

THE STORIES OF THE BIBLE ILLUMINATE 'DARK SANCTUARIES'

by the late Dr. Gary M. Gray, founder of American Consultation on Stained Glass

FOR A MILLENNIUM, the church has welcomed God's light. Through stained glass billions of people have been told the biblical story.

In the last few decades tens of thousands of churches have gone into the darkness, in what is referred to within the stained glass field as the "Dark Sanctuary." Peter Rohlf, one of America's premier art glass specialists, called the trend of dark sanctuaries a "theatre where control of external light and sound allows a minimal distraction from the emotive power of the AV being presented." Rohlf declares rather, that it is the "real events taking place therein that are the 'audio visual' that has been the actual experience of worshipers for millennia.

A surprising study by LifeWay Research for Cornerstone Knowledge Network backs Rohlf's claim. The 1,684 unchurched adult respondents, when given photos of churches with various different architectural styles, chose the Gothic style cathedral by a 2 to 1 ratio over the contemporary "dark sanctuaries." Ed Stetzer, director of LifeWay Research, says the unchurched "were clearly more drawn to the aesthetics of the Gothic building than the run-of-the-mill, modern church building. Buildings don't reach people, people do, but if churches are looking to build and are trying to reach the unchurched, they should take into consideration the kind of building."

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Despite the immense inspirational value of stained glass, stained glass studios are having difficulty getting conservative/fundamental congregations to consider the possibility of the biblical story being told through natural light.

Roy Loman, the founder of Loman Stained Glass, Tulsa, OK, confirms the problem: "Being in the 'Bible Belt' we have experienced the trend to build 'dark sanctuaries,' mainly to control lighting for pageants and plays. It seems to occur primarily with small, young, contemporary churches, which are representing biblical stories and teachings through a new medium instead of stained glass windows."



Stained Glass Windows by Loman Stained Glass

As Loman indicates, there are a number of ways to “have your cake and eat it too.” The most obvious is to have a wondrous, inspirational stained glass in the church narthex that greets the worshipper as they gather and challenges them as they depart into the world. The narthex can be pro-light while the sanctuary remains dark for the myriad options of AV systems.

The second approach is to have stained glass that can be covered or “turned off” when a program requiring darkness is occurring. Thus, the idea of shades (pulled when needed) or the light box (turned off with a switch) are real options,

especially when built into the original architectural plan.

Probably the greatest misconception in church fund-raising is that stained glass is expensive. Of course it is, but that misses the point. Place a stained glass design in front of a potential donor, or a family seeking a way to memorialize a lost loved one, and people will want to fund it. People know that generations will be impacted by their gift. Stained glass, if properly refurbished over the years, will last centuries. Yet we see church after church being built with only the next few years of growth in mind.