Designer builds churches to appeal to 'people of God'

By BRUCE SCHULTZ

LAFAYETTE — Pim Van Dijk wants to make sure that churches he helps design are more than buildings constructed of brick, mortar, glass and wood; with four walls, a roof and the usual steeple.

"It's not just statuary and stained glass," he said in his melodious Dutch accent. "It's what people do."

Churches should create a religious environment open to its parishioners, Van Dijk believes.

Van Dijk (pronounced van diik) moved to the U.S. from Holland in 1980 to work for two years with an uncle, Stan Gall in Crowley, designing furniture and liturgical art. He also began restoring statues.

Next, he joined the Angele Guidry Partnership, a Lafayette architectural firm, where he now works as a liturgical consultant. With the architectural firm, he started having a role in the renovation of churches and the design of new churches.

He has worked on renovation projects for the St. Martin de Tours Catholic Church in St. Martinville, and St. Patrick Catholic Church in New Orleans, but his work has not been restricted to Catholic churches.

The trend in new church design is to open the building to the people, to make the pulpit more accessible, and to decrease the distance from the parishioners to the pastor.

The 13th Century Gothic design, with its peaked arches, is still revered as the typical church, he said.

"If you ask people to draw a church, they still draw a little Gothic church."

The Gothic era established a clearly-defined hierarchy, with the clergy at the end of the church sitting high above the people, and the choir at the opposite end, above the parishioners.

Van Dijk says he considers old style "not people friendly."

"People were only allowed into the building by the grace of God. This house we are building now is for the people of God."

The plans for the new St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Milton incorporate touches of local architecture to convey a sense of place. Parts of the structure will resemble small Cajun homes, and the outdoor environment has been made a vital part of the church.

Van Dijk becomes concerned with the architectural details down to the configuration of the confessionals.

Above all, he believes it is essential to include parishioners in the design process, to determine what kind of church they want. With many individuals giving their input to the design, he said, it's likely more parishioners will become motivated in the fund-raising process to generate money to build the structure.

"You have to be very careful," he said. "You have to involve the people."

Van Dijk is himself Catholic and knowledgeable of biblical teachings which he incorporates into his work. In turn, he said, his work has deepened his faith.

Van Dijk credits his mentor, Dr. Marcheta Mauck of LSU, a liturgical consultant who is an expert in medieval art, for opening his eyes to his current way of approaching church design.

After one of his early church renovations, he said, Mauck was critical of his efforts for copying his pieces and pieces of other churches. It was through her criticism that Van Dijk says he discovered that church design can be elevated to a higher plane.

He is currently working with her on a renovation project in Mobile, Ala.

In May, he will be certified as a liturgical consultant through the Institute of Liturgical Consultants, organized by the Archbishop of Chicago.

Art is essential to convey religious symbolism in the church, he believes, and original artwork best achieves that goal.

By copying another piece of art, he said, "we have gotten the apple's peel but not the content."

Duplication of another's creation is nothing more than a cliche, he believes.

"We have to find new ways of making the old symbols speak."

Van Dijk is currently working on a wood-carving for a confessional in Crowley. The piece shows a father figure reaching out to a young man. From his project, like many others, Van Dijk says he gets more than just a fee.

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