

Change Amid Tradition



The west façade of Washington National Cathedral, with its St. Peter and St. Paul towers, was completed in 1990, after 83 years of construction.

For more than a century, the cathedral has witnessed much change. Christianity is losing its dominance as the country becomes more pluralistic. The Episcopal Church no longer asserts the authority it once had. And the character of church design and liturgy has shifted to emphasize the immanent nature of God. Different sensibilities exist today that demand different architectural responses, and call into question the continuing validity and relevance of the cathedral's traditional design.

Yet, instead of ignoring the winds of change and quietly slipping into the role of an extravagant anachronism, Washington National Cathedral willingly engaged the challenges posed to its design and responded thoughtfully, embracing some ideas while rejecting others. The result, a traditional place of worship that has evolved into a vibrant liturgical setting, encapsulates the spiritual aspirations of not one but many generations, and embraces change without losing its architectural integrity, character, spiritual substance, and relevance.

The decision to build Washington National Cathedral in the Gothic Revival style was due largely to the strong persuasion of Henry Satterlee, the first bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington and a driving force in the creation of the cathedral. For several years, a debate raged within the cathedral community over the appropriate style for the 20th-century cathedral, involving a number of prominent voices in the world of architecture,¹ with no decision reached. Some argued for a design in the Classical Revival style, while others supported the Gothic Revival. Ultimately, in 1906, the decision was made in favor of Gothic Revival, guided by Satterlee's influence. George Bodley of England and Henry Vaughan of Boston, both noted Gothic Revivalists, were selected as the architects. In 1907, the pair presented the initial schematic design and it was accepted. As construction ensued over the next 83 years the details of the design would be developed, allowing opportunities for adjustments and alterations.

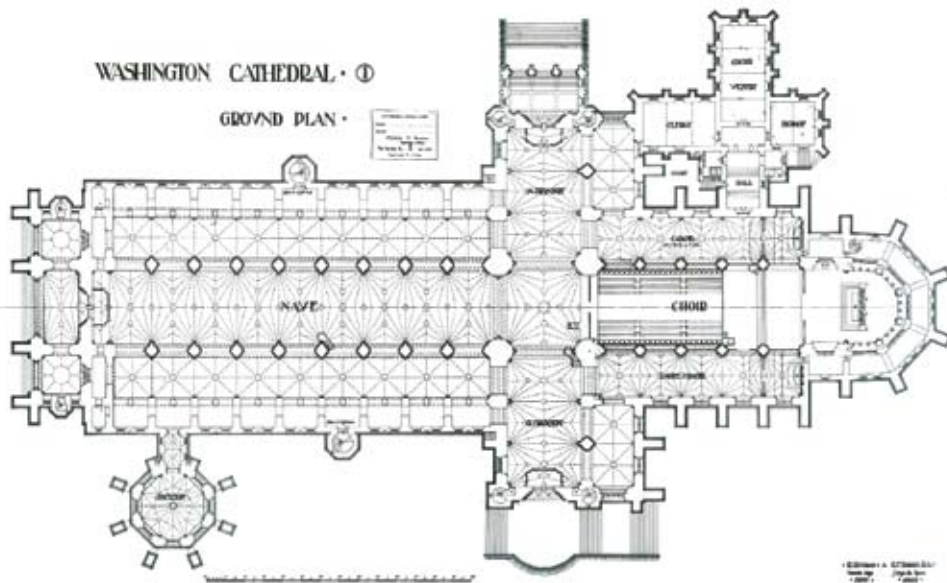
The cathedral was built from east to west, beginning with the establishment of the high altar as the primary reference point from which all construction followed. There is a Christian tradition that subscribes to the sacramental notion that the altar is the first element to be built in a new place of worship and then the rest of the building is put up around it. Consequently, as the cathedral steadily grew

BY THE REVEREND JOHN ANDER RUNKLE



In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Washington National Cathedral was first conceived, the religious sensibilities that shaped it were different from today's. At that time, Christianity was unquestionably the dominant religion

in the U.S. The Episcopal Church, the faith tradition that gave rise to the cathedral, was recognized by many as the Protestant denomination of choice by much of the country's powerful elite. And the character of church design and liturgy emphasized the transcendent nature of God. So it is no surprise that the cathedral's initial design unabashedly reflected these sensibilities through the form of Gothic Revival, the prevailing ecclesiastical expression of the time.



The original plan of 1907 by architects George Bodley and Henry Vaughan, was completed with only minor modifications.

The Great Choir circa 1932, when it comprised the sanctuary and nave, and provided a more intimate setting for worship.



in a westerly direction and the volume of enclosed worship space increased, the distance between the altar and the seated worshippers grew. The resulting chasm between the place where the clergy celebrated Holy Communion and those who would receive it caused some to feel a sense of separation and detachment.

The first primary space enclosed and used for worship in 1932 consisted of the Apse and Great Choir. At the time, however, the present wooden partitions and choir stalls that give formal definition to the space did not exist, which allowed the sense of one unified worship space. By 1938, the Crossing and North Transept were enclosed and incorporated into the worship space, nearly doubling the seating capacity. At the same time, the center of preaching moved from a temporary pulpit in the Apse to the Canterbury Pulpit erected in the Crossing – a shift that dramatically separated the pulpit from the altar. Still, seated worshippers remained in close proximity to both liturgical focal points and a degree of intimacy prevailed.

Then, in 1939, the wooden choir screen was installed between the Crossing and the Great Choir; in 1940 and 1941 the wooden partitions and choir stalls were put in place in the Great Choir. What once had been a unified worship space, albeit unstructured and unfinished, became several distinct spaces, each with specific functions and characteristics. And with this structure came a loss of proximity and intimacy. The preacher delivered the sermon in one space – the Crossing. Holy Communion was celebrated at the high altar in another – the Apse. People were seated in the North Transept, the Crossing and Great Choir, all of which created a sense of disconnection.

At this same time, the liturgical movement, which called for a greater sense of lay participation and a renewed emphasis on God's immanence in worship, began exerting influence beyond its Catholic roots in a number of Protestant traditions, including the Episcopal Church. As early as 1948, conversations began among cathedral clergy and lay leaders about the idea of placing a movable wooden altar table in the Crossing, in the midst of the gathered community. By 1952 the cathedral regularly used a movable altar table in the Crossing for Sunday worship and then removed it following the service. (During this time communion was offered only one Sunday a month; Morning Prayer was the standard fare for most Sunday worship.) The high altar continued to be a place of significance, used for all great feasts.² In the early 1980s — after the Nave was completely enclosed in 1976 and the Holy Eucharist was established as the primary



The moveable raised platform at the Crossing has been the setting for Sunday service since 1976.

Sunday liturgy — the decision was made to use only the movable altar table in the Crossing as the liturgical focal point for Sunday communion. The high altar continues to be used primarily for weekday Eucharists.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the design of Washington National Cathedral came about during the early 1950s, when cathedral leadership was making the decision to proceed with the construction of the Nave and taking it to completion. A number of people, both clergy and laity, questioned the logic and the viability of continuing to build according to the original design. Some argued the design was too large, requiring a Nave of impractical size and cost. They proposed a more contemporary design as smaller, simpler, and less expensive to build, all of which would allow the cathedral to be completed in a more timely manner. They believed a contemporary design would reflect more accurately the spirit of the present age and would support the manner in which current Christian worship was practiced. All of

these were reasonable arguments and prompted considerable debate.

After much deliberation, the cathedral leaders decided to adhere to the initial design. Dean Frank Sayre expressed the prevailing sentiments by stating that a cathedral of this size and design was needed primarily because of the spiritual impact it would have on people's lives. Practical matters certainly were important and thus far, the cathedral's design proved it offered flexibility and adaptability to meet changing needs. Yet, a place of worship should do more: it should embody the finest qualities and aspirations human beings have to offer; it should speak clearly to the people of God, reminding them of God's unfailing presence. In the mind of cathedral leadership, the traditional design offered a known certainty in that regard, while a contemporary design offered only an unknown possibility. The cathedral leaders felt called to build a structure for the ages, and placed its trust in a design that had proven itself reliable.³

As a place of Christian worship in an increasingly diverse and pluralistic society, Washington National Cathedral, since its conception, has sought to shape itself as "a house of prayer for all people" (Isaiah 56:7). One who was instrumental in helping define this initial vision was Bishop Satterlee. He understood the Church as being much broader than one denomination. For Satterlee, the Church was a holy community, open to all people. While committed to the Episcopal Church and its liturgy, he experimented with alternative forms of worship and other programs to reach a much wider audience with little or no connection to the Church. His vision for the cathedral did not include making it a home for all Christian traditions. Rather, he wanted the cathedral to be a place where people of all Christian traditions could *feel* at home. Richard Hewlett, Satterlee's biographer, pointed to the design of the cathedral's original baptistery, built immediately to the south of the cathedral, as evidence of Satterlee's intent. In Satterlee's mind, baptisms



The Crossing with the raised platform removed allows flexibility for events such as this interfaith dance.

should take place outside the cathedral, in a separate building, where people from other Christian traditions could feel more comfortable and even complete immersions would be possible. Satterlee hoped that by providing such an arrangement, all Christians would feel encouraged to use the cathedral without feeling compelled to become part of it.⁴

Since that time, a number of faith communities, Christian and Jewish, have used space at the cathedral to worship God. Russian Orthodox, Jewish Reformed, Syrian Orthodox, Polish National Catholic, Ukrainian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Hungarian Reformed, Armenian, Serbian Orthodox, Kehilla, Roman Catholic, and United Methodist, to name a few, have found the worship spaces inviting and comfortable for their congregations to use for extended periods of time. Numerous leaders from other religious traditions have visited and participated in nondenominational worship at the cathedral; services shaped to extend hospitality across theological divides and establish a

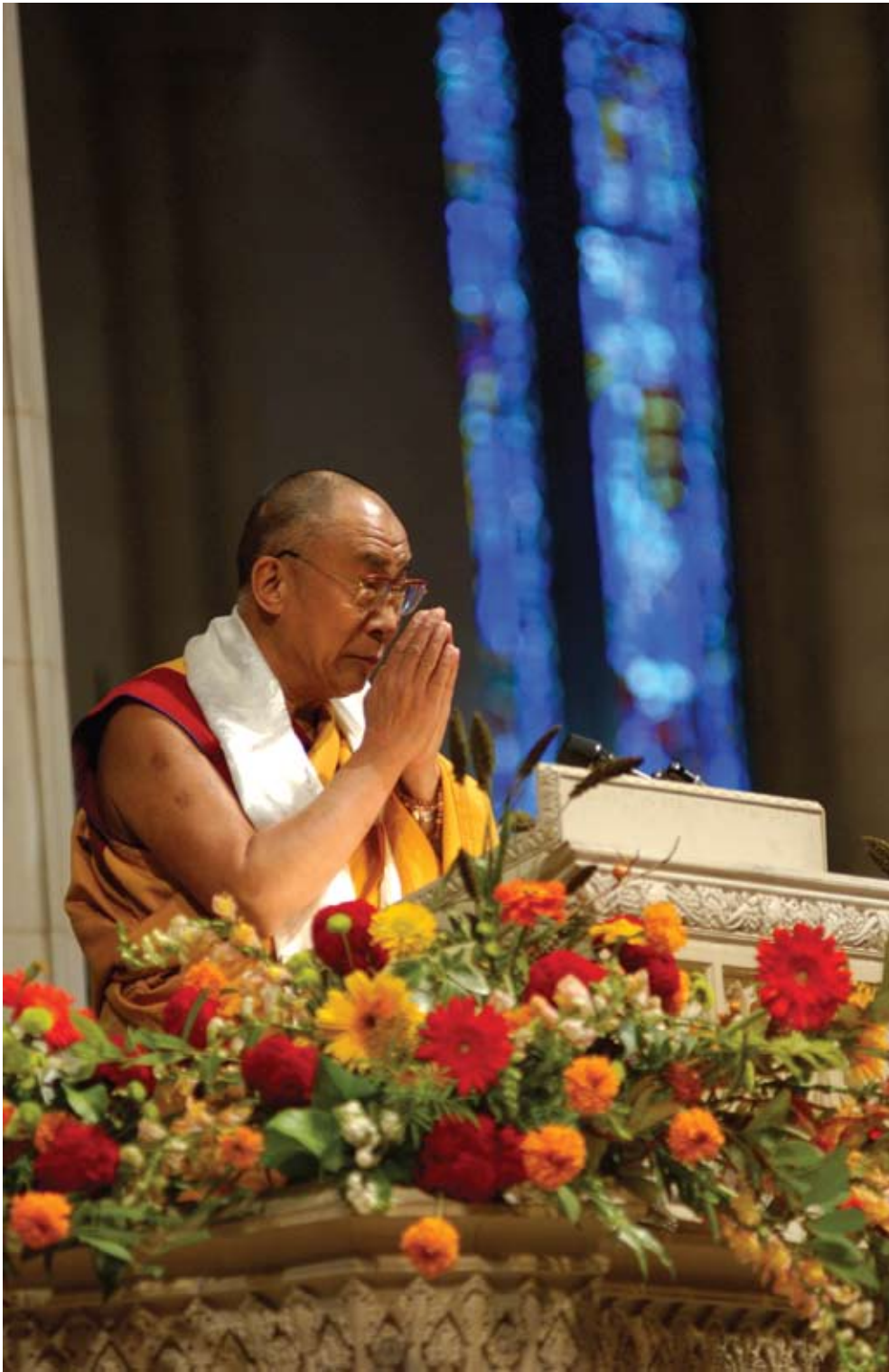
sense of common bond and shared humanity. This attitude of hospitality continues into the present as the cathedral welcomes people of all faiths and perspectives to come join in a variety of programs.

Consequently, the cathedral has come to be seen as a spiritual resource — a place for presidential inaugural prayer services, funerals for heads of state, and celebrations of national significance. The cathedral also lends itself to support secular events such as musical and dramatic performances, lectures and conferences. In the end, the cathedral's desire to be "a house of prayer for all people" is not to establish dominion, but rather to foster relationships among the multiplicity of faithful people in this country and around the world.

While Washington National Cathedral established its identity at a time when society and culture were different from today's, the cathedral has engaged the process of change and has adapted to become a responsive, affective place of worship that proves itself relevant

for a great many who come here. Why? Part of the reason is due to the fact that effective worship space demands a response. Being more than merely a convenient or useful building, a place of worship needs to make a theological statement that elicits a positive reaction from people; but sometimes a negative response can be equally efficacious. Using traditional architecture, Washington National Cathedral speaks the language of ancient Western Christendom — a language some appreciate, while others find it obsolete or offensive. Either way, it provides a means for the cathedral to engage in dialogue with a newcomer; the second just may require more effort than the first.

Another reason for the cathedral's relevance is the timeless quality and character of the space. Every effort made during the design and construction of the cathedral aspired to excellence. Decisions were guided by long-term, rather than short-term, vision. Materials such as limestone, iron, and white oak came from the earth, and all are of high quality.



The Dalai Lama is just one of the many representatives of world faiths that has visited Washington National Cathedral.

Designs are compatible with the context of the architecture, as seen in the stained glass, stone carvings, and metalwork. The end result is a space of such striking beauty, unlike most encountered in day-to-day life, that it inspires awe. Is it an ideal environment for worship? Of course not. No one place of worship can express adequately the fullness of God or the identity of God's people who gather there.

While Washington National Cathedral's

story is unique, it is not without parallel. Countless other traditionally designed places of worship face similar challenges. Changes in liturgy, polity, demographics, economic — all exert stress on the worship environment and carry the implied threat of “adapt or perish.” Too often, some react by gutting much of their worship space, claiming openness and complete flexibility to be the ultimate design solution. Yet in doing so, the space and the

worshiping community are stripped of many features that give definition to the spiritual character of the environment. What is left is an environment lacking in confidence, seemingly hesitant or unwilling to express architecturally a belief in God and life as a community of faith.

While religious sensibilities from earlier times may seem very different from our own, it does not mean they are without value. Just as we can glean wisdom from other faith traditions, we can also gain valuable insights from the architectural expressions of previous generations. Throughout its history, as Washington National Cathedral wrestled with the questions of the day, it was hesitant to discard the lessons inherited from the past, believing they contain some kernel of insight for the future.⁵

THE REVEREND JOHN ANDER RUNKLE, AS THE CONSERVATOR OF WASHINGTON NATIONAL CATHEDRAL, OVERSEES THE PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION OF THE CATHEDRAL'S BUILDING FABRIC, ALONG WITH MANAGING ITS FINE ARTS COLLECTIONS. AS AN EPISCOPAL PRIEST, HE SERVED A NUMBER OF PARISHES IN VIRGINIA, NORTH CAROLINA AND TENNESSEE. AS AN ARCHITECT, HIS CAREER REPRESENTS A DEVOTION TO THE CARE AND INTERPRETATION OF ARCHITECTURAL AND CULTURAL LANDMARKS.

NOTES

¹ Daniel H. Burnham, Charles F. McKim, Sir Casper Purden Clarke, Bernard Green, and Dr. Charles H. Moore. From Richard T. Feller, *For Thy Great Glory*, (Culpeper, VA: Community Press, 1979) p. 15.

² Protestant Episcopal Cathedral Foundation (PECF) Building Committee minutes, December 8, 1952.

³ Canon Charles S. Martin, “Memo to the Cathedral Chapter,” September 1952; “A Gothic Cathedral in 20th Century Capital,” *Cathedral Life*, Autumn 1952; 18-19, 33; PECF Building Committee minutes, January 12, 1953; PECF Building Committee minutes, December 14, 1953.

⁴ Richard Hewlett, email message to the author, May 22, 2009.

⁵ Valuable assistance in the preparation of this article came from Diane Ney, Lee Tidball, Craig Stapert, Joe Alonso, Mike Heid, Rick Dirksen, Richard Hewlett, and Harriet Runkle.

All photos courtesy of Washington National Cathedral