

Design Vision for  
St. Vincent Martyr Church, Madison, NJ



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## THE EXISTING SPACE

The current worship space at St. Vincent Martyr parish already has a long and rich history. Built in 1906 in the Norman Gothic Style, it was built in a cruciform shape, with the altar located in a sanctuary at the head of the cross and the seating in the remaining portion. In the 1970's, the church was renovated and reordered under the guidance of Willy Malarcher, liturgical design consultant. That reordering included relocation of the altar to the center of the cruciform building shape, with seating on all four sides and a new entrance from the parking lot.

Though we do not know the exact seating capacity of the original church layout, we estimate that it was probably between 400 and 450, including the balcony that was removed during the 1970's renovation. According to *The Golden Jubilee of Saint Vincent Martyr* booklet, published in 1956, it had a capacity of 550 adults. Regardless of which number is correct, the seating capacity was significantly reduced during the 1970's renovation. Based on the number of matching wood chairs currently in the worship space, we believe that the original seating capacity of the renovated church was approximately 385. The 92 metal chairs were most likely added since the renovation was completed. Current seating capacity, including the 30 chairs in the "Chapel", is 477. This is the minimum capacity for the renovated space.

General planning guidelines for new churches suggest allowing 12 – 15 square feet per person for the worship space. The lower end is for more efficient seating layouts and minimal aisles while the higher number allows more space for movement within the worship space. The square footage of the current worship space is approximately 4,800 square feet. Dividing that number by the 385 seats in the original renovation design allows 12.5 square feet per person, which is pretty tight. If we add the additional 62 chairs that are currently in the worship space, this number drops to 10.7 square feet per person, which helps explain why the current worship space often feels cluttered and crowded. Needless to say, accommodating this many people in the same space and making the space more comfortable is quite a challenge.

The question might then arise, "Why not add on to the church?" While this is certainly possible and has been considered in the past, there are a couple of challenges to adding on to the existing building. Given the design and height of the building, an addition to the north, east or west would be very difficult and expensive. Expanding to the north would require replication of the front of the church and would create a very long nave. Expansion to the east or west would be equally difficult construction and would only add 10 seats for every three feet of addition—not a very good return on investment. That leaves expanding to the south. While this is a bit more feasible, this expansion is restricted by the structure that supports the upper part of the chancel of the church, which is only twenty feet wide—too narrow for useable worship space. Adding to these challenges is the fact that the church is within the Madison Civic Commercial Historic District, which has its own particular set of design guidelines. In a conversation with Frank Russo, Zoning Officer, he stated that the previously proposed addition to the church (which was essentially a continuation of the architectural style of the existing building) was the kind of addition they were looking for in this district. During our visioning process, we considered an addition for support spaces (such as the Gathering Space); however, it should be noted that such an addition will require an extensive review process by the Borough of Madison and would most likely require an area variance as well. This can be a very lengthy and expensive process that might give the Planning Department an opportunity to request additional improvements to the site.

More important than the restrictions placed upon the parish by either the building or the Borough of Madison are the aspirations and needs of the parishioners. The Vision Statement should always be a guide for the work of the architect when working with the parish.

## VISION STATEMENT

The parish has developed the following goal statement for their worship space:

*The St. Vincent Martyr Vision Statement calls forth a worship environment that should reflect that we are:*

- *a Eucharistic community*
- *a welcoming community responsive to and inclusive of culture, age and tradition*
- *a Catholic community*

*while reflecting both a physical and historical unity of interior and exterior and a harmonious design within, allowing for reverent movement which supports the spiritual development of the individual and the community through sacramental worship and devotion.*

## NEEDS ASSESSMENT SUMMARY

As part of the visioning process, the Liturgical Design Consultant prepared a detailed Needs Assessment Report. This report summarizes the needs of the parish at the current time and for the future. The report concludes with a list of six issues that should be addressed in any renovation of the worship space. Those issues, in priority order, are as follows:

1. Being able to fully participate in the liturgy by being able to see and hear the liturgical action without distractions is very important.
2. We are called to gather around the Table of the Lord when we come together to worship.
3. The elements that most Catholics feel clearly distinguish Catholic churches from other churches—the tabernacle and the crucifix—should be more readily visible to all who enter the church.
4. We need a better way to meet and greet each other before and after Mass without disturbing those who wish to pray quietly in the worship space.
5. The difference in style between the interior and the exterior does not contribute to making the worship space welcoming and reverent.
6. More needs to be done to reflect the cultural diversity of our parish.

## VISIONING PROCESS

We investigated a number of different options for the configuration of the worship space. Some of those options were based on leaving the altar in the center but removing the seating behind it while others were based on moving the altar from the center but still keeping it in the crossing. The problem with all these options is that the seating is greatly reduced. In the best-case scenario, the seating capacity was only 300, far below the current seating capacity of even the nave.

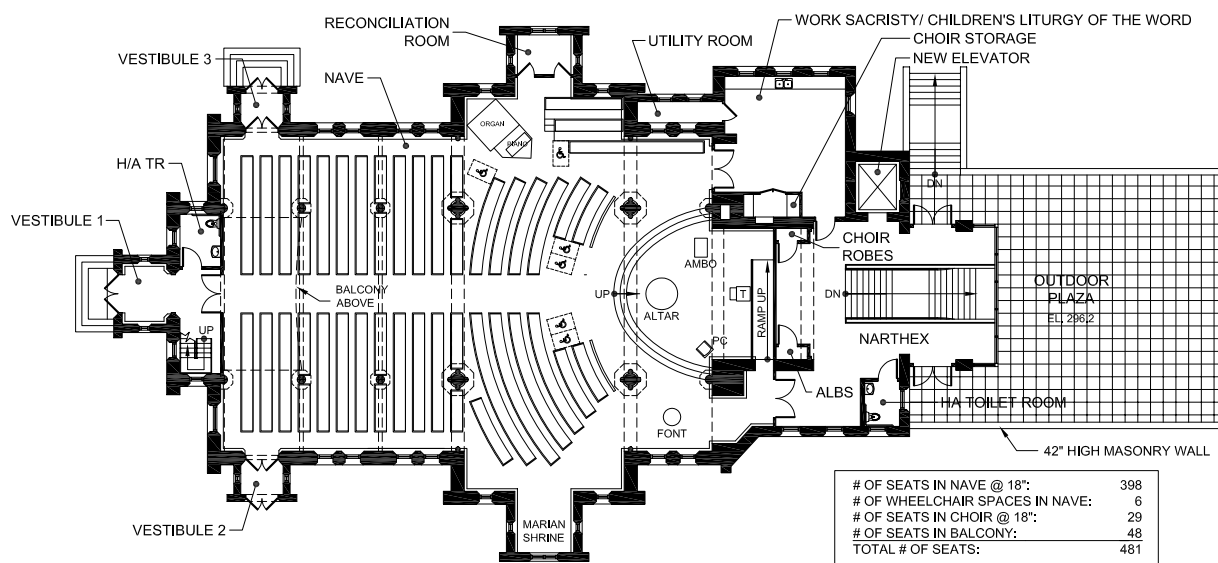
We then looked at what would happen if we replaced the existing chairs with new pews. Using a very tight arrangement of pews and providing the accessibility requested to the altar platform, we were able to provide seating for 459, which is more than the 447 seats currently in the nave but less than the total capacity of 477, including the 30 seats in the chapel. It should be noted; however, that the seating calculation for the pews is based on the code allowance of 18" per person, rather than the 21" per person that the chairs provide. Therefore, it would be possible to accommodate 459 people in the worship space but only if they sat very close to one another. This kind of closeness is not unusual for Christmas or Easter but people are rarely willing to sit this close to each other for a normal Sunday Mass. Also note that this plan retained seating behind the altar and did nothing to address the issue of distractions during Mass.

We then started to explore options that were more like the original arrangement of the church, with the altar near its original location. This option had some distinct advantages over the central altar location options—primarily the ability to create a focal point of the altar and tabernacle.

We also revisited the option that was presented during the last attempt at renovating the church. This option places the altar in front of the Green Village Rd. entrance (either screening or closing off that entrance) with the seating filling the rest of the church. While this option had the advantage of allowing most people to enter through the “back” of the worship space, it had certain drawbacks—the biggest of which was the negative history associated with the design concept, due to the project being abandoned mid-fundraising.

Once all these options had been presented and discussed, we used the six issues mentioned earlier as criteria for determining which option would best meet the stated needs of the parish, which led us to the design concept shown below.

## THE SELECTED DESIGN CONCEPT



As previously mentioned, the committee felt that this concept was the most successful at meeting the stated needs. As this is only a concept, and not an architectural design, it is not meant to be (nor was it endorsed as) as final design. It is meant only as an illustration of how the committee would like to see the selected architect approach the design of the worship space. To better understand how this concept responds to the stated needs, we shall look at each need and describe how this concept responds to the need.

1. *Being able to fully participate in the liturgy by being able to see and hear the liturgical action without distractions is very important.*

The most important element of the selected design concept is the arrangement of and relationship between the assembly, the altar and tabernacle. The altar remains on the central axis of the church building; however, it is moved toward the south end of the building so that all the seating can be in front of the altar. Most of the complaints about distractions during the Mass were due to people entering the church directly behind the altar and various people moving around the altar platform during the course of the liturgy. The other significant impediment to full participation is the lack of focus in the current arrangement. The selected design concept includes a solid wall behind the altar,

which eliminates distractions and allows for liturgical art or other design elements that help create focus on the altar. (Note that this wall does not align with the rear wall containing the stained glass window, as that would make the altar platform too deep and would take away space from the Narthex. The architect will have to determine the best way to integrate the stained glass window into the new reredos.)

All the seating, with the exception of the Music Ministry, is facing the front of the altar. The last three rows of the existing seating arrangement have been eliminated to keep the maximum distance from the farthest seat to the Presider at 72', only 12' farther than the current arrangement. To achieve the desired seating capacity, a small balcony is included in the seating plan.

The Music Ministry seating, as well as the organ console, have been moved back toward the Reconciliation Room to create a better circulation route on the east side of the worship space. This puts both the organist and the choir members under the pipe organ casework. This arrangement is less than ideal, as it takes them out of the direct sound path of the pipes, which can distort what they hear. The architect, working with an acoustical consultant, should evaluate options for avoiding such acoustical problems. These options might include modifications to the organ casework, electronic enhancements or locating the Music Ministry on the west side of the worship space, across from the organ pipes, as well as other options suggested by the acoustical consultant.

2. *We are called to gather around the Table of the Lord when we come together to worship.*

The selected design concept shows a number of curved pews and an altar platform that reflects the curve of the pews. This seating arrangement is just one way of creating the feeling of gathering around the Table of the Lord. The committee welcomes other suggestions for both the pew arrangement and the platform design, as long as they convey the sense of gathering around the Table of the Lord. When exploring such options, the architect should keep in mind the relationship between the central tower and the seating that occurs within its footprint. The committee has also identified this area as a place where the transcendence of God might be experienced, as various sacraments will take place within the volume of the tower. Ideally, the architectural treatment of this area would create a special place that proclaims the heavenly Jerusalem while actualizing the mystery of the communion between man and God. The way in which the seating for the assembly and the altar platform relate to each other should be clearly expressive of the unity of the entire holy people.

3. *The elements that most Catholics feel clearly distinguish Catholic churches from other churches—the tabernacle and the crucifix—should be more readily visible to all who enter the church.*

With a solid wall behind the altar, an ideal location for the tabernacle is created. Locating the tabernacle on axis with and behind the altar not only complies with Bishop Serratelli's directive regarding tabernacle location in new and renovated worship spaces but also addresses this issue quite well. While the tabernacle would not be visible upon entering the worship space from the south side, it would be easy to locate once within the worship space.

This new arrangement opens up several possibilities for relocating the large, existing crucifix. Consideration should be given to locating it in its previous location (see image following). However, other options could also be explored.



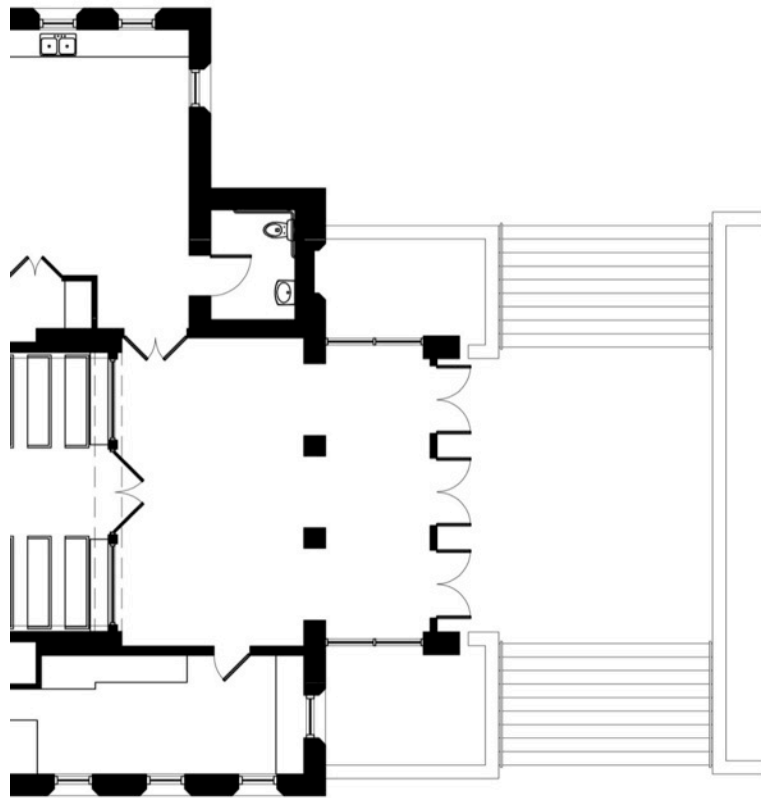
There was also a good deal of discussion about the location of the baptismal font. While the location shown on the selected design concept addresses the desire to have the font be located along the entrance path as a reminder of our journey to the altar through baptism, the location shown makes it less visible to the congregation during baptisms. The architect will want to look at alternative locations in the final design process.

4. *We need a better way to meet and greet each other before and after Mass without disturbing those who wish to pray quietly in the worship space.*

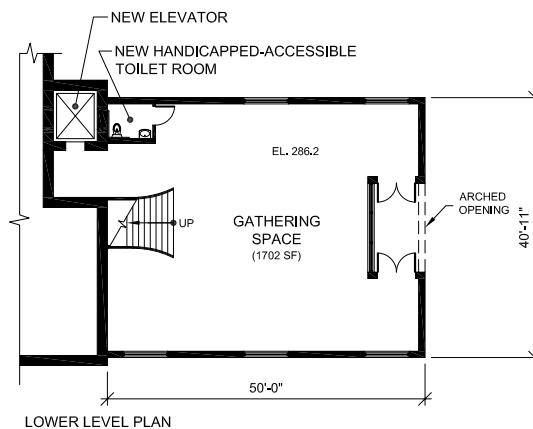
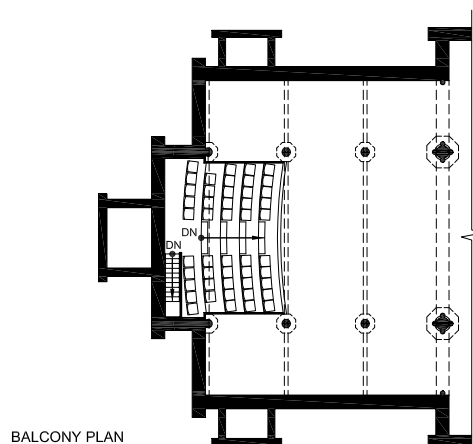
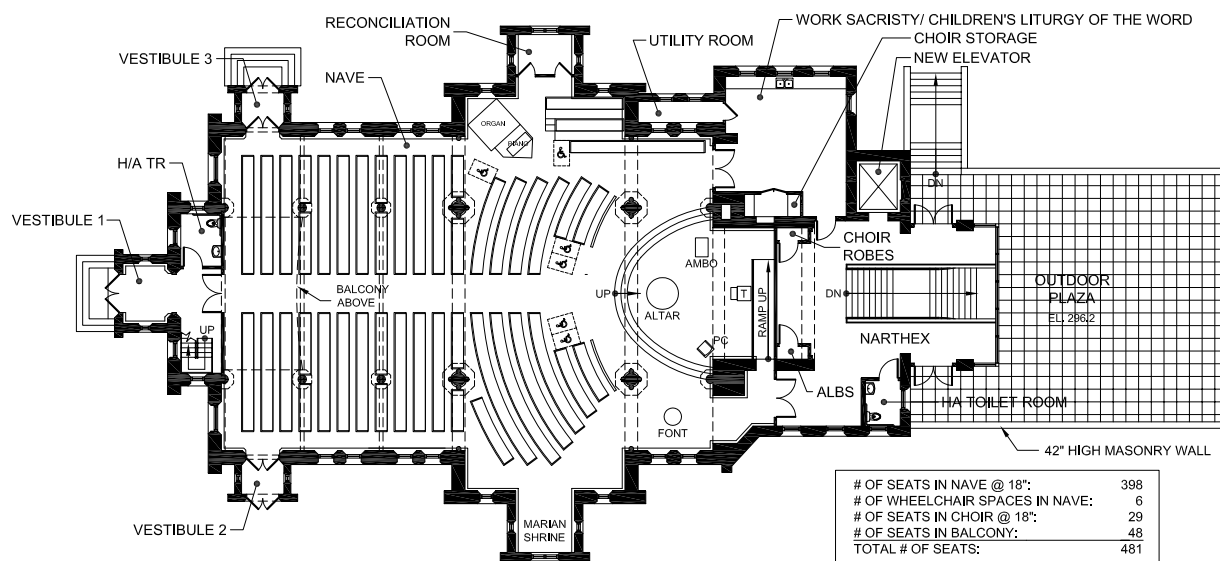
Much discussion was had about the use, size and location of a Gathering Space for St. Vincent Martyr Church. Because of the current Mass schedule, it would not be practical to try to use this space for coffee and refreshments after Mass, as the incoming traffic

(both vehicular and pedestrian) would conflict with the lingering or outgoing traffic. In the Needs Assessment Report, the committee identified a variety of uses for this space. It seems that the final uses may well be determined more by the size of Gathering Space that can be feasibly built. As mentioned earlier, there are zoning issues that would most likely impact both the size and the design of any addition for Gathering Space. Therefore, in the course of our visioning process, we looked at two basic options for enlarging the current Narthex.

The first option was to not change the roofline of the existing Narthex but to push the walls out to that roofline and reconfiguring the exterior steps. This results in a slight increase in the size of the Narthex but would probably not require any kind of variance from the Planning Board, as there would be no increase in impermeable area.



While providing a small amount of additional space, this option does nothing to improve handicapped access to the church. The second option is designed to provide access to the disabled into and through the new Gathering Space. It takes advantage of the 10' difference in elevation between the floor of the church and the northern edge of the parking lot by providing an accessible entrance at the parking lot level into a new Gathering Space at that level. A new elevator would provide access to the church. By making this a one story, partly below grade addition, the visual impact on the existing church would be minimal and approval of the look of the design by the Planning Board might be easier, as it would essentially be an extension of the current walled plaza design. This approach would also create an outdoor gathering space for use during good weather.



During our discussions, we explored having the Gathering Space in other locations. As there has already been an addition to the south side of the building, this is the only façade that is not original. An addition on this side of the building would be the least detrimental to the architectural integrity of the building. Also, experience shows that the most effective Gathering Spaces are those located along the route from the main entrance doors to the parking lot, which the proposed location provides.

This proposed Gathering Space is only included as one example. The architect will want to have further discussions with the committee as to other options that are within the budget. Also note that providing the other support spaces required (sacristies, choir rehearsal space, space for Children's Liturgy of the Word, storage spaces, etc., as identified in the Needs Assessment Report) will be part of the architect's design effort.

5. *The difference in style between the interior and the exterior does not contribute to making the worship space welcoming and reverent.*

It seems that the biggest factor contributing to this "mismatch" is the current carpet. Based on its color alone, it is clearly identified with the 1970's rather than with the 1900's, when the church was built. Replacing the carpeting with a more timeless material will go a long way toward addressing this issue. The other primary "dated" interior design element is the lighting system. The lighting fixtures do nothing to enhance the beauty of the space and do not do a great job at providing the lighting necessary for active participation in the liturgy. The architect, working with a lighting design consultant, should propose a new lighting system that fits better with the style of the church and provides proper illumination for both practical and aesthetic functions. With improvements in the painting scheme and significant improvements in lighting, the interior of this building could be as beautiful and impressive as the exterior.

6. *More needs to be done to reflect the cultural diversity of our parish.*

The architect should look at opportunities both inside and outside the existing building, as well as in any proposed additions, to create spaces where parishioners and visitors from various cultures can feel connected to the parish and their ancestral heritage and traditions.

## SUMMARY

The Renovation Committee has worked very hard with the Liturgical Design Consultant to come to consensus as to the reconfiguration of the worship space. Members of the committee feel that this design concept responds to the needs the parish as expressed by the parishioners and is consistent with the parish's Vision Statement. While acknowledging that some parishioners will be disappointed that the seating is no longer around all sides of the altar, they believe that, in the hands of the right architect, the same spirit of community that exists in the parish can be preserved and even enhanced by the design of a renovated worship space and a new gathering space. Both the parishioners and the committee members have embraced the consensus decision-making process used to determine the design direction for the renovation and look forward to continuing to use that process with the architect they select.