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Discarded Art and Furnishings, Part 1: Repurposing

Paul Daniels

Luther Seminary, pdaniels@luthersem.edu

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“Ask the Archivist” Column, Spring 2018

Paul A. Daniels

Archivist, ELCA Region 3; Archivist and Curator, Luther Seminary

Question: What should we do with our discarded sanctuary art and furnishings?

Response 1: Re-purposing the objects

This is one of the more difficult questions I am asked by congregation members. It is difficult because it deals with the physical objects that surround us each time we are gathered in worship and fellowship. They become important “markers” and memory pieces that we will miss when they are no longer needed for their original purposes.

The reasons for removal and possible disposal or transfer of these objects can be many, but most often they have to do with the remodeling of the sanctuary or more sadly, the closing of a church and the removal of all artwork and furnishings. This column will deal with responding to the first situation, the remodeling of the sanctuary.

Most of our churches, even those with their original sanctuary, have been changed, updated or “spruced up” over time. It may be that certain pieces of furniture and art (e.g., pews, altar, chancel furniture, altar painting) are no longer needed in the refurbished space.

Before making plans to re-locate, sell or donate the pieces, it is important to photographically document the space where the pieces have been. This can be done digitally with “still” as well as scanning video. It can be both fun and enriching to do a recorded “walk-through” of the space with narration by someone who knows the history of the artwork and the furnishings.

A good option for retaining the pieces is to use them elsewhere in the church building. It is important to choose spaces where they will be seen and appreciated. Many churches have done this by incorporating the old altar or stain glass windows into an existing or refurbished chapel space. Others have hung the old altar painting in a frequently traveled stairwell, high enough on the wall to avoid damage from people and light. Ideally, descriptive text and a photo would indicate the original location and use of the piece in the old sanctuary space.

The question naturally arises about what to do with objects that simply are not needed or not useable in a refurbished space. Rather than throwing them out or trying to sell them on Ebay or through a re-use center, it is always advisable to offer them back to the family members who are most closely associated with the items. For example, maybe the altar painting or a set of stain glass windows or altar cloths were donated by a particular family or set of families as memorials. It could be very meaningful to offer these pieces back to them, or at the very least, involve them in the decision-making about where the pieces might go. This is where the memorial book proves itself an important and helpful record.

Next time, we will explore options for the art and furnishings remaining at the closure of a church.