

Reflections on the use of a
NAVE ALTAR
in the Anglican Parish of St. Luke, Winnipeg

On January 18, 2009, and again on February 15th, an altar was placed on the proscenium stage at St. Luke's for Sunday worship. The presider conducted the liturgy there, facing the congregation. Following the second trial of this layout, a survey was put to the parishioners, with the promise that the results would be included in the forthcoming parish self-portrait, and conveyed to clergy who might be considering applying for the position of Rector.

Summary

The people of St. Luke's are content with Sunday worship where the presider is at the High Altar, facing away from the congregation. They find it easier to pray and to sense the presence of God when the liturgy is laid out in this manner. While a clear majority (60%) considers the reverence of the liturgy more important than the location of the altar, there is also a sense that it is spiritually desirable to keep the liturgical layout the same week by week.

Should the parish *ever* use a Nave altar in worship? A lot of people did not even answer this question. Those who *did* reply can accept the use of a Nave Altar on occasion, but most feel that the high altar should be used the majority of the time.

Detailed Analysis

The theoretical statements on the survey form

In the survey, a number of statements were put forward illustrating the various principles underlying the positioning of an altar in a church. For example, when a church has an altar far away from the people, and located at the top of several stairs, it is easy to emphasize the mystery of faith. God is much greater than humans, majestic, and in some ways distant. On the other hand, when an altar is among the people and they face one another around it, the Incarnation, "God-in-the-midst-of-us," is emphasized. Prayer, and our approach to God is also affected by these arrangements: the high altar encouraging silent prayer in deep humility; the nave altar encouraging a sense of joy in the midst of the heavenly community.

Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with eight statements, using a scale of one to ten. "10" would indicate strong agreement with a given phrase, and "1" would indicate strong *disagreement*. "5" would thus indicate complete neutrality. When all responses are tallied, therefore, and a statement averages a score above five, it is safe to say the congregation generally agrees with that statement; while an average score below five would indicate overall disagreement with it.

In any human community there can be a wide range of opinions, so when those opinions, expressed as numbers, are averaged, the results will cluster around the middle – no average in a large group would ever be 10 or 1. However, the *degree* to which an average score can go above or below neutral can still indicate a general mood in the group. And, when a statement *averages* something over 8 out of a possible 10, it is a very strongly affirmed statement indeed!

The two most strongly held opinions:

The following statement generated **8.54**: "The High Altar reminds us that God is wonderful and mysterious and greater than all else." Another statement also generated an average of **8.2**:

“When we celebrate the Eucharist at the High Altar, I find it easy to pray and to sense the presence of God.”

Two statements with which we mildly disagree:

Nothing in the survey generated an average score below 4, so it is safe to say that no statement on the form prompted *widespread* rejection. However, given that 5 indicates neutrality, the two statements whose ratings averaged less than 5 can fairly be said to cause some mild but general disagreement among St. Luke’s members.

For one, they don’t quite like the look of the nave altar as it is currently configured. The phrase, “The look of the Nave Altar on the new proscenium stage is agreeable and attractive” generated a score of **4.91**.

And, on average, they don’t appreciate regularly changing the liturgical layout. The lowest score generated by the survey – the statement most disagreed-with – is “Regularly changing the layout of worship is spiritually good for us, and keeps us aware of what we are doing” (**4.89**).

How often should we actually use a Nave Altar?

Theory about liturgical matters is one thing, but the crunch comes when a person is asked to recommend how frequently, if at all, a liturgical object should be used. On this survey it was technically quite possible for someone to say, “Regularly changing the layout is good for us” and then tell us that the Nave Altar should *never* be used. So the most concrete question on the survey was where respondents could select from *always, twice a month, once a month, occasionally, and never*, under the unfinished phrase, “At St. Luke’s, a Nave Altar should be used ...”

Of those who answered, the most popular frequency selected was “occasionally” (26.76%).

The next most popular selection was “never” (25.35%).

Those who selected “once a month” were not quite as numerous (22.54%), but close on their heels were a similar number (21.13%) who selected “twice a month.” Only the option, “all the time” received extremely poor support (5.63%).

How can we assess this? At first glance the parish appears to be divided four ways, with almost equal numbers of people saying we should use a Nave Altar “never” or “occasionally” or “once a month” or “twice a month.” What should become our practice?

Here is one way to weigh it:

Using a Nave Altar twice a month is really using it equally with the High Altar. So we could say that those who selected “always” and “twice a month” could be lumped together as accepting the frequent use of a Nave Altar. Meanwhile, those who select “once a month” or “occasionally” or “never” really prefer that a High Altar be in use the *majority* of the time. Finally, everyone except those who selected “never” can be said to *accept* the presence of a Nave Altar at St. Luke’s, with *some* degree of frequency.

Looked at in that light, we can say that **76% of the parishioners accept the use of a Nave Altar some of the time**. However, we can also say that **75% of parishioners believe we should use the High Altar most of the time**.

Those who said nothing about frequency of use

It is notable that almost 20% of the respondents chose not to answer the concrete and practical question about frequency of Nave Altar use. Did they understand the question? Do they care?

Isolating their responses shows one thing quite consistently: they give a uniformly high rating (average of **8.0** out of 10) to the statement, “I don’t care where the Altar is, so long as worship is reverent, music inspiring, and sermons thoughtful.” However, they also give a higher rating (**7.5**) to the statements about the High Altar pointing to the majesty of God, and assisting them to pray. They were not quite so keen (6.9 and 6.1) on the statements about the Nave Altar affirming Christian fellowship, and assisting them to pray.

Most notable, perhaps, is that this group of people – who decline to say how often the Nave Altar should be used – strongly disagree with the statement that favours keeping the layout the same all the time. They like, indeed they *prefer* change.

Comments written in

It would be impossible to summarize here all the marginal notes that the respondents put on their forms, of which there were a great number. However, it is noteworthy that 6% wrote in suggestions about trying to move the High Altar forward *within the Sanctuary*, rather than using a Nave Altar.

Another 3.4% made a reference to using Morning Prayer (‘Matins’) in worship.

At least two submissions had small essays written on the back that are worth quoting here. These essays are somewhat opposite to one another:

One, that favours change:

Change is good and inevitable. Thus, it would be advantageous to our parish if we embrace this reality in all we do. Using both the Nave and High Altars is one example of this; as is use of different liturgy & services (evensong, matins &c) for worship.

Similarly, we should consider the frequency of change of the Rectors’ position/tenure!

If we resist change within, we lose our ability to adapt to those changes around us, which are out of our control.

And one that does *not* favour this sort of liturgical change concludes with the following statement:

I point out that the nave altar, prior to the installation of the ramp and consequent alterations, was much larger, more intrusive and uglier than it now is, and was dragged out twice a month. Rev. B. quietly dispensed with it, I believe, just after those renovations, and dispensed with it should remain. It is regrettable that its current resurrection may raise one more thing for St. Luke’s parishioners to fight over.

The Numbers

NAVE ALTAR SURVEY

Please rate each of the following eight statements on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 meaning "I strongly disagree" and 10 meaning "I strongly agree with this statement."

8.54	The High Altar reminds us that God is wonderful and mysterious and greater than all else.
8.17	When we celebrate the Eucharist at the High Altar, I find it easy to pray and to sense the presence of God.
6.79	I don't care where the Altar is, so long as worship is reverent, music inspiring, and sermons thoughtful.
6.78	Keeping the layout the same all the time prevents uncertainty at worship and helps us penetrate more deeply into the meaning of what we do.
5.86	The Nave Altar reminds us that God has called us into a loving fellowship and feeds us at a holy table.
5.28	When we celebrate the Eucharist at a Nave Altar, I find it easy to pray and to sense the presence of God.
4.91	The look of the Nave Altar on the new proscenium stage is agreeable and attractive.
4.89	Regularly changing the layout of worship is spiritually good for us, and keeps us aware of what we are doing.

At St. Luke's, a Nave Altar should be used (*circle one*):

#	frequency	% of survey	% of those who answered this question		
18	never ¹	20.40%	25.35%	prefer high altar most of the time (75%)	accept nave altar on occasion (76%)
19	occasionally	21.59%	26.76%		
16	once a month	18.18%	22.54%		
15	twice a month	17.05%	21.13%		
4	all the time ¹	4.55%	5.63%		
71	Number that answered this question ¹	80.68%	100.00%		
17	no answer	19.32%			
88	TOTAL SURVEY	100.00%			

¹ One respondent circled *two* options for the use of Nave Altar: *never* and *always*!