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William Morgan: A treasure of a new church

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A NEW CHAPEL at the Shepherd of the Valley Church in Scituate demonstrates that good architecture is more the product of the heart than the purse. Consecrated in October, the chapel is small and unassuming — an inexpensive addition to an ordinary church on a road far from “downtown.” Almost in spite of itself, the 60-seat chapel achieves a quality and dignity that fancier buildings with huge budgets rarely achieve.

Just over the Cranston line on Seven Mile Road — and close to where the Copts are building a new church, Shepherd of the Valley is the sort of white-bread Protestant church found all over exurban America. An amalgam of two older Methodist congregations, optimistically named Phenix [sic] and Hope — they once occupied attractive Victorian wooden churches of 1859 and 1875, respectively.

Shepherd of the Valley was built in 1972, employing an off-the-rack package from Stanmar, a maker of pre-fabricated buildings. Laminated ribs spanning the sanctuary, along with some furniture saved from the older churches, offer a hint of a Gothic-Revival past. The catalyst for new design was not aesthetic yearning, but a need for space.

The then pastor of Shepherd of the Valley, Lynn McCracken, asked Kyna Leski, a fellow rower at the Narragansett Boat Club, for advice. The church hired Leski and partner Chris Bardt to prepare a master plan for the entire church complex. A slow process of studies and fund-raising ensued, while

McCracken moved on to a pastorate in Middletown. The congregation resisted the idea of a new worship space as being extravagant, so the architects proposed a children's chapel — a space that could be used for other functions as well.

Leski and Bardt, professors at RISD and principals of the Providence architectural firm 3SIX0, had never designed a church. The designers, known for their theoretical studies and for an astringent work based on detailed explorations of light, as well as high-end restaurants in New York, Boston, and Memphis, would seem an odd fit for rural Rhode Island. Shepherd of the Valley, however, became a learning experience for both the congregation and the architects, with happy results.

The shape of the 1,200-square-foot cedar-wrapped chapel is not a simple rectangular box. The roof folds down to form a simple entrance framed by a water diversion of zinc-coated copper. The roof was to be copper, but the budget allowed only for asphalt shingles. Because of the twisting roof, the cornice and the ground plane of the main façade are far from parallel; the church's front rises from the human-scaled entrance to monumental-story height at altar end, creating an optically illusionistic rhomboid.

The row of 10 windows does not climb to echo the rising roofline, although the openings become less wide as they march toward the taller end. Hardly noticeable, but this kind of subtle shaping makes for a strong and constantly changing perspective. In lesser hands this would be just a row of windows. In a reversal of usual practice, the windows do not reach upward, but touch the ground, allowing for more varied natural illumination.

Also, the narrowing window openings are unusually deep — a Leski/Bardt signature detail — quietly reconfiguring the light as one moves through the interior space. There are no stained-glass windows here, but the manipulation of light creates an aura of mystery. A skylight inserted between wall and roof at the altar end further heightens this sense of the supernatural. This hidden light source is a simple, inexpensive and dramatic device that politely injects a little Italian Baroque into American Protestantism.

In designing their first church, the architects tried to balance the practical needs of the congregation with explorations of the spiritual. They imagined the building as an endless spiral. The floor, ceiling, and tapering, slightly pitched walls — built of cedar and Brazilian mahogany — form a continuous container, almost as if the chapel interior were the inside of a wooden bowl made on a lathe. These details are as thoughtful as they are understated: Not obvious, they play on the subconscious and offer a slight tension, perhaps necessary when contemplating the metaphysical.

The children's chapel is only a part of a future plan that may include a larger main sanctuary. In the meantime, one suspects that the congregation will use this worship space more and more. Without fanfare, and without spending a fortune, the church became a patron of good architecture. And, because of their desire to create a sacred space, the architects gave Shepherd of the Valley Church a real treasure.

William Morgan, an occasional contributor and a Providence-based architectural historian, is the author of *American Country Churches* (Abrams).