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Article abstract

This paper starts with a brief architectural history of George Street United Church, Peterborough, Ontario, which includes an account of a failed attempt at gender segregation which took place in 1889. The paper then looks at Methodist gender construction, masculine and féminine ideals, and its paradoxical notions of "womanhood." It explores, with examples from contemporary churches, how gender concepts were incorporated into sacred architecture. The article concludes with one explanation for the disintegration of Wesley's mid-18th-century idea of forced gender ségrégation by the end of the 19th century.

GENDER SEGREGATION AND SACRED ARCHITECTURE: A STUDY OF GEORGE STREET METHODIST CHURCH, PETERBOROUGH, ONTARIO

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Introduction

One of the most beautiful buildings in Peterborough, Ontario, is the gothic-revival George Street United Church, on the corner of George and McDonnell Streets. Like many buildings in Peterborough, it has a deep history which reflects both the local community, and also the cultural conditions under which the church was constructed. This essay discusses one specific architectural feature of the church, the raised interior balcony, and offers some suggestions as to its functional and deeper theological and sociological meanings, particularly as it relates to cultural constructions of gender.

George Street Church

There is an abundance of printed information on Ontario churches. However, very little of it deals specifically with their architecture, and even less deals with the social implications of religious architecture. There are also several short guide books to historic Ontario churches, some describing unique architectural features and building history. Much more numerous are church histories written by members of church congregations.

George Street United Church has rarely been written about specifically, with the exception of the two histories by Bullock. The church congregation was originally formed as a Wesleyan Methodist Church in 1835. The first church, a small frame building, was constructed in 1837. This structure was situated where the current Kaye Funeral Home on George Street now stands, slightly to the north and on the opposite side of the street from the current church. In 1843, a larger timber and brick building was constructed immediately south of the first church. This edifice is still standing, but is now a double house (525-527 George St.) and is no longer owned by the church (Bullock 1975:9).

The land for the present church, known legally as Lots 1 and 2 east of George Street and north of McDonnel Street, was bought by the congregation late in 1872. A house had been built on this land prior to the sale, and was moved to a new location on Water Street. The church retained architect Henry Langley,

who had designed Metropolitan Church, Toronto. The original plan was to construct the entire church of stone, but this proved to be too expensive. Instead, it was decided that the church would be built of white brick, with a stone foundation. The limestone for the foundation was quarried locally from the east shore of Clear Lake in nearby Dummer Township. The buttresses were originally capped with zinc and iron, though this was replaced with stone at an unspecified later date. The total cost of the building was close to $60,000 (1975:10-12).

Excavation of the church basement was begun in 1873, and by 1874, the building was closed in. The church was ready for use in 1875, but the interior of the basement was not completed until 1876 (1975:12). An organ was installed in the gallery at the back of the church in 1875. This organ had originally been purchased in 1863 from a church in Toronto for use in the second Methodist church on George Street. Apparently, this organ proved unsatisfactory for the new church, and a new organ was bought in 188 4 (Bullock 1975, 17). This may have been due to its age, and the acoustic properties of the larger church building. In 1891, the tower was added, at a cost of $3,137 (1975:13). The tower was a copy of a church tower in Doncaster, England, which had been designed by Sir Gilbert Scott (1975:10). Fig. 1 shows the exterior west entrance of the church, including the tower and stone foundation.

The specific architectural feature that this essay deals with is the balcony, or gallery, which was included in the original design in 1875. Fig. 2 is a view of the gallery from the east end of the church. The weight of the gallery is supported on all sides by a series of cast iron supports so as not to obstruct the view of the congregation seated in the lower section of the church. (Fig. 3).

Gender and Gender Segregation

The gallery's most basic function is clearly to increase the number of people that can be seated for a service. The church today seats 850 people, of whom the balcony holds approximately 300. It seems likely that the balcony's seating capacity would have been less in 1889, as the organ, which was originally placed in the gallery, was moved to the front of the church in 1931 (1975:17). As an architectonic feature, however, the balcony serves to communicate messages that reach much deeper than its function as additional seating.

Among the collections of the Peterborough Centennial Archives is a short text entitled "One message concerning gender," presented in a farewell address given by two Methodist evangelists at George Street Church. The portion of this essay I wish to share reads as follows:

> When the doors of the church were thrown open at 7 o'clock Thursday evening the last night of the services there was waiting in the church-yard a crowd that almost entirely filled the church. The ladies were largely in the majority in the crowd and as a result the gallery to which the gentler sex had been confined was filled as was

> never filled before. But the fact that the portion of the church allotted to them was packed to its utmost did not discourage those ladies who were still left on the outside, but they stood with eyes of envy watching the men walk in and take their choice of seats in the body of the church, and finally by some means or other they broke the barriers at the door and crowded in and filled up all the remaining available space in the body of the church. [Magnificent n.p.]

The majority of the congregation at the May service in 1889 was made up of women, and that "the portion allotted to them" was so small provides a telling statement about the position of women within this church. The segregation of genders in fixed, architecturally defined spaces is a physical manifestation of deeply held beliefs.

Westfall (1989:7-8) argues that the people of the Victorian age tended to view reality in terms of strict dualities, with society dividing the world into the religious and the secular, and human nature into distinct masculine and feminine spheres. He writes:

> Sex and religion were closely joined: man was material and practical, while woman was moral and spiritual; man had power, woman had taste; man was active, woman reflective; man was rational, woman intuitive. [1989:7]

In a study of one hundred and twenty-one American Sunday-school books published by the Methodist Sunday School Union in the 1850s, Gillespie (1983:195) found that two main female characteristics are noted–modesty and saintliness. She argues that "the twin ideals of female sainthood and modesty, within a Christian context, were imported into every village, town, and cross-roads hamlet in the expanding nation" (1983:196). Traditionally, Protestant women expressed their belief in "feminine pursuits, as in teaching Sunday school, leading prayer groups, and visiting house-to-house" (1983:202). The Methodist ideal of female saintliness challenged women to "acquire personal perfection" (1983:205) and ultimately nurtured

> ...in women a basic ambivalence toward traditional patterns of authority; rather than encapsulating women in a religious cocoon, the attitudes internally generated by "modesty" and "sainthood" would form a springboard out of family-bound settings for them. [1983:203].

Williams (1984:110) argues that while Methodist sermons were almost entirely given by men, they "praised such idealized feminine traits as patience, love, gentleness, sensitivity, humility, and submissiveness, and rejected the competitive values of the male-dominated spheres of commerce, politics and sport." The two dichotomies proposed above by Westfall, masculine vs. feminine, and secular vs. sacred, are seen here as being linked at a very structural level, i.e.:

masculine : feminine : secular : sacred.

At this point, one can propose that the following associational strings hold true for Methodist societies of this period:

masculine > secular > competitive;
feminine > sacred > cooperative.

Yet while women may have been regarded as spiritually equal to men, men still retained the power and authority granted to them by the wider society. Women could take an active role in the church, but this action was restricted to areas that fitted the moral and spiritual realm of women, and was not in areas that fitted the practical, material realm of men. Still, the potential for women's action was an important step in the development of what Gillespie (1983:199) calls "the newly autonomous female self." She writes:

> It was a spiritually legitimized change in self-perception which would quietly undermine the traditional boundaries of authority, possibility and self, without alarming the general culture or even the evangelical subculture itself. This was because a "new woman" was quietly expanding, within her sphere, under the imprimatur of the two unexceptionable, and seemingly unobjectionable ideals of modesty and saintliness. [1983:199]

Methodist writer C.H. Payne (1882:239) argued in 1882 that "... no religious body ever honoured woman as Methodism has done, and none ever enjoyed so richly the fruit of her peculiar endowments." A contemporary Methodist minister, Rev. William Gorman (1892:193), proclaimed "... if, in a word, the city of God is to be at once the model and the fashioner of a renovated society, the living human woman must walk free therein."

The Methodist movement looked to the history of the early Pauline Christian church for inspiration, and found that Pauline theology "... re-affirmed the right of woman to a religious character" (Smith 1877:34). The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, drew from the early Christian church his belief in the rights of women to take an active role in religious activities. In an essay on who should be ordained as clergy, he wrote of the early Christian church:

> Both the evangelists and deacons preached. Yea, and women when under extraordinary inspiration. Then both their sons and daughters prophesied... [Wesley 1989:573]

Wesley recognized that the New Testament stated that women should not speak in church (1989:573), but he taught that "... the social inequality of women was no proof of God's will, for on biblical and pastoral grounds, women and men appeared spiritually equal" (Hayes 1982:40). He also wrote that while St. Paul had written that they should not speak, "in extraordinary cases, he made a few

exceptions; at Corinth in particular" [cited in (Rogal 1974:7)]. The Rev. William Gorman (1892:191) wrote that "... woman's fitness to be comprehensively man's co-worker needs no vindication in this hour of our age; it has heaven's seal." Keller (1982:25) writes that the inclusion of women in the life of the Methodist church, and a "... belief in the equality of all persons before God", is central to the Wesleyan tradition. She also notes:

> Running counter to this affirmation, however, is a theology of exclusion, which has been rationalized through a "separate but equal" sphere of women's activity and by an ideology of the moral superiority of women. [1982:25]

The sphere of women's activity was largely that of the Sunday-school programme, or local church women's groups. Women preachers like Elizabeth Collett, who was born in 1762 and died sometime after 1804 (Church 1949:156-159), were tolerated but not encouraged. When Collett's son Richard submitted an account of her life to *The Methodist Magazine*, it was rejected "...lest it should be a precedent to young females... who are ready to step into the work" [cited in (Church 1949:156)]. The contributions of women like Barbara Heck, who helped build John Street Methodist Church in New York, and who organized the first Methodist society in Canada in 1785 (Brown 1974:326), are often ignored.

Into the equation [feminine > sacred > cooperative] must be added a seemingly irreconcilable factor. For just as women were viewed as godly beings, by nature both moral and spiritual, they were at the same time viewed as being extremely dangerous to the spiritual well-being of men. Women embodied sexual desire and were recognized as having the potential to be spiritually destructive. This Victorian dichotomy is presented beautifully in the character of Mrs. Dempster in Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business* (1970), the wife of the parson who brings a tramp to a life of holiness through sex. Methodism viewed women like so many Mrs. Dempsters–the souls of nuns trapped in the bodies of prostitutes.

Perhaps much of this "whore/nun" opposition can be traced back to the founder of Methodism itself, John Wesley. Hayes (1982:41) argues that "Wesley's own faith had been greatly influenced by strong Christian women." Baker (1982:131) argues that Wesley's relationship with his mother, Susanna Wesley, "affected his approach to women in general, giving them a higher status in his eyes and a higher function in his societies than they otherwise would have had." Rogal (1974:10) writes that "each woman who crossed John Wesley's path was viewed against the background of his mother's unselfishness." Baker (1982:112-131) credits Susanna Wesley for teaching and encouraging her son, in many ways shaping what would later form his reinterpretation of Anglicanism. Other women, such as his friend Sally Kirkham, acted as his spiritual guides (Hayes 1982:41), and affected his belief in the strength of women's spirituality. Certainly this explains the "nun" component of the "whore/nun" dilemma.

But what about women's potential for spiritual destructiveness? An anti-Methodist writer in 1743 wrote about Wesley's popular sermons:

> Three-fourths parts, of what attend 'em,
> Are Female Sex, and John's to mend 'em,
> For Women are most prone to fall,
> Like Eve, the Mother, first of all.
>
> [cited in (Hayes 1982:30)]

While much of this view of women grew out of a societal morality that denied human sexuality, there is evidence that these beliefs were reinforced for John Wesley through personal experiences of temptation and desire. Rogal (1974:9) writes, "... frankly, the history of Wesley's relationships with women comes forth as one of the few resounding failures in an otherwise brilliant and even enviable career." Consider the legal case brought against John Wesley in Savannah, Georgia in 1737. Hayes (1982:30) records that Wesley had been accused of being

> "...guilty of using too great familiarities" with a pretty seventeen-year-old girl named Sophy Hopkey. Even after she had married, the affidavit reported, Wesley had urged her to meet him at various times and places, sometimes in the middle of the night and sometimes even in his own house, notwithstanding the fact that her husband, William Williamson, had "applied" to Wesley "to desist from such proceedings" and notwithstanding that Wesley had promised to do so.

Wesley's actions are hard to fully understand in light of his spiritual teachings.

Perhaps it was Wesley's distrust and dissatisfaction with women who did not live up to his mother's ideal unselfishness which led him to incorporate his belief in the avoidance of familiarity into his views of Methodist sacred architecture. Church (1948:53) writes that while there was no concrete set of rules that determined how a Methodist chapel should be built, Wesley had definite opinions on the subject. He issued a set of eight main principles for the construction of chapels, and while they were not followed in all instances, they had a profound effect on the architecture of the movement. Wesley's sixth of the eight principles was as follows:

> 6. Let there be no pews, and no backs to the seats, which should have aisles on each side, and be parted in the middle, by a rail running all along to divide the men from the women, just as at Bath. [cited in (Church 1948:54)]

Wesley justified this sexual segregation by once again drawing comparisons with the early Christian church. "From the beginning," he wrote, "men and

women sat apart, as they always did in the primitive church" [cited in (Church 1948:59)]. According to Dell Upton (1986:180), the custom of gender segregation was "widely believed to have been practised among ancient Jews, and therefore among primitive Christians, and it was used by Quaker and Calvinist congregations for that reason." The incorporation of this idea into Wesleyan architecture must have been aided by the prevailing [masculine > secular > competitive] mindset.

At the first Methodist church in London, England, Wesley made sure these ideas about gender segregation were put into place. Church (1948, 59) writes, "... under the front gallery were the free seats for women; and under the side galleries, the free seats for men. The front gallery was used exclusively by females, and the side galleries for males." This separation was insisted upon by Wesley "in all his early churches" (Withrow 1879:311). Church (1949:215) writes,

> At the Conference of 1765 the question was asked: "Should the men and women sit apart everywhere?" and the answer was given: "By all means: Every preacher should look to this." Next year an exception to the rule was allowed: "In those galleries where they have been accustomed to sit together, they may do so still. But let them sit apart everywhere below, and in all new erected galleries."

This idea of sexual segregation during service was adopted quite early in North America. In July 1839, a British army doctor named William Orde Mackenzie attended a Methodist camp meeting near Brighton, Ontario. His diary described the religious meeting in detail. Westfall (1989:60) outlines Mackenzie's description by writing that "a ring of trees formed a large circle within which two sets of benches (one for men, the other for women) faced an elevated preaching platform." A description of a Methodist outdoor camp in Delaware from 1790 is very similar:

> In front of the preacher's platform, the white audience was seated according to a geometric plan that separated men from women and set up "streets" and "courts"... At the north end of the enclosure, under a crude shelter of sticks and tree limbs, was a mourner's bench for men. To the south end, under a similar shelter, was the women's bench. [cited in (Williams 1984:83)]

At Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church in Wilmington, Delaware, men and women arrived for service at the same time. Once there, they entered the churchyard through separate gates, entered the church through separate doors, and sat in a sanctuary divided by a four-foot-high partition that "prevented either sex from viewing the other while seated" (Williams 1984:107). In 1832, women and men were allowed to enter through the same door, and then in 1845, they were allowed to sit together in the body of the church (1984:107). At the Methodist church in Camden, south of Dover, Delaware, men and women were segregated until the 1860s (1984:108).

Sexual segregation also took place in Ontario Methodist churches. Westfall (1989:157) notes that in many Ontario Methodist churches "...men and women sat on opposite sides of the centre aisle." The first Methodist church built in Toronto, then called York, was built in 1818 on King Street (Champion 1899:39). It was a clapboard, thirty-by-forty-foot structure built on posts (1899:39). It is described thus:

> A narrow passage down the centre of the church led to a high, square and box-like pulpit with sounding-board. On either side rude benches extended to the walls. The men sat on the benches to the right and the women on the left. This strange old eastern custom was followed here throughout the entire existence of the chapel, but went out of custom when the little church was sold. [cited in (Champion 1899:40)]

Finally, then, we return to George Street Church, Peterborough. Aside from the excerpt from the article given at the start of this essay, there is no further written evidence for gender segregation at this church. Indeed, it is not certain if "...the gallery to which the gentler sex had been confined" was the only area women were allowed to sit. The event to which the piece refers took place on a Thursday evening, and may have differed from usual church practice. The date of 1889 does seem somewhat late for the practice of segregation. As mentioned above, it was abandoned by American Methodists in Delaware between 1845 and the 1860s. The King Street Methodist Church in Toronto abandoned the custom "...when the little church was sold" in 1833 and turned into a theatre (Champion 1899:73). Furthermore, when Champion wrote in 1899, he described the segregation of women from men as a "...strange old eastern custom," which would hint that the custom had long since fallen out of use.

However, the fact remains that on that particular Thursday in May, 1889, a crowd of women was "confined" to the balconies until the men had taken their seats in the body of the sanctuary. At that point, the overflow of women "... broke the barricades at the door" and filled the remaining seats. The idea that women were seated separately from men fits with what is known about Methodist theology and Methodist church architecture, and the theology of exclusion that surrounds the two. Although the quotation from the Methodist Conference of 1765 is the only example speaking directly of galleries, the placement of one sex in a balcony would seem just as effective as the division by means of a four-foot-high railing.

Conclusions

The nature of sexual segregation in 18th- and 19th-century Methodist churches cannot be described by one simple statement. Most likely, it grew out of both John Wesley and the congregation as a whole having to deal with the conflicting perceptions of women being by nature both spiritually aware and

spiritually destructive in a society that valued clearly-defined women's and men's roles. This belief in the use of strict oppositions to define the world and human nature must have also led to problems. For example, these oppositions must have eventually led to a potentially confusing mediation, with men forced to adopt and admire "feminine" traits while maintaining their own "masculine" power as husbands and church leaders. In addition, it has been shown that women were being encouraged to develop spiritual traits that would eventually enable them to function on the same power level as men. It was a combination of these factors that was probably responsible for the disintegration of Wesley's mid-18th-century idea of forced gender segregation by the end of the 19th century. The carefully constructed spheres of influence that defined men's and women's roles were eventually worn away from the inside by the very associational strings that had originally defined them, with the women eventually breaking the barriers at the doors, and filling up the body of the church.

While it can be argued above that Methodism did, to a limited extent, encourage women to develop the spiritual traits that would eventually enable them to function on the same power level as men, George Street Church stands as an example of how male temporal power was used to distance women from male spheres of influence and traditionally held male space within the church.

Between 1789 and 1812, Jeremy Bentham devoted considerable effort to designing and promoting what he termed the "Panopticon Penitentiary House." It was designed to enforce a solitude on prisoners in which they would be forced into thinking they were under constant observation, even if they were not (Bentham 1969:194-195). Michel Foucault has used the example of Bentham's Panopticon to demonstrate the "technology of power" [cited in (O'Farrell 1989:104)], and the extent to which architecture can be used to enforce social behaviour (Foucault 1979:195-228). While perhaps not a Panopticon, George Street Church exhibits some of the same characteristics. It reinforces social ideas about gender relations and segregation, and the division of spheres of influence along sex lines. Built to reflect social ideas, historical traditions, and theological teachings, this church and others like it were used to condition social behaviour and to strengthen ideas about gender segregation in the people who used them.

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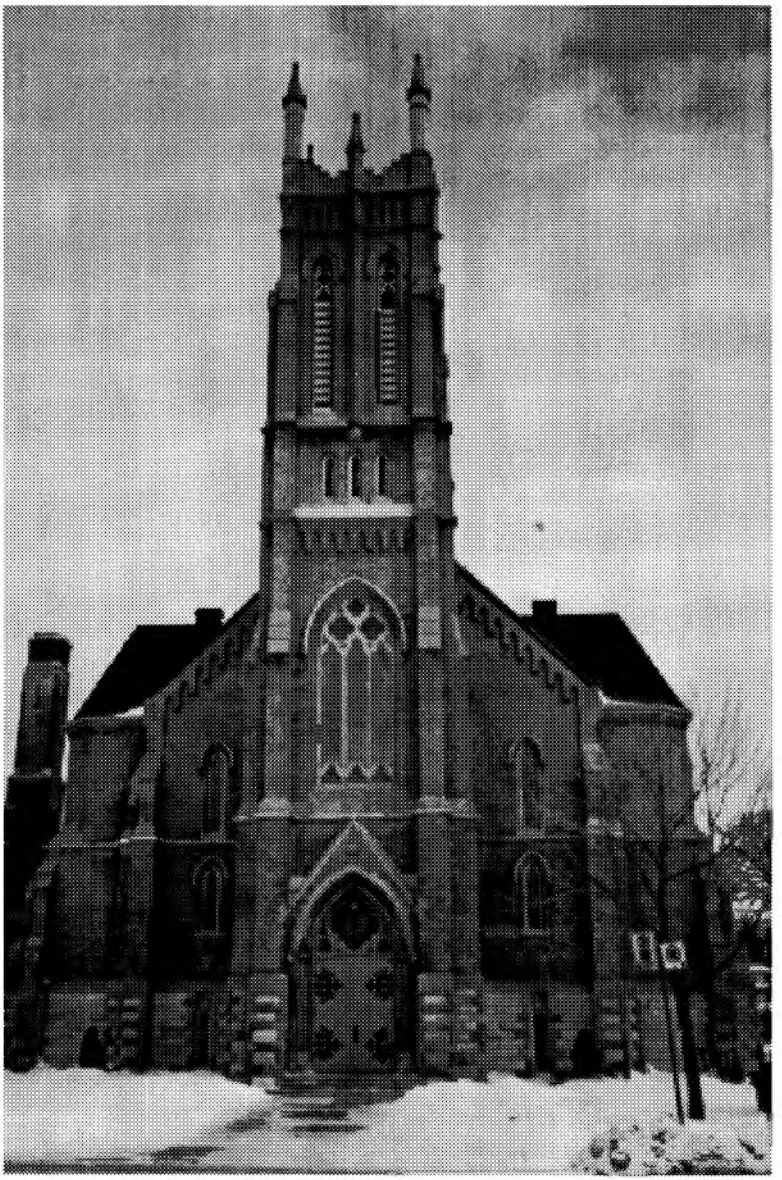
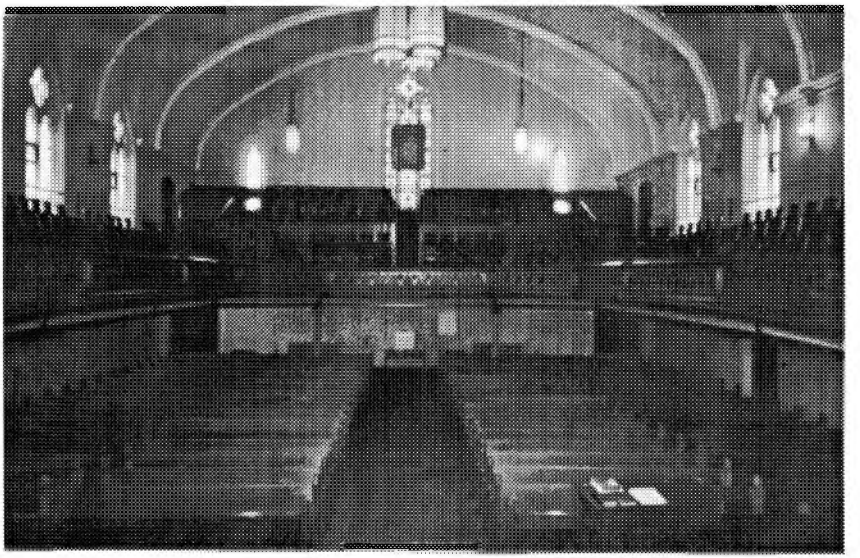


Figure 1.



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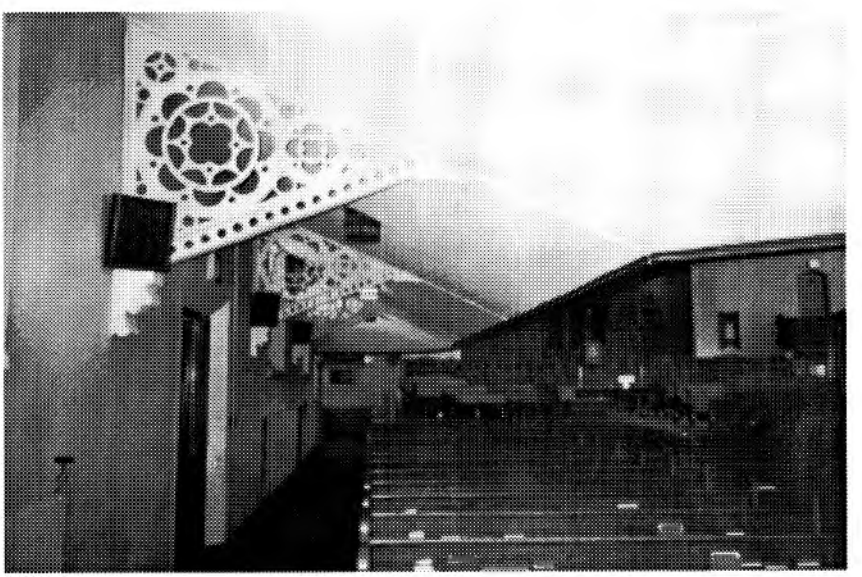

Figure 3.