & Kay DeCook
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James & Jacqueline Harvey
Richard & Ethelyn Havorth
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Wayne & Jill Van Dam
Brian Vanden Brink
George & Alice Vander Molen

...to the following donors for funding the art glass:

Jean Cook & Family
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Reda Santinga
Anita VanWyk

...to the following staff & faculty for contributing to the two WTS art glass windows:

Carol Ann & David Bailey
Alan & Jeannette Beagley
Carole Bechtel & Torn Mullens
David & Diane Becker
Todd & Rachel Billings
Mark & Anna Bogertman
Thomas & Judy Boogaart
George & Wills Brown
Timothy & Nancy Brown
Stephanie & James Croom
Dara & James Daniels
Keith & Rebekah Derrick
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Jade Gao
Theresa Hamm
Jace & Michelle Hamman
George & Katherine Hunsberger
Michael & Jennifer LeFebre
Jeffrey & Gretchen Monroe
Rayetta & David Perez
Carla Plurmers
Ron & Debra Rienstra
Beth Smith
Jacalyn & Randall Soper
Lee Ann & Jeff Sotol
David & Lynn Stubbs
Leanne Van Dyk
LuAnne & James VanSlooten
Travis & Marla West

...to the chapel renovation committee:

Norman Donkersloot, chair
David Becker
Dawn Boekhans
Thomas Boogaart
Timothy Brown
Samantha Kaczban
Noah Livengston
Rayetta Perez
Ron Rienstra
Leanne VanDyk

...for providing these items:

Grand piano - Kermit & Sallie Campbell, SPX Foundation
Communion table - Patrick & Jeanne Kellner Family
Baptismal font - Mildred Hovinga
Processional cross - Eugene Vander Well
Lectern - Karen & Jon Hansen; Harvey “Bud” & Sherry Hoffman

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