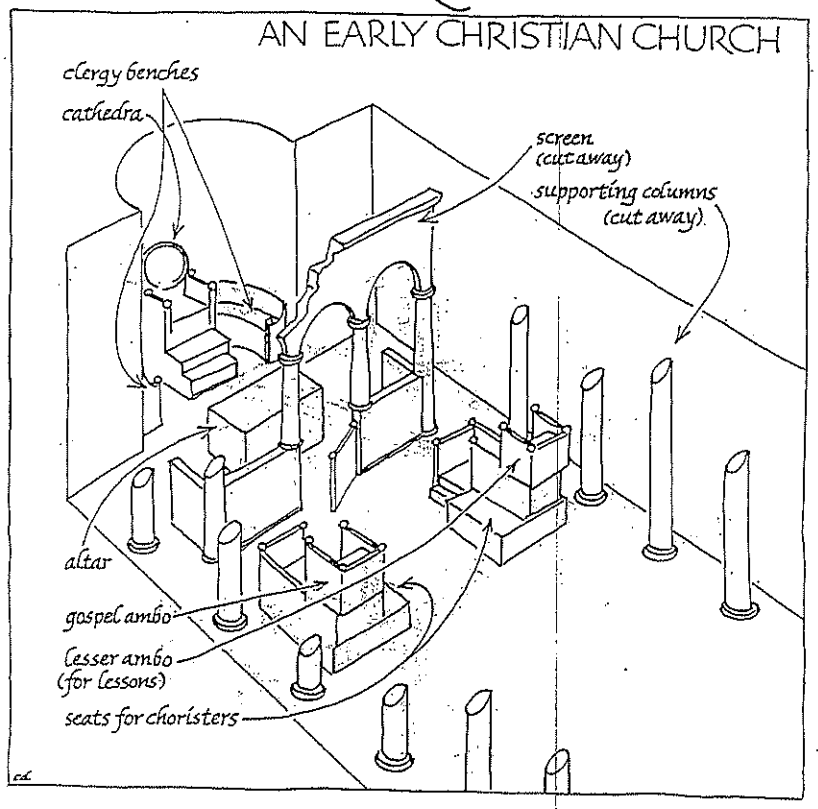
Six Stages in Development of Liturgical Space

FIGURE 1



AN EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH. By the fourth century the common form of a church was that of a basilica, a type of building that had been developed by the Romans to house a court of justice. Entered by way of a forecourt and covered porch, it was rectangular in shape but with a projecting apse at the far end. The interior was characterized by a row of columns on each side and by a partition or screen that separated the altar area from the nave where the main body of worshipers assembled. Beyond the screen stood a freestanding altar, roughly cubical in shape. Behind it and somewhat elevated above the floor on which the altar stood were seats for the bishop and his attending priests and deacons.

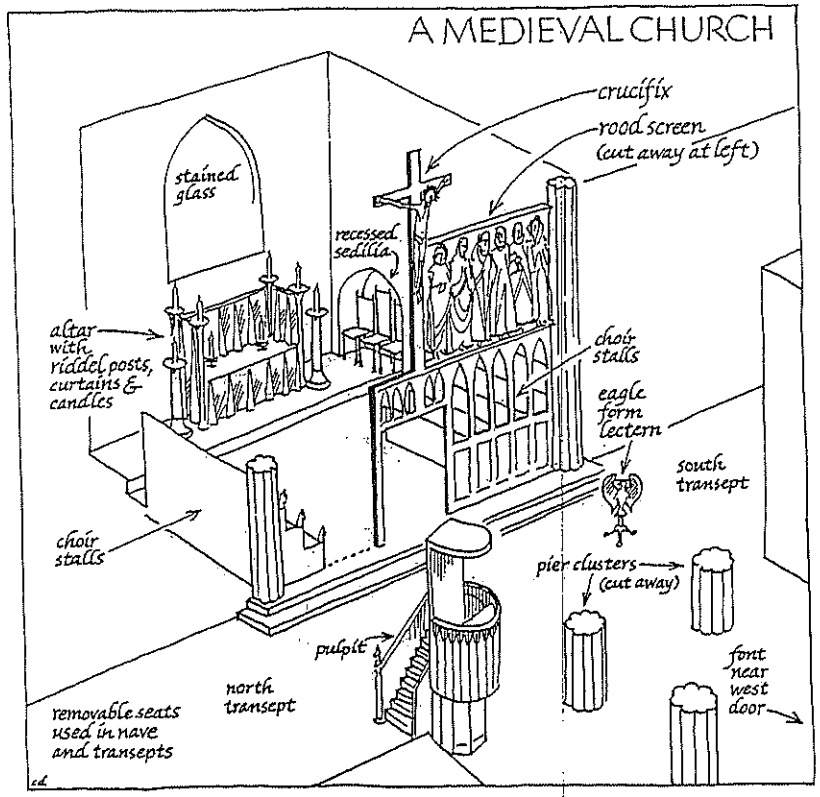
The screen consisted of panels rising from the floor, perhaps four feet in height. Above it were slender columns that supported an architrave from which votive lamps might be suspended. Although the progenitor of the later rood screen in the West (and the iconostasis in the East), basilican screens were not solid, hence the altar could be seen from the nave. In front of the screen there were places for the choristers. Also, the altar was usually dignified by a ciborium, or architectural canopy, supported by four slender columns.

In the early days, the sermon was preached from the *cathedra*, or chair of the bishop, which stood in the center of the apse behind and a little above the altar. It was from this place that the bishop or, in his absence, the priest presided over the eucharist and preached the sermon. The gospel was read from an elevated platform called an *ambo* approached by a flight of steps and protected by a parapet. Located in front of the screen, it was larger than the later medieval pulpit because it had to accommodate not only the gospeler but also his attendant taperers. It was used on Easter Eve by the deacon who sang the *exsultet* at the blessing of the paschal candle (see page 286 of the 1979 Prayer Book). And from the steps of the ambo, part of the psalmody was sung by chanters between the reading of the epistle and the gospel. This came to be called the "gradual," from the Latin *gradus*, a step. Originally there was only one ambo, placed on the north side of the axis of the church. Later two were used; the second on the south side for lessons at the eucharist. To show greater honor to the Gospel, the one on the north was usually larger and more imposing than its counterpart on the south.

Baptismal fonts were not visible. They were consigned to separate buildings or rooms because in early Christian practice catechumens of both sexes and all ages were baptized in the nude. After their water baptism and chrismation, they were brought into the church for admission to the eucharist, which completed their Christian initiation.

Communion rails had not yet come into use. At the appropriate moment the gate to the altar was opened, and the priests and deacons came forth to administer Holy Communion to the people who came forward and stood to receive it.

FIGURE 2



A MEDIEVAL CHURCH. Because of the great increase in the number of persons in Holy Orders and because of the proliferation of minor orders, the apsidal ends of Romanesque churches were deepened to make room for them. By the time Gothic architecture came into its own, the chancel had become a prominent feature of medieval churches. Meanwhile, the structural divider that visibly separated the chancel from the nave developed into the rood screen. Another development was the appearance of chapels, an outgrowth of the cult of saints, the custom of votive masses, and the belief that each priest should celebrate the eucharist every day and no two at the same altar.

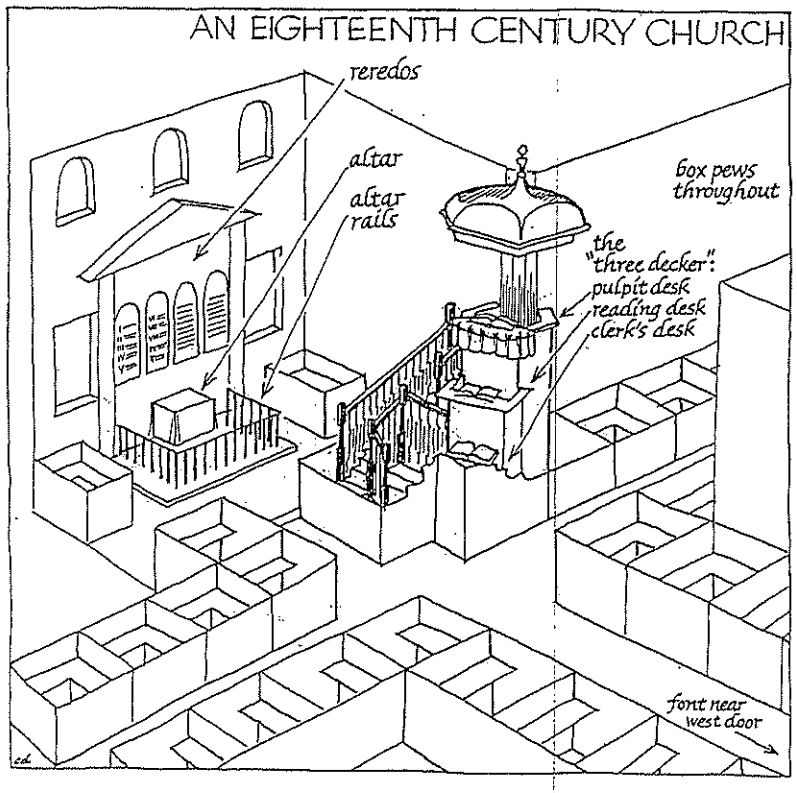
For didactic purposes, symbolic importance was attached to the architectural setting of the eucharist. Gothic churches, often cruciform, were said to represent Christ on the cross. Their customary five doors, representing the wounds of our Lord, were often painted blood red. The nave, which held the people, stood for the world, "the Church militant." Hence, Holy Scripture was read and sermons preached there. This resulted in lecterns and pulpits being located in the nave. Now that candidates were no longer baptized in the nude, fonts were placed in the church itself, rather than in chapels or separate baptistries. They were commonly near the west door of the nave in order to point up the fact that entry into Christ's Church was by means of baptism.

The rood screen with its great crucifix symbolized the fact that our Lord's Passion and death alone gave the faithful admittance to paradise. The chancel, now enlarged to include the singers as well as the clergy, represented paradise. The white-robed choristers suggested the celestial choir of angels. The sanctuary with the high altar represented heaven itself and the heavenly banquet where the redeemed met and enjoyed the company of the ascended Lord. Thus the sanctuary symbolized a foretaste of salvation and a glimpse of eternal life.

Congregational participation declined because the liturgy continued to be in Latin long after the rise of modern languages and because the musical setting of worship was progressively elaborated so that it could no longer be sung by the people but only by trained choirs. The developing ceremonial suggested that the celebrant was speaking to God on behalf of the people and performing the eucharistic action for them rather than with them. Hence, instead of celebrating facing the people from behind the altar, the priest now stood in front of the altar with his back to the people, and altars instead of being freestanding were placed against the east wall. The earlier structural ciborium was now converted into a reredos with riddel posts and curtains and perhaps a tester high above the altar.

By the late Middle Ages the altar would likely have had two candlesticks on it as well as other lights on the riddels and around the altar, especially on great feasts. The altar itself, now much longer than in early Christian days, was covered by a fitted frontal of rich material, and there was a color sequence, which was elaborate or simple depending upon the ability of each cathedral, abbey, or parish church to obtain expensive furnishings.

FIGURE 3



AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY CHURCH. The English reformers of the sixteenth century accepted the interior arrangement inherited from the medieval Church but undertook to correct the liturgical faults of the late Middle Ages by endeavoring to recover a sense of corporate worship. Archbishop Cranmer did this by creating the *Book of Common Prayer,* which simplified the services, translated them into English and provided congregational responses. He also engaged John Merbecke to adapt simple plainsong melodies to serve as settings for services on the principle of one note to each syllable. With these changes came a new emphasis upon hearing the liturgy, and that in turn created a demand for a different architectural setting for worship, designed to make churches more auditory. The change was accomplished chiefly by the great English architect, Sir Christopher Wren.

At first, the hearing of the services was facilitated by enjoining the priests to speak distinctly and in a loud voice and by moving much of the liturgical action from the far end of the deep chancel to places nearer the people. The portable wooden altars that replaced the medieval stone ones could be brought forward into the chancel for celebrationss. Matins, the litany, and the eucharist as far as the offertory were transferred to the nave in the interest of audibility. At the offertory, the priest, accompanied by those of his parishioners who intended to receive Holy Communion, went into the chancel where they could be close to the holy table, hear the consecration, and see the manual acts.

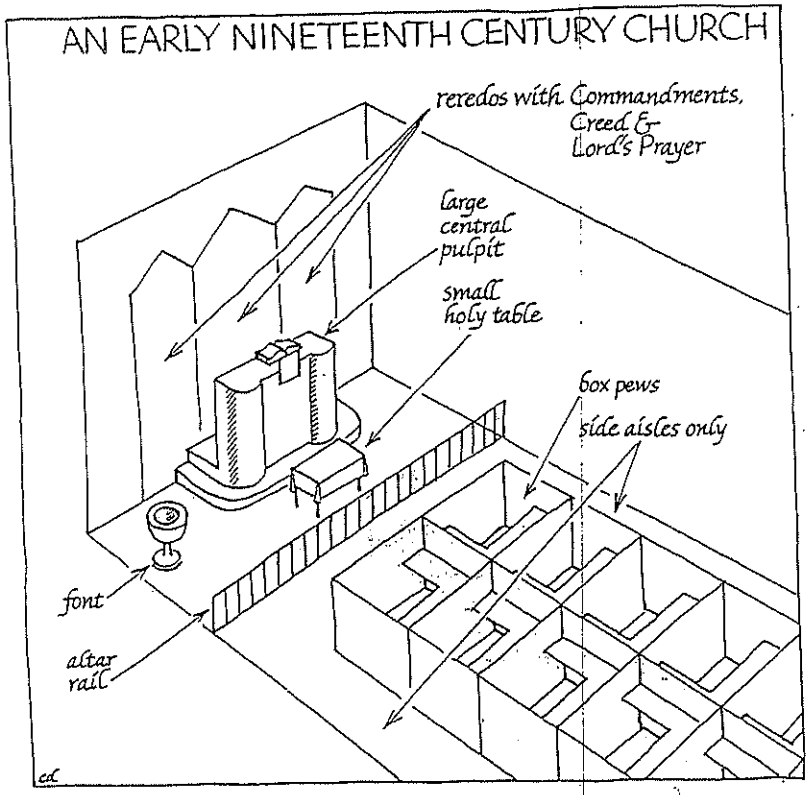
This shifting of the altar into the chancel was too much of a departure from medieval practice for High Church people such as Archbishop Laud and the Caroline divines. They initiated a partial Counter-Reformation that, after 1660, resulted in restoring altars to their accustomed place at the east end, and they required them to be fenced with altar rails to protect them from profane and irreverent use. They also revived the early Christian type of altar cloth, now known as Laudian or Jacobean frontals, that coexisted with the fitted type until banished by the Victorian Ecclesiologists.

The practice continued of having the entire Ministry of the Word in the nave. As in Elizabethan days, the priest and communicants went forward together to the altar at the offertory where they could be close to the celebrant for the consecration. As more of the service took place in the nave than had been the custom in the Middle Ages, pulpits became larger and were associated in the minds of the worshipers with the liturgy as well as with the sermon. Located in the nave, eighteenth-century pulpits often had a reading desk for the priest at a lower level and even another, at still a lower level, for the parish clerk, thus becoming the so-called "three-decker."

As time went on, the chancel screen that had survived the turmoil of the Reformation, went out of fashion in the eighteenth century, and the depth of the chancel was progressively reduced until, by the late eighteenth century, it was often omitted altogether. Thereafter the altar and the small area surrounded by the rails constituted all that was left of the medieval chancel. By then, however, it was adequate for the needs of the liturgical practice of the day. Unvested parish choirs were usually placed in the rear gallery, and there was a shortage of priests. Moreover, the day of such lay ministers as crucifers, taperers, thurifers, and chalicists had not yet dawned.

Fonts were still sometimes placed in their traditional location near the west door, but as time went on, the premium on space often resulted in their being transferred to the east end near the altar. The nave and transepts were filled with high box pews with doors, designed to retain heat from portable foot warmers. These continued in use as long as churches were unheated—well into the nineteenth century.

FIGURE 4



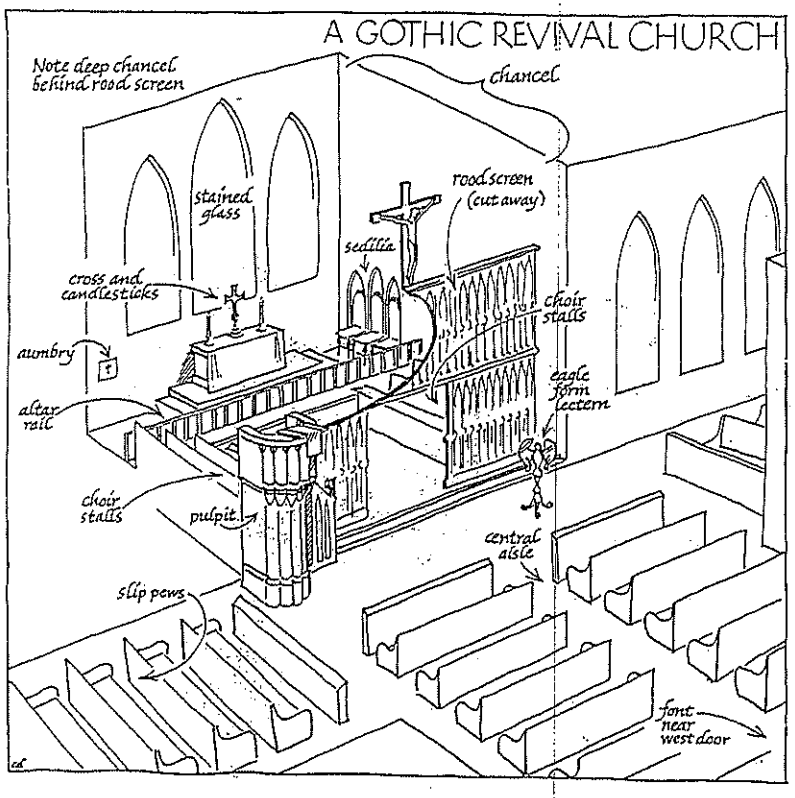
AN EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY CHURCH. Many older churches passed through the early nineteenth century with there interiors unchanged, but the Evangelicals who reached their apex of influence in the early nineteenth century, and other church members who agreed with them about the setting of worship built or retrofitted churches that departed to an extreme degree from the received medieval arrangement. The auditory principle reached its apogee because their unprecedented emphasis on preaching led them to create church interiors that proclaimed their conviction that worship was less a matter of participation in an action than it was of speaking and hearing the Word. In extreme instances, Anglican worship had never been so completely intellectualized or so nearly stripped of ceremonial. On the other hand, the arrangement adopted, by bringing the altar and people close together, anticipated one of the objectives of the later Liturgical Movement.

When stoves began to be used for heating churches on Sundays, the old box pews that had come down from the colonial period were reduced in height or replaced by slip pews in order to facilitate radiation and convection, thereby enabling the congregation to listen to the long sermons in physical comfort.

Having no liturgical use for chancels, the Evangelicals abandoned them altogether, and they scrapped the traditional idea of having three distinct liturgical centers. Instead, they combined pulpit, altar, and font to make a single focus of worship at the front of the church. The pulpit was placed in the middle of the east end with an inconspicuous holy table in front of and below it. Pulpits lost their graceful, wine glass shape and resembled a magistrate's desk, visually dominating the interior and overpowering the altar. Instead of a stone font, as required by English canon law, or a separate wooden structure to support a baptismal bowl, the Evangelicals usually preferred a small silver bowl placed on the holy table when there were baptisms.

Having little enthusiasm for liturgical processions, the Evangelicals generally eliminated central aisles and filled the body of the church with blocks of pews. As a result, the interiors of many early nineteenth century Anglican churches were scarcely distinguishable from those of the Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists.

FIGURE 5



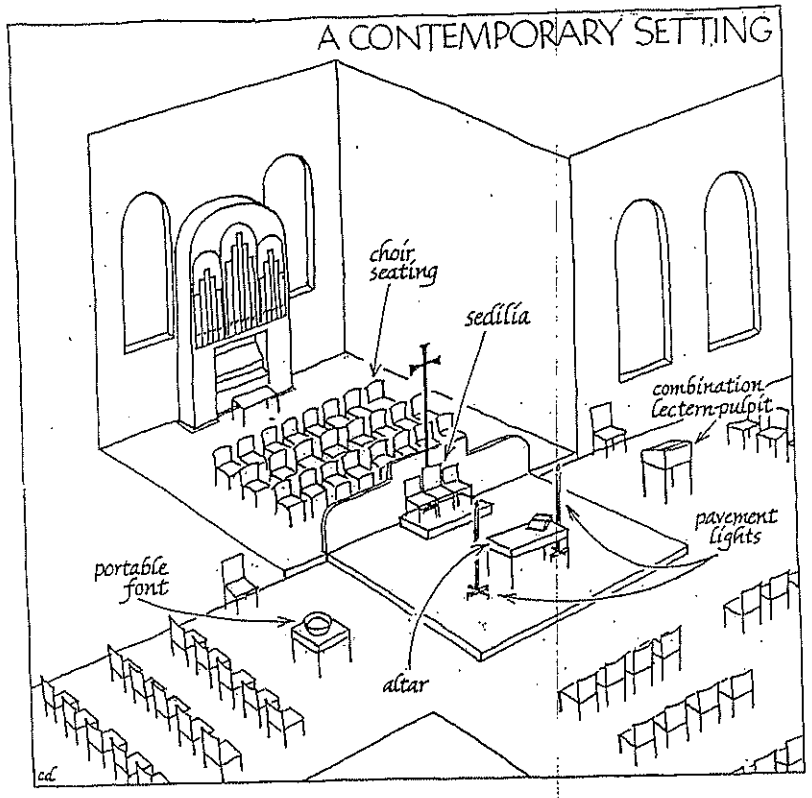
A GOTHIC REVIVAL CHURCH. Touched off by John Keble's sermon "National Apostasy" in 1833, the Oxford Movement began to leaven the Anglican church and bring about a Catholic revival similar to, but far more complete than, that of the Caroline divines in the seventeenth century. Largely theological at first, it eventually spilled over into the realm of liturgy and therefore produced an architectural expression. The Ritualists sought to revive medieval ceremonial and the Ecclesiologists promoted Gothic Revival architecture. Aided by the Romantic movement in literature and especially by the popular novels of Sir Walter Scott, the two groups were remarkably successful in their attempt to revive the medieval splendor of the English church.

The Ecclesiologists insisted on a particular phase of Gothic—that of the "decorated" style that flourished from 1260 to 1360—as being the only proper model for Anglican churches. Also, they recovered the idea that a church should have three distinct liturgical centers and that it should have a deep chancel visibly separated from the nave, preferably by a rood screen.

The Ecclesiologists abhorred the eighteenth-century "three-deckers" and replaced them with medieval-style pulpits and separate lecterns, usually on the opposite side of the central aisle from the pulpit. Fonts were once more made of stone as they had been in the Middle Ages, and they were placed near the west door as they had been formerly. Central blocks of pews were removed, central aisles restored, and box pews replaced by slip pews after the medieval fashion. Other visible changes favored by the Ecclesiologists included the use of stained-glass widows, aumbries or pyxes for the Reserved Sacrament, and the recovery of medieval vestments and paraphernalia that were believed to have been in use in English churches in "the second year of the reign of Edward VI," i.e., between January 28, 1548 and January 27, 1549, as had been authorized by the ornaments rubric of the 1662 Prayer Book.

The revival of medieval ways brought additional ministers to the altar, specifically a deacon and subdeacon in addition to the priest. Instead of a chair on each side of the altar, medieval sedilia were restored. Chancels were in vogue again and often had to be deepened in order to accommodate vested choirs and other functionaries such as crucifers, taperers, and thurifers that had not been much in evidence since the sixteenth century.

FIGURE 6



A CONTEMPORARY SETTING. As the objectives of the Liturgical Movement are to recover the concept of the eucharist as a corporate action involving both priests and people and to restore more fully the active participation of the people in worship, changes have been made in church interiors that involve going behind the neomedievalism of the Ecclesiologists to the practice of early Christian times. This, in turn, has resulted in the building of new churches that reflect the insights of the Liturgical Movement and in refitting existing churches along similar lines. Many older churches, especially those built before 1840, that had been rearranged later to meet the standards of the Ecclesiologists were rearranged once more. The architectural axiom "form follows function" is as true today as at any time since the early Christians emerged from hiding and built churches designed to house their liturgical practices.

Altars have been brought forward from the east wall and placed at the front of the chancel or at the head of the nave. Now that they were freestanding, it was once more possible for priests to celebrate from behind them, facing the people. This change rendered impractical the continued use of an altar cross, which had become virtually universal in Anglican churches. The vanished altar cross has sometimes been replaced by reviving the medieval practice of placing a processional cross in a socket behind the celebrant's chair.

Existing rood screens have been demolished or made to serve as reredoses for nave altars. Deep chancels filled with choir stalls that separated the people in the nave from the priest at the altar have become anathema. In some cases, the choristers remain in what had been the chancel but behind rather than in front of the sanctuary or altar area. In other cases, organs and choirs have been relocated, as formerly, in west galleries.

This rearrangement not only brings the altar and the people close together but also provides a spacious setting for the altar, more adequate seating accommodations for the celebrant and other clergy behind the altar as in early Christian days, and additional room for the host of new attendants that have become widespread in recent years—lectors, chalicists, and banner bearers.

In current liturgical practice, fonts have acquired a new importance, because baptism is now regarded as a regular part of the principal eucharists on certain Sundays and holy days each year, rather than being consigned to hours outside the principal services. There is, therefore, a new imperative to place the font in a conspicuous location where it can best be seen by the congregation and also to position it so that the priest can stand behind it, facing the people. In some cases this may mean that it will be at the east end, near the altar, rather than in its traditional place near the west door. The governing principle, however, is the convenience of the people, who are expected to participate in the baptismal action no less than in that of the eucharist.