



{ PHOTO ESSAY }

Cape Cod's  
newly completed  
**Church of the  
Transfiguration**  
embodies the  
belief that beauty  
can nurture our  
communion  
with God.

Interview  
by David Neff

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# The Art of Glory





**People Look East:** This photomontage shows the Church of the Transfiguration's art-packed interior, culminating at the eastern wall with a monumental mosaic of Christ in glory.

**T**HE CHURCH OF THE TRANSFIGURATION, located near picturesque Rock Harbor on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, may be the most art-intensive worship space built in recent years. Everywhere you look there seems to be carved stone, cast bronze, mosaic, fresco, or stained glass.

But the Church of the Transfiguration is art-intensive in another way: From the beginning, the worshipping community has attracted members with an artistic impulse. The Community of Jesus, the intentional ecumenical community that worships here, is widely known for the quality of its musical ministry—from a choir that has toured in 24 countries and produced 45 CDs to a world champion marching band.

As the community built its new structure, it retained master artists in traditional media and apprenticed members to those artists.

As a result, the community not only learned new skills and partly underwrote the building with sweat equity, it also deepened the community's creative spirituality. When the community outgrew its original worship space, it thought carefully not only about what worship activity would happen in the new space, but also about what that new worship space would say, what its witness would be. Thus, the building's focus on art with a biblical message.

The church building was dedicated in June 2000, and in June 2010, the congregation celebrated the completion of the extensive artwork. *Christianity Today* editor in chief David Neff interviewed Community of Jesus spokesperson Blair Tingley about the biblical message of the church's art.

#### **What is the point of all the art in this church?**

When we thought about the art, the fundamental thing we wanted





was for it to teach the Bible. It needed to be a teaching church that would recount the history of salvation from Genesis to Revelation.

In addition, we wanted the art to support and illuminate the Easter mystery—hence the centrality of the altar—and give glory to God.

Parallel to that is the celebration of creation. That's what you see when you approach the church's atrium. The exterior of the church celebrates the beauty of creation as recounted in Genesis. The first two verses in the Bible, which talk about God's Spirit hovering over the chaos, are portrayed on the lintel over the door. The front doors show Adam and Eve standing beside the Tree of Life. This celebrates



the beauty of God's work before sin. In the atrium, each of the carved stone capitals on the pillars celebrates a different day of creation.

**I noticed Garden of Eden imagery just inside the front doors, too.**

A Tree of Life mosaic starts on the floor right at the doors and carries on the full length of the center aisle. Then it bursts into full flower at the altar.

Embedded in that tree are different portions of the Bible story. Because the church tells the story of salvation, the first thing we do is show the need for salvation. We recount the story of Cain and Abel in mosaic on the floor at the very opening of the doors.

**Floor Show: Glow from the west wall's oculus window enlivens the Tree of Life processional path that also features Moses and Elijah, witnesses to the Transfiguration.**

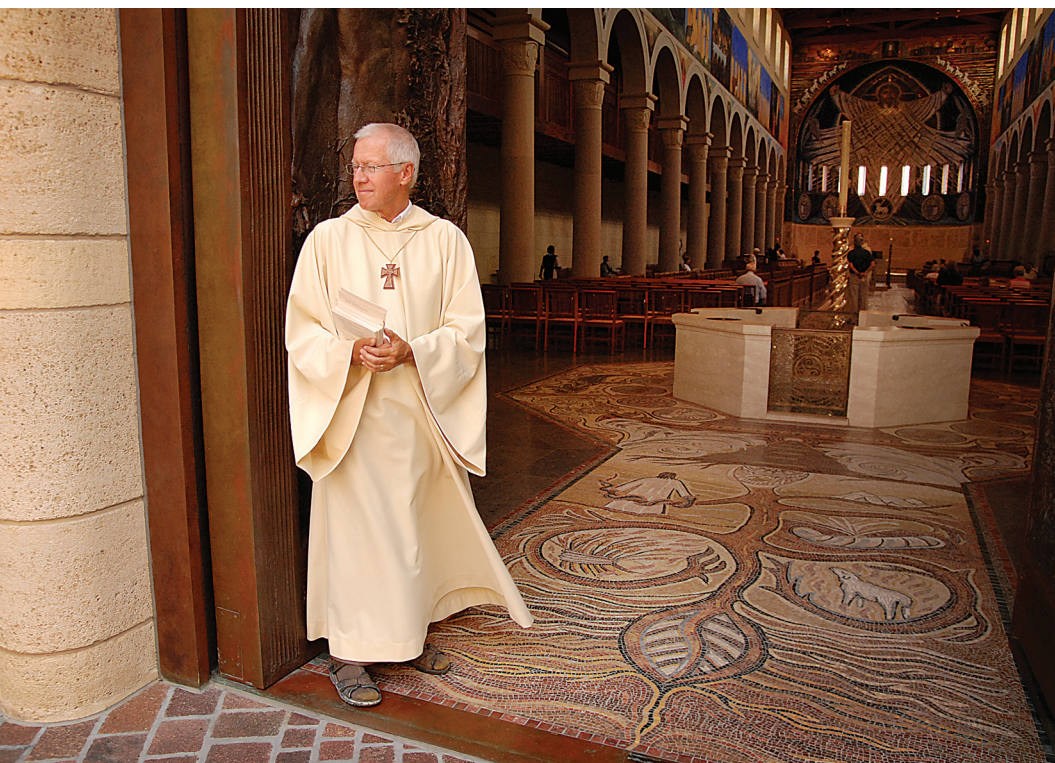
**It Loves to Tell the Story: True fresco paintings depict scenes from the life of Christ, beginning (from right) with the visit of the Magi and Jesus' baptism, followed by the wedding at Cana and four other miracles. Alternate paintings show people from every nation traveling to heaven.**

Then you come to the baptismal font, which is large, made of marble, and eight-sided. The theme of the baptismal font is the Trinity enlivening the newly baptized. Here Christians are reborn. That's a re-gensis. On the floor surrounding the font is the story of Noah and the Flood, another of God's works of salvation. We have embedded in the Noah story 42 aquatic animals from the Cape Cod area. That gives salvation a concrete context. Yes, salvation occurs everywhere, but the art emphasizes that it happens in this place.

As you walk toward the east end of the church, there are medallions to illustrate the stories of Moses and Elijah and that outline our need for salvation.







**Welcome to Worship:** Usher Eric Cragg greets worshipers at the church's main doors. In the church's center aisle, the pulpit holds the gospel book (below), with its carved cover that presents the traditional symbols of the four evangelists.

The next main piece of liturgical furniture is the pulpit or ambo, from which we proclaim the Word of God. In the floor surrounding the lectern is the story of Jonah and the whale, a typology for Christ's three days in the tomb.

Then we process toward the altar, which is housed in a conch-shaped terminus wall at the east end. On the floor you see the Tree of Life bursting into full flower and fruit, symbolic of paradise.

**Does the art on the walls have a similar thematic flow to the art on the floor?**

We have fresco murals painted in the



part of the wall beneath the windows and above the columns and arches.

On the north wall are scenes from the life of Christ in chronological order: Jesus' baptism, the wedding at Cana, and some other stories of Jesus' miracles.

On the south wall, the mural begins with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and then tells the story of the Passion through the Last Supper and the Crucifixion, ending in Pentecost.

Between the scenes from the life of Christ, we have representations of all nations and tribes coming to the heavenly city. The picture is taken from both Isaiah and Revelation.

Beneath the rectangular murals are triangular areas called spandrels. In those spandrels are Old Testament images that relate to the New Testament images just above them. For example, underneath the Last Supper is Melchizedek offering bread and wine, and Abraham ready to sacrifice Isaac.

On the west wall is a contemporary depiction in glass of Christ's glory at the moment of his transfiguration.

**That's where your church takes its name from. How did you come to name this the Church of the Transfiguration?**

A key idea that drives our community is that we are being transformed into the likeness of Christ. We are, or should be, reflecting the glory of Christ in every element of everything our community does, whether it's the church building



or the way we bake a cake or clean our homes. Doing all things for the glory of God has been a foundational ethos.

When Christ went up the mountain and was transfigured, his disciples witnessed his heavenly glory for the first time. The image provides a good balance to the art at the far end of the church, where we picture Christ returning in glory. So those two scenes and the idea that all of us are to reflect his glory led to the naming of the church.

**When you visit the church, though, the Transfiguration isn't what you notice first.**

Yes, what you notice is Christ in glory in the apse, the half-dome at the far end of the church. The picture is taken from Revelation. Christ is portrayed coming again, with his arms outstretched. He has two seraphim with him, one on each side, and 12 trees beneath him, which are symbolic of the Tree of Life.

Above him we show the heavenly Jerusalem, the new city where we're headed. Processing in through the gate of the heavenly Jerusalem are 12 sheep, symbolic of the 12 tribes of Israel, and peoples of all nations coming to the heavenly city and to the Lamb. Way above that is the Alpha and Omega, Jesus Christ, the first and last.

**How has participation in all this art changed community members?**

Creativity and artistic leanings have been part of the community since its first days in the late 1960s. One of our founders, Mother Cay, had a strong feeling that the Spirit of God inspired the spirit of creativity and that we were all nurtured by the role of beauty in communicating with God.

When we began to build the church, the depth and breadth of artistic understanding and expression increased enormously through that process. More than half the community members were involved in the arts. Whether it was being trained by professional artists or even helping the guilds who were trained by the professional artists, it enriched our

community's own artistic understanding.

It also inspired additional creativity that wasn't necessarily directly related to the craft they were studying. Some people who trained in the mosaic guild have gone on to express themselves through costume design for our theater guild.

**You talk about beauty as a channel for get-**

**Banqueting Table: Christ returns in glory above the altar, while the Tree of Life bursts into full bloom around its base, linking the Eucharist to the heavenly banquet of joy and peace. Inset: Stegosaurus in paradise.**

**ting to know God. Has that experience also been deepened in the community?**

Absolutely. The whole notion of beauty being a way through which we can worship and receive a sense of God's love has been





## FAST FACTS ABOUT THE CHURCH OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

**Groundbreaking:** November 1, 1997

**Dedication:** June 17, 2000

**Completion of the art:** June 2010

**Seating capacity:** 540

**Members of the community:** 281

**Church height:** 55 feet

**Church width:** 72 feet

**Church length:** 182 feet

**Building cost, not including  
donated labor:** \$10 million

**Estimated value of donated  
labor:** \$1.5 million

**Primary building material:** Limestone

foundational. It has only increased as the arts themselves have increased.

### What impact does the new church have on visitors?

When I am giving tours and we round the corner of the community's white clapboard buildings, the view of this stone basilica is often unexpected. People aren't anticipating what they run into visually. The nature of the stone and the simplicity of the structure give it a timeless quality. The simple basilica shape allows us to be timeless in a way that a Gothic structure wouldn't.

I often say when I am giving tours that all

**After a Service: Below, children enjoy the atrium fountain. Upper right, ringers pull the 10 change-ringing bells imported from a foundry in London, while a 4,000-pound bronze angel atop the bell tower watches over the church.**

Christians can find this style of architecture in their heritage. If they trace their family tree back far enough, they'll find a basilica. We wanted to have a church that was welcoming to all Christians, that all Christians would feel at home in, by virtue of the fact that it wasn't exclusive to a particular branch of Christianity.

In addition to looking back to the ancient and traditional, we wanted the church to have a fresh voice architecturally and artistically, to have something contemporary to say. So there is modern expression throughout the church.

### How does the building reach out to others?

That was why we wanted a teaching building

that spoke eloquently and majestically of God's work through human history.

The church is open. Our services are public. We welcome people to join us for worship and prayer, and to experience the love of Christ. It's a church that is built to be shared.

