



# PROCLAMATION BY DESIGN

*The Visual Arts in Worship*

Karmen Krahn and Leslie James



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# Table of Contents

<i>Foreword by Marlene Kropf</i> .....	v
<i>Acknowledgments</i> .....	vii
<i>Introduction</i> .....	ix
<i>A Call to Twenty-first Century Worship</i> .....	xii



## **The Gallery** .....

<i>Chapter 1 The God We Praise</i> .....	3
<i>Chapter 2 The Scripture We Proclaim</i> .....	17
<i>Chapter 3 The Design We Offer</i> .....	31
<i>Chapter 4 The People We Become</i> .....	47



## **The Catalogue** .....



## **The Studio** .....

In the Liturgical Closet .....	86
The Liturgical Year .....	89
The Colors of the Liturgical Year .....	91
A Spectrum of Design .....	94
Setting up a Visual Arts Ministry .....	96
Planning Pearls .....	99
Ritual Design—Symbols in Motion .....	101
Dramatic Symbols .....	105

Safety: A Primer .....	109
Candle Care .....	112
Cleaning the Closet .....	115
Found Art, Shared Art .....	118
For Smaller Gatherings .....	120
Cautions .....	123
Evaluation: The Artist's Prayer .....	125
Worship—in Concert .....	128
<i>Glossary</i> .....	130
<i>Notes</i> .....	132
<i>Recommended Readings for the Studio</i> .....	135
<i>Bibliographies</i> .....	139
<i>Art and Photo Credits</i> .....	143
<i>About the Authors</i> .....	144

# Foreword

This is the book for which many pastors and churches have been waiting. In a time when the lively role of the visual arts in worship is being rediscovered, we need a trustworthy guide to help us navigate this colorful new landscape.

Here is what often happens: Some well-intentioned person decides the worship space needs a little decorating. A bouquet of flowers here or a cluster of candles there brightens the space. Before long, however, such persons discover that the urge to decorate has a far deeper source and much greater potential. As they hear Scripture proclaimed and sung in worship, they become aware of a growing desire to bring the Word to life in visible form.

In church traditions that have offered little guidance for this transition from decorator to illuminator/interpreter of Scripture, many congregations stumble. How do the visual arts faithfully proclaim the Word? How do they express the congregation's theological commitments? How does visual art become integrated with other elements of worship? How do artists receive feedback that will help them learn and grow? Who assists them in practical issues of scale, appropriate materials, and finances? And finally, where do these folks store all the "stuff" needed to fulfill their call?

*Proclamation by Design* offers thoughtful, tested guidance for each of these questions and many more. Among resources for visual arts in worship, it is unique in its focus on Scripture as the organizing center of worship. Karmen Krahn and Leslie James gracefully articulate a theology of worship and give plenty of practical guidance—everything from organizing a liturgical closet to cleaning up spilled wax. They make clear connections among the congregation's encounter with God, its life together, and its mission in the world.

I am especially grateful for the binational partnership that made this book possible. Following in the tradition of our denomination's publication of hymnals and curriculum, Karmen and Leslie collaborated from their respective locations in Saskatchewan and Kansas, working tirelessly and against great personal odds to complete the project. Their vision and commitment are evidence of God's grace and the Spirit's renewing energy. To each of them I am personally grateful. And in time to come, churches that use this resource will also be pro-

foundly grateful for the enlivening worship it inspires.

*Proclamation by Design* offers a vision that the postmodern church needs. At the heart of Christian faith is the Incarnate Word, which every Christian is called to embody in daily life. This book will equip the church to experience the Word-made-flesh in worship, thereby inviting worshippers to see and taste and touch the glory of God and to be transformed to love and serve Christ in the world. I commend this book with great joy!

—*Marlene Kropf*

*Denominational Minister of Worship (Mennonite Church USA)  
and Associate Professor of Spiritual Formation and Worship  
(Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary)*

# Acknowledgments

This book is the product of a long journey of collaboration among Mennonite leaders and congregations across North America. Following a consultation of publishers and educators in January of 2001, a group gathered to discuss the creation of a congregational worship resource on the visual arts in worship. In November of the same year, Mary Lou Weaver Houser, Leslie James, Karmen Krahm, Michael Yoder, and Pamela Bressler Yoder met in Indiana with Marlene Kropf, Minister of Worship for Mennonite Church USA, to work further on a proposal. Karmen was affirmed as the principal writer for the project, with Leslie as collaborator.

In 2004 we received a green light from Mennonite Publishing Network to develop a manuscript. We interviewed worship leaders and visual artists in several locations in the United States and Canada, and we integrated our findings and photographs into this book. We obviously could not contact every Mennonite church, and we are sure that we missed some wonderful examples of the arts in local congregations. Eventually, over two years, we collected stories and photos from nine states and four provinces (see page 142).

We wish to thank the following artists, pastors, and congregational representatives who responded so graciously to our queries: Dorothy Dick, Esther Kreider Eash, Joanna Fenton Friesen, Matt Friesen, Todd Friesen, Carol Sue Hobbs, Michelle L. Hofer, Vicki Hofer-Holdeman, Mary Lou Weaver Houser, Norma Johnson, Joe Loganbill, Doug Luginbill, Eric Massanari, Jane Peifer, Barbara Peterson, Joanna Pinkerton, Chuck Regier, Elsie Rempel, Frances Ringenberg, Deb Schmidt, LaVerle Schrag, Kris Shenk, Lois Siemens, Randall Spaulding, Pauline Steinmann, Lavina Thiessen, Mark Wasser, Tonya Ramer Wenger, Lynette Wiebe, and Laurie Yoder.

This project also would not have been possible without the generous financial support of the former Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries (for meeting expenses) and the Schowalter Foundation (for photography and travel expenses).

An immense debt of gratitude goes to our editor, Byron Rempel-Burkholder, who helped us form an unwieldy and often untamed manuscript into the book you hold in your hands.

We also offer special thanks to Marlene Kropf of Mennonite Church USA and Eleanor Snyder of Mennonite Publishing Network for their patient and faithful shepherding of this project to fruition. Finally, to all those unnamed loved ones, friends, and colleagues who, even on the most unendurable days, endured us, encouraged us, brought us coffee and chocolate, and continue to speak to us in spite of it all, we offer our deepest appreciation and gratitude.

—KK and LJ



# Introduction

In the concentric circles of congregational life, worship is at the center. Contrary to the configuration of most pews, this is the shape of worship. Worship is a promised presence, for where two or three are gathered, there God has promised to be. What we say and touch and see in that presence is of vital importance to our growth in faith, our formation in community, and our corporate witness to the world. Worship is a response to what God has done and continues to do. And it is in worship that we are formed into a people shaped as, attuned to, and participating in God's activity in the world.

"Be thou my vision," we sing, understanding from Jesus' many parables and healings that vision is a cardinal metaphor for faith, and that faith is the beginning of having our lives transformed. "God be in my eyes and in my looking," we pray, understanding that the world looks profoundly different when we see it through God's eyes. Set within the context of corporate prayer and Scripture, glimpses of God's intended kingdom form that motivating set of images toward which we move. Images of salvation from both testaments erase the boundaries between worship and mission and the sluggishness that befalls us between Sunday and Monday. What we see in worship becomes the goal of Christian service. What we experience in worship shapes us as the people of God.

There is a long history in Protestant worship of creating formative images primarily through words and music. Certainly these are important avenues. The Word is broken open through the words of the sermon and reflected in the prayers of the gathered body. The singing of God's praises, enjoined by the Psalms, is a dearly held tradition of Protestant worship. At the same time, Protestants have been reluctant to use visual images in worship and, at some junctures of their history, have even prohibited them. Spaces of simple design and empty walls have long been a hallmark of Mennonite meeting places. Yet even in such surroundings, the visual has spoken. The centrality of the pulpit has spoken to the importance of the proclamation of the Word. The height and openness of the space has spoken of the vastness of God. Plain windows, creating frames for sky and trees and fields, have invited reflection on the beauty and wonder of God's creative energies.

As we move further into the twenty-first century, into what is being called the postmodern age, the visual and the experiential are coming to the fore—not as replacements for the spoken word, or for the voices raised in praise, or even for accepted symbols of pulpit or worship space, but as additional and vital avenues for the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ and the formation of God’s people. The intentional introduction of the arts has the same purpose as that of preaching or hymn-singing—to proclaim the Word of God. The focus of this book is the proclamation of the Word of God through the art and arts of worship in our assemblies. We hope to offer both foundational and practical help for integrating the arts into worship.

We begin with a “Call to Twenty-first Century Worship,” a brief statement reflecting our time and location, our opportunity and responsibility, for the proclamation of the gospel early in the postmodern age. To talk about faith as Christians is to talk about belief in God revealed through Jesus, the risen Christ, who is still in our midst by the Spirit. In a postmodern, post-Christendom world, we must remember that what we see shapes us; what we gaze upon affects our vantage point; and that upon which we meditate and in whose company we pray guides our worldview. Worship, at the center of Christian life, formation, and witness, is where this happens.

The book is then divided into three main sections—a series of foundational essays, a catalogue of color photos, and a set of hands-on ideas and helps. The first section is called “The Gallery.” Imagine walking into a large, metropolitan art museum. Once inside the door, we are invited to begin a journey through rooms of art, each focusing on a particular period, artist or theme. Exploring each exhibit builds our understanding, and we leave the museum ready to reflect on the ways in which all that we have seen is interrelated. There are four such rooms in our gallery. The first considers the God we praise; the second, the Scripture we proclaim; the third, the design we offer; and the fourth, the people we become.

Next is a catalogue of art created for worship in particular congregations for a particular service or series. When we enter a gallery in the museum, we are not met simply by a description, but by actual works of art that embody the period or artist or theme. The art brings the theory to life and makes the visit truly memorable. The art is not offered as pattern to copy, but as illustration and inspiration.

Finally, in “The Studio,” we will find tools and work spaces for creating art for worship. At the start of an art class, students are invited to tour the studio in order to become familiar with available materials, to locate the tools for good composition, and to become familiar with both good technique and safe handling of materials and tools. A thorough tour of the “stu-

dio” in this book will allow us to become familiar with the materials in the closet; to look at the design, interpretative, and evaluative tools that can help guide our work and build our confidence; and to take special note of the suggestions regarding safety and good technique. Following the initial tour, feel free to use the studio as your own. Dig in, with heart and soul, with mind and hands. May the God of all colors bless and keep you. May the faces of God shine upon you and be gracious to you. May God’s full palette be revealed to you and give you joy.

The art created in this studio is meant to be an integral part of congregational worship. It does not exist as a monument to itself, but to serve the God we praise, to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, and to highlight the work of the Spirit in forming God’s people. In the end, the arts in worship are offered to God in the company of worshippers in much the same way first fruits and the first-born were brought to the temple. May God do with them as God will. May they lead us to pray and wonder, to praise and confess. May the God we praise use the Scripture we proclaim, through the design we offer, to form the people we become.

—*Karmen Krahn*

*Leslie James*

*Season of Epiphany, 2007*



# A Call to Twenty-first Century Worship

*To the worshipping church postmodern people are saying,  
“Grant us . . .”*

## **a place of gathering**

If Jesus, the risen Christ, plays the role of host  
then visual art shall adorn the Host’s front door.  
It is a banquet table lovingly set with the nourishing Word.  
It need not (and ought not) always be beautiful,  
only spirited and true. Welcome to worship.

## **a wordless sanctuary**

Wordless evocative biblical art is its own call to worship.  
Where modernity has been criticized as “long-winded,”  
postmodern worship is refreshingly light on words.  
Wordlessness is pastoral care.

So, if the Christ candle is lit upon entry we need wait for no verbal cue.  
Christ is here. Let us pray.

## **an engaging mystery**

What science did in modernity in helping us understand  
the mysteries of the universe,  
the arts are doing now in helping us encounter the mysteries of God.

Science peers through a microscope.  
Worship peers through prayer—  
    offering a glimpse of strangers becoming friends,  
        granting access to new and surprising faces of God,  
        imagining the kingdom as Jesus did.

### **a story intricately woven**

One Sunday at a time the worship leader becomes a story weaver.  
    The warp is strung beforehand—Scripture below, prayer above,  
    ritual below, songs above—round and round til Sunday comes.  
Using the shuttle of imagination, the worship leader sends  
    the *individual* story through the weave of *corporate* story until the two  
    become part of the entire tapestry of salvation history.

The tapestry is only finished at the time of the benediction.

### **imaginative license**

Visual art in worship is not an artistic luxury. It is ethically imperative,  
    for if moral, spiritual, and mental transformation begin with  
        imagining new ways of being, we cannot worship without it.  
Peace-making begins when we imagine what peace looks like  
    according to God's original design. We do this in worship.  
Forgiveness and hope are not so much doctrinal propositions  
    as they are mind-expanding ways of seeing.

### **room and reason to participate**

Visual art is a prompt and a permit to move.  
    "Still life" was never meant to sit still. In the hands of people  
    the church's symbols come to life in the most dramatic visual design of all.  
God's people abandoned in praise is at once worship and mission—  
    for what more does God desire?

What could be more attractive to the watching world?  
Modern worship sat. Postmodern worship moves.

### **a new calendar**

The modern calendar has left people tired, scared, overwhelmed and broke.  
As colorful and symbol-rich as its cultural counterpart,  
the Christian calendar allows us to locate ourselves in time marked  
by banners, not sticky notes. Color, not credit cards.  
Candles, not headlights and symbols beyond the computer's toolbar.  
Here, we find icons of transcendent meaning and eternal value.

### **a new clock**

By design, modern clocks tick in electrical silence.  
By design, liturgical clocks tick audibly in chimes  
and colors and loud hosannas. What time is it? "He is risen!"  
By design, modern clocks are sharp and angular, glowing red.  
By design, the theological clock is round and welcoming,  
coming around again and again with annual symbols of deliverance.  
Modern clocks are alarming; the biblical clock is motivating.  
We carry modern time with us on our wrists;  
biblical time transports us in memory and hope.  
By design, modern clocks tick without ceasing. This is a falsehood.  
God's clock, by design, reminds the church of rest, renewal  
and ultimate fulfillment. This is true.

### **a trustworthy ritual path**

Full-being encounter with mystery in Jesus Christ.  
Entered into together, experience of community, imagining a new way of being.  
Environment in which the Spirit is given space and time  
to act and do as the Spirit of God would choose,  
transforming messy, clumsy rehearsal

into distinctive, revolutionary reality.  
Envisioning the completeness of the Kingdom of God  
amidst the already and the not yet.

### **liturgical freedom**

The church is a body of freewill participants.  
May the art be corporately made, claimed, and interpreted.  
The church's worship is public.  
May the art be relevant, rich enough in meaning for all who gather.  
The church worships with intelligence, willfulness, and virtue.  
May the art be free of cliché, propaganda, and moralistic prescription.  
The church gathers freely in joy and thanksgiving.  
May the art inspire us to confess and relive ongoing suffering.  
The church gathers freely in suffering and despair.  
May the art remind us that reconciliation is the hope God wants us to see.

### **an acknowledgment of reality**

For the worship leader as prophet—the visionary, passionate truth-speaker—  
evocative art serves as an act of solidarity, of pastoral care.  
For the gathered, looking to see God, evocative art invites them to  
revelation, an experience of God.

*And so,*

Seeing ourselves rightly, we confess and repent.  
Seeing the world more justly, we are motivated for mission.  
Seeing ourselves with undeserved proximity to God's holiness, we praise.