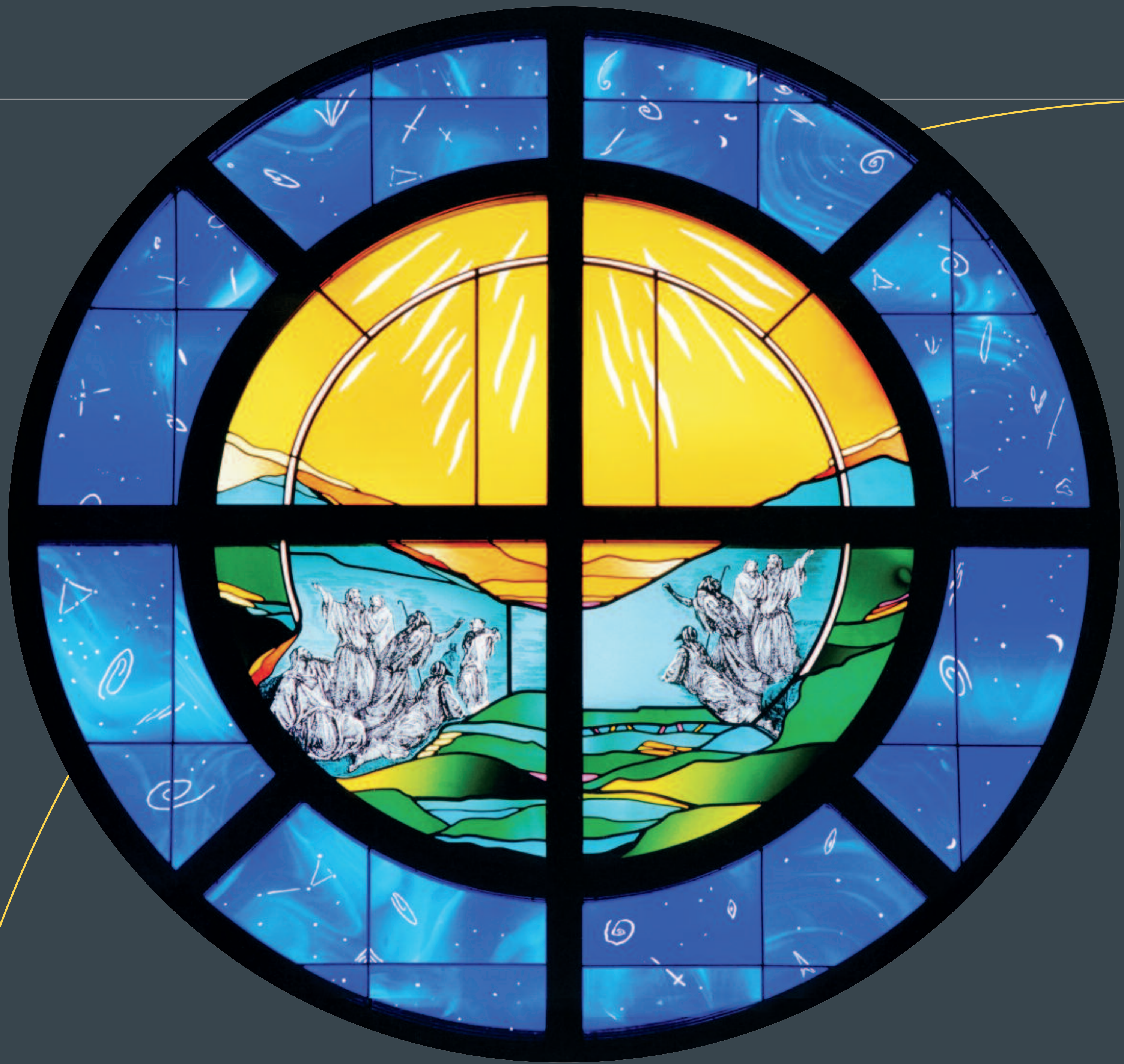

Peter Coffman

To Tell Stories at St. John Lutheran Church, Dublin, Ohio

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"WE WANTED OUR STAINED GLASS to tell stories." There is no hesitation in Stephanie Freiberg's voice as she explains the position of the building committee for her new church. "We didn't want it just to be symbols or abstract things. We wanted people to be able to tell what it was."

Hundreds of miles away in her Toronto studio, stained glass artist Sarah Hall reflects on the conservative, figural windows which Stephanie Freiberg — and millions of others — grew up with, and on the acres of derivative, sentimental, recycled saints that continue to find their way into contemporary architecture.

"I hate seeing that stuff in churches," she says. "It drives me crazy. That's where we should have the strongest and most original and extraordinary work. Not fill it up with a bunch of schmaltzy schlock."

At first blush, these two don't sound like a promising team. Certainly not a team that could agree upon and execute an ambitious set of stained glass windows. But they did, and with spectacular results, at St. John Lutheran church, completed late last year in Dublin, Ohio. The process they underwent to reach a consensus puts into sharp focus both the challenges and rewards of the artist-client relationship.

Some would say that organized religion and fine artists have not shown a lot of team spirit since the

Top: interior view of chancel and *Resurrection* window, St. John Lutheran Church, Dublin, OH ✧ *1998e*

Bottom: Coloured light reflections from the east facing *Resurrection* window above the altar

Overleaf: *Ascension* north rose window, St. John Lutheran Church, Dublin, OH ✧ *1998e*

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beginning of the twentieth century. The church has become so used to mistrusting contemporary artists, and artists have become so used to avoiding the church that neither side seems to realize just how perverse the split would have looked in any other century.

For most of western history, the church and artists have been considered natural allies. Not now. "The church forcibly separated herself from Modernism," explains art historian and Jesuit Peter Larisey. "There was a time when the Christian Church was the form-giver of the culture, but this is no longer the case." Is the divorce final? Larisey's response is pragmatic as much as philosophical: "To close that gap, you have to know who the artists are, and the church by and large doesn't."

This would seem to cut off stained glass artists from what has arguably been the most sublime and distinctive contribution of their medium: the enriching of spaces of worship. Nevertheless, from the moment the congregation of St. John Lutheran decided to replace their overcrowded nineteenth-century church building, stained glass was part of the plan.

"We have to make our faith tangible," explains David Reimann, pastor of St. John. "The more senses that are involved in the teaching and learning process, the deeper the lesson will be felt and experienced and held on to. That's why the arts are so critical in church."

But just what did the congregation of St. John mean by "art"? Not surprisingly, it was largely informed by what their forefathers had understood art, especially liturgical art, to be. This is not philistinism, but a profound, affirmative connection to their heritage.

"This church was founded in 1855," Pastor Reimann points out. "There's this tie to the past that we couldn't ignore."

Philip Markwood, the architect chosen for the commission, immediately recognized the central importance of heritage at St. John: "This is a kind of living community that began a long time ago, and they have an enormous connection, emotionally and literally, to the past. One could just sense that they wanted to have something that they could recognize as being part of that."

In terms of stained glass, "the past" means depictions of stories and figures. In North America, it specifically means the nineteenth century, an era of huge, comforting — some would say sentimental — saintly figures in stained glass.

The tradition of figural windows is, of course, far older than that. In the Middle Ages, glittering coloured windows were the "poor man's Bible," explaining sacred stories to the illiterate, at that time made up of almost everyone outside the church. This is the tradition that North America appropriated in the nineteenth century; this is the tradition that, to this day, is perpetuated by studios whose idea of design is to allow clients

to choose their windows from a pattern book of venerable, tried and true designs. And, being entirely new to the game of commissioning stained glass, this is the route that the building committee at St. John initially took.

This seems natural enough, but the more one thinks about it, the more unsatisfying it becomes. The congregation at St. John isn't "poor." They know how to read. Moreover, they live in the twenty-first century, not the twelfth, or even the nineteenth. Their sensibilities are different. Their architecture is different. And their architect, as he pictured cookie-cutter windows inserted into his design, began to worry.

Markwood had taken great pains to create a building that would express this community, here and today. As he imagined it adorned with windows from a pattern book, it wasn't a pretty picture: "There was a little shuddering going on. Fear and trembling."

The shuddering grew not out of artistic ego, but out of a deep commitment to realizing his client's vision: "This was a place created for these people, this congregation, at this place, at this point in time. It was hard for me to grasp how that would be reinforced by picking out windows that had been used in many churches over time. I was convinced that they could have something that was better connected and more a part of who they are."

Enter Sarah Hall, an award-winning stained glass artist from Canada with an international reputation and portfolio. "What I offer, and what other artists offer, is a vision of who they are," says Hall. "It's finding a visual picture of who they are and what their spiritual journey is."

The year before, Hall had completed a stunning set of windows for St. Andrew Catholic church in Columbus. A visit to St. Andrew impressed Freiberg: "Just seeing the colour inside the

Coloured light on the stone font cast from the south facing *Nativity* window

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church, and the reflections of the light everywhere; it was just really nice to see that. She pays such attention to how the light comes into the church and how it's going to look inside."

Nevertheless, at first, according to Freiberg, the building committee at St. John was a bit intimidated by the very idea of a stained glass artist: "We thought, oh my gosh, a special artist who only does stained glass … we're not going to be able to afford it."

The gentle persistence of Philip Markwood was critical in steering them away from the mass-produced glass they had been considering up to that point: "They thought that was the best they could do, and I helped them see that they could do better. It wasn't a matter of dollars, it was a matter of refining the question."

With a professional stained glass artist on board, there was bound to be some re-framing of the answer, too. To put it simply, Sarah Hall was never going to produce the kind of windows that the congregation at St. John had grown up with.

"Those literal pictures, I feel, are not adequate for our spiritual life at this time. I feel they are too simple; we live in a different time, and we need to reflect our own time in our work." This conviction goes back to Hall's training at the Swansea College of Art in the 1970s: "It was explicitly part of our instruction never to do figurative work. It was considered that figurative work was passé, because we were all literate. The function of glass was one of modulating and mediating light, and providing a fitting atmosphere."

It's a wonderful thing when client and artist find themselves immediately in sync from the word go, sharing a single vision of what the project is about and how it should look. Unfortunately, reality rarely works that simply, and it didn't at St. John. For David Reimann, Stephanie Freiberg, and the building committee, the picture — the story — remained paramount. "The purpose has to be the message," insists Pastor Reimann. "It's not just a series of lines and drawings. Any artist worth his salt always has something in the back of his mind that he's trying to communicate."

The notion that mere "lines and drawings" don't communicate anything is the ball and chain that contemporary art has had to drag around for decades. It must seem as odd to contemporary artists as it seems axiomatic to their detractors. For whatever reason, it's a burden that was lifted from the art of music years ago. No one could possibly suggest that a Bach fugue is merely notes and rhythms without narrative or that it fails to communicate anything meaningful. The literary critic Northrop Frye once remarked that people who insist on realism in, say, a painting of a cow, do so because they would really rather be looking at a cow than at a painting. This may well be true of worshippers; who wouldn't rather look at a saint than a window? This preference, however, is not a promising recipe for getting the most out of stained glass artists and windows.

Nor, many would argue, is the placement of conservative, traditional windows in contemporary architecture. This is a form of visual dissonance with which Sarah Hall has some reluctant familiarity: "They do a tremendous disservice to contemporary buildings. I think that there isn't a good integration of heavily painted and sentimental pictures with contemporary architecture. Contemporary architecture is rather clean and spare; it has a certain tautness to it."

For Hall, successful stained glass isn't about feel-good pictures; it's about working with the fundamentals of architecture — space, mass, and light — and finding its correct place in that mix. "It has to fit beautifully and appropriately into the building, and it has to be a real part of its materials. And to be a real part of light, and the interaction of light in the space. Those things are just as important as whatever imagery is being carried."

She likens stained glass to a veil that wraps the building: "It gives a threshold that clear glass windows don't give to the space. It mediates between the interior and exterior, and it should do it beautifully and gracefully and appropriately. When it fails, it's heavy and crude. It doesn't work."

This was the sensibility that Sarah Hall took with her to St. John. When the building committee first saw Hall's work, they were, if not quite shell-shocked, at least a little mystified.

"This is a real traditional church," recalls Stephanie Freiberg. "Everything we saw was kind of contemporary. We were a little bit hesitant because none of the work that we had seen looked like us."

Pastor Reimann also recalls a certain initial resistance: "I'll have to say that in the committee meetings, there was a sense of, 'Sarah we like you, we like your work, but we're afraid to say what we really think.' We didn't want to offend Sarah, because we valued her ideas and her work, and we wanted to allow her the artistic freedom to create something. And yet, what we had seen was just too modern for us."

There's obviously a problem here, and it's the artist's problem. Not because she is wrong, but because she is the only one who can solve it. This is partly because she has far more experience in these matters than the committee and partly because the only thing that will solve a design problem is the production of more designs. A serious artist will want to help a client push the envelope, but there are limits.

"You take these kinds of situations and you help people go as far as they can, but you don't take them farther than that," explains Philip Markwood. "You don't disenfranchise anybody, but you want them to flex their muscles as much as they can."

For Hall, the process begins with dialogue. She begins her client presentations with some background on the history of stained glass — where it came from, what it has looked like at

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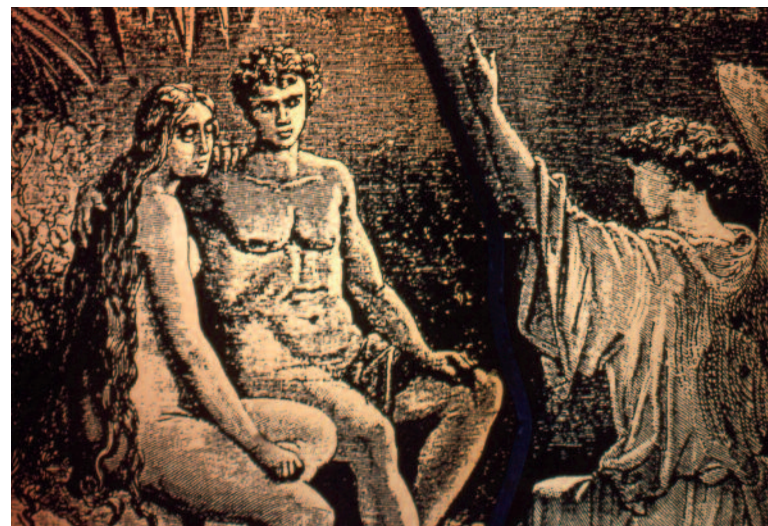
Detail of angel at the tomb, *Resurrection* window above the altar, St. John Lutheran Church, Dublin, OH ✧ *1998e*



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Old Testament aisle window and detail showing Adam and Eve in the *Garden of Eden*, St. John Lutheran Church, Dublin, OH ✧ *1998e*

different times and what it does, showing just how vast the world of stained glass is. Then, it's time to listen to what the client has to say. True listening requires good faith, discipline and a genuine willingness to reassess one's position.

"During the process of working with various clients, there are points at which I am deeply, deeply resistant to giving in to what they want. But I also find that in listening to them, I learn things that surprise me. I think that through every single commission, I have grown tremendously in my understanding."

The client also has to be willing to listen and grow. "There was definitely growth on our part — on my part," states Pastor Reimann. "I grew through experiencing it through the artist's eyes and the artist's depiction."

It can be a real roller coaster for everyone involved. "The journey that they take is one of opening themselves up," says Hall. "I think it's a slightly nervous journey for all of us, but there's usually a certain amount of excitement about going on this journey, and about where it will lead."

This requires a leap of faith, and part of the artist's job is to find that faith in herself and inspire it in her client. At the end of the day, the artist has to sign the window and the client has to sign the cheque, and both must be able to live with themselves the morning after.

Part of Hall's journey involved moving beyond her preconceived notions to the particular needs and sensibilities of this community. At first, the congregation's desire for biblical pictorials struck Hall as sentimental and old-fashioned. It wasn't until she delved more deeply into the history and theology of the congregation — mostly descendants of German, Missouri Synod Lutheran farmers — that she appreciated the tenderness and compassion with which they had chosen their themes. "I think I had mistaken their tenderness for sentimentality. That kind of woke me up a bit and changed how I saw it."

Hall's final solution was to combine powerful abstract forms with figures that were screened rather than painted. Like great stained glass of all ages, the windows are, first and last, concerned with the spiritual resonance and limitless emotional nuances of colour, light and composition. Yet the figural element survives, and even holds its own, with an almost miraculous seamlessness. Of course, it's not a miracle at all; it's due to Hall's judicious, sensitive choice of figural style.

"For the pictorial element, I chose to use screening because I think that the printing medium also connected to all of the reading that I had done about Luther." Equally important to Hall was the flat, two-dimensional quality of the screened images, more spiritually akin to medieval work (especially that of the Norwich School, which Hall had admired as a student) than the more painterly windows of the nineteenth century. The effect is unmistakably pictorial, but never loses the strong graphic quality which has always been one of the great strengths of stained glass.

"They're obviously parchment-like. That was the effect that I wanted. They look more like pages from a book. It's an illuminated manuscript for the twenty-first century." It worked. According to Philip Markwood, the windows give just the right lift to his building: "It reflects and dissolves the architecture and creates all manner of different understandings. When you come

Nativity rose window with angels and constellations in the heavens, St. John Lutheran Church, Dublin, OH ✧ *1998e*

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in and get the impression of the windows, it isn't an impression of storytelling. It is ambiance and mood and a certain amount of mystery and other-worldness."

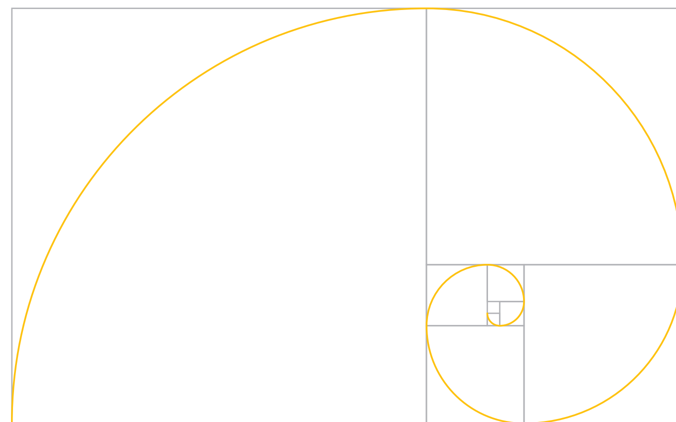
David Reimann has kept the narrative quality central to his theology while adding richness to his congregation's experience. "It's art in the best sense of the word. It's something that you can go and look at for quite some time and ponder, and think about, and move to a different position and see from a totally different perspective."

For Stephanie Freiberg, the windows transformed the interior from being a huge room to a place of worship. "As soon as the stained glass went in, it was like, 'oh, it's a church now.' All the feelings of being a Christian, and having Christ in your life, just happened."

Almost 900 years ago, while pondering the brilliant stained glass in his newly renovated church, the Abbot Suger of St-Denis used different words to express a similar experience, as he ushered in the first great Golden Age of stained glass:

> *The church shines with its middle part brightened.*
> *For bright is that which is brightly coupled with*
> *the bright,*
> *And bright is the noble edifice which is pervaded*
> *by the new light.*

Come to think of it, Suger never mentioned what pictures he was looking at.



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