



# THE CHAPEL AT ST. CROIX

## *History and Overview*

Ever since St. Croix Lutheran High School moved into its 1200 Oakdale Avenue facility in 1992, many staff and friends of the school dreamed of adding a beautiful chapel to the site. For almost 12 years, students, staff and visitors of St. Croix used the school auditorium as a gathering space for daily chapel. The auditorium served its purpose as a place to gather for fellowship, worship and spiritual growth, but the dark space was not ideal for appreciating the beauty that often accompanies worship spaces, and the campus never really felt complete without a space dedicated specifically to worship.

A new chapel was on St. Croix's wish list for quite some time, but seemed out of reach. In May 2002, an anonymous donor approached St. Croix President Merlyn Kruse with a \$1.5 million gift intended to be used to build a new chapel on campus. It was this lead gift that created momentum for the project. Ground for the new chapel was broken on Palm Sunday 2004, and on Sunday, January 9, 2005, among hundreds of friends, St. Croix proudly dedicated its new chapel, now the most prominent building on campus.

## *The Site*

The design and prominent placement of the Chapel at St. Croix reflect its importance to the mission of the school. The chapel embodies the school's strong commitment to the spiritual education of students, and together the chapel, school and stadium now speak clearly to viewers of the school's emphasis on soul, mind and body.

The orientation of a building is basic to how we experience its structure. Situating it so it is viewed straight on gives a flat impression, lacking depth and understanding, so the chapel was situated at an angle so that its scale, detail and character can be appreciated as one approaches the chapel.

Light is also fundamental to the siting of a religious building. At St. Croix, it was critical to understand how light would affect the interior space. The need for a variety of

internal light forms is satisfied by the three semicircular walls, each with a slightly different orientation and a slightly different covering. Thus, the direct light to the inside is different for each curve, and the indirect light off the copper is slightly different.

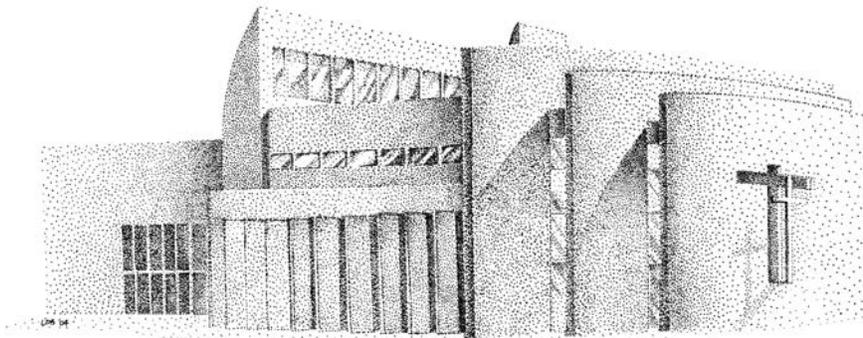
Artificial light enhances the religious experience as well. From the outside, light is best experienced at dusk. Then the warmth of interior light first makes its presence known; the light establishes a transparency that carries the outside inside and vice versa, revealing what is unseen.

## *Building Form*

The three semicircular walls surrounding the cross manifest the experience of the holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Their shape is that of a shield, even as God is our shield and strength, and they are rounded to symbolize his

eternity in our continuum of time. The cross sits on two very simple arms, much like the arms of a person holding the cross, extending outward as if to be emphasized.

In religious architecture, the elements that define the space must be honest about their role in defining a religious environment. At the



Chapel at St. Croix, this occurs in the expression of the exposed, steel-beamed structure, which plays a critical role in the statement of the space. That structure is expressed, as it was in the great cathedrals, as if to say, "This is my role as defined by God — to hold back the forces of nature for all who enter to pray."

## *Materials*

A unique characteristic of the chapel is the copper cladding that covers the entire exterior and portions of the interior of the chapel. Copper is the ideal material for a religious building, according to the architect. When first installed, it is bright and contains all the promises that nature has to offer. Soon after its exposure to nature, the copper begins to mature. It takes on a growing character and, before our eyes, begins the aging process. In the next year to 20 years, it takes on a change that develops a patina and maturity. As it ages further, a greater maturity takes hold. A change from

brown to slight indications of weathered green occurs with the greater passage of time. In the final years, copper takes on a completely green, weathered look. It is a productive and inspiring life, reflective of the life of the Christian as we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. We age and mature in our faith. We see life as a precious gift from God. It is beautiful at any stage.

### *The Interior*

The entry at St. Croix was designed to express the invitation and transformation inherent in a place of worship — that the place reaches to all, and that passing from the outside to the inside is a change marked by a transition. In this case, the transition is a lowered defining ledge. Once past the ledge, the space is designed to become a progression of light and space.

The baptismal font is part of the gathering space. Just as individuals enter their religious life through baptism, they enter the church each time by connecting to baptism. Through the connection with water and entering the sacraments through baptism, each member is reminded of their entry into the presence of the Savior.

The interior semi-curved walls serve to represent the Trinity in a progression of planes that focus on a slotted window, allowing the exterior cross to be seen from the inside. The cross as the symbol of worship is the one very strong element that connects the interior with the exterior. The importance of moving toward the cross, toward a very specific, vertical light source, reinforces that the space is for both individual and collective connection to God.

In his dedication sermon, Rev. William J. Schaefer noted that one of the most-asked questions about the chapel has been, “Why is the window around the cross shaped differently than the cross?” His response: “Exactly! Your attention has been drawn to the cross, as we can see the same cross from the inside as well as the outside. It focuses our attention and even makes us wonder and ponder how the power of the cross of Jesus has changed me to God and has changed the world to me.”

The worship space features a “chapel in the round” design, with the altar in the center and four sections of chairs facing the central space, so that from each seat in the nave there is a sense of community. So that all may better hear the message, the chairs are arranged in stadium or

“epiphanal” seating. In a sense, there are no “back seats.” The acoustics of the chapel are also very important for this purpose: the windows and ceiling panels are all subtly angled to deflect a sound that is very lively with and without amplification. Each person in attendance is engaged with the speaker and his message, that faith may be strengthened through the hearing of the message of Christ.

### *Thoughts on the Chapel*

Edward J. Kodet, Jr., architect for the chapel, wanted to create a space for each individual and his or her time with God. “Most essential to the design of the chapel is that the space is designed for each person individually. Each will see and experience the space in their own religious reflection. It’s a backdrop for becoming closer to our Savior as the gospel in Word and sacraments are collectively communicated to each person.”

Rev. William J. Schaefer, chapel planning committee chairman, said in his dedication sermon:

“The cross dominates our worship on the inside, but the cross is on the outside of this chapel. Let it stand as a reminder to us who see it and hear its message in this place to share it with the world outside. See the two arms that hold that cross up? Let those be our arms as we give our world the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus!”

St. Croix President Merlyn Kruse couldn’t be happier with the new addition

to campus. “The chapel stands boldly as a physical statement of our mission to educate the total student: spiritually, intellectually and physically. It will serve as a place for the entire community to grow in faith and love. It is truly an awesome place!”

### *Summary*

The Chapel at St. Croix is conceived in such a way that worship is dynamic. People, art, liturgy, light and the world around it contribute to a religious experience. The interior is meant to inspire reflection, imagination and contemplation in a way that brings each individual closer to his or her maker. The chapel will provide a place for giving thanks and praise to a gracious and loving Savior who has blessed St. Croix for nearly 50 years.

St. Croix offers daily chapel services that are open to the public and begin at about 9:45 a.m.

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*- St. Croix President  
Merlyn Kruse*