

How to Start an Art Gallery at Your Church

By Christopher Brewer

(From his site: <http://Gospelthroughsharedexperience.blogspot.com>. Used with permission.)

Thinking about starting an art gallery at your church but not quite sure where to start?



I started showing art at our church in Grand Rapids, MI in 2006 and since that time we've exhibited the work of Harvey Alley, Mary Andersen, Rick Beerhorst, Alfonse Borysewicz, Sandra Bowden, Michael Buesking, Clay Enoch, Doug Fassett, Wayne Forte, Peter Gordon, Gail Kedde (Zieger), Edward Knippers, Scott Laumann, John Marquardt, Carol McCrady, Armand Merizon, Chris Stoffel Overvoorde, Steve Prince, Julie Quinn, Jonathan Quist, Rembrandt van Rijn and John August

Swanson. We've also purchased 20 works for the permanent collection: *Art that Tells the Story*. With the help of our Media Director, Dave Gavette, we put together a [site](#) for the arts ministry that includes video interviews with several of the artists that we've exhibited. And most recently, I edited and published a catalogue inspired by, and including much of, the collection: [Art that Tells the Story](#) (Gospel through Shared Experience, 2011).

As a result of all of this, lots of folks ask me how they can do something along these lines at their church. In an effort to help you get started I've put together a brief guide to starting an art gallery at your church, and this in an effort to cultivate and create alternate wisdom traditions (learn more [here](#) and [here](#)), in this case art.

Connect with your church's leadership

Have you discussed the possibility of starting an arts ministry/gallery with your pastor or pastoral team? If not, then setting up a meeting with them is the first step. Besides having been commanded to obey our leaders and submit to their authority (Hebrews 13:17) it just plain makes sense. And when you schedule the meeting be sure to ask if there's a standard process for submitting a ministry idea. Do you need to fill out an application or put together a 1-page summary that includes stuff like a purpose statement, a potential leadership team or a proposed budget?

You'll also want to connect with the worship pastor/leader/team, media director,

aesthetics/decoration committee and/or custodial staff. I realize that not all churches have folks in these positions, but if yours does, be sure to keep them in the loop. And do everything to can to establish a committee and budget. Committees can make it harder to get things done (i.e., get your way quickly), but that's not necessarily a bad thing and they also make it harder to get things undone (thanks Chris Overvoorde for pointing this out). The last thing you want to see after you purchase several pieces or move out of the area is for the pieces to be taken down and stored in the broom closet. Finding others who care about this ministry and are willing to share the load and then giving them resources to accomplish the task is absolutely crucial to the ministry's success.

Identify your gallery space

Work together with the folks mentioned above to select a gallery space that suits your purpose. If you're showing work tied to the preaching schedule or liturgical calendar you might consider selecting a space in the main foyer or sanctuary. If you're looking to show work as a sort of community engagement/outreach you'll want to be sure that the space is accessible (maybe even off-site, see one such effort [here](#)) and provides room for proper viewing and reflection. How many pieces will you be showing? What type of works will you be showing (e.g., paintings, sculpture, etc.)?



Will the work be concentrated in one area or scattered throughout the church? Do you want the work in high or low traffic areas? Do the works need to be in a secure area or protected with a security hanger? What about stanchions?

We began showing work in the Worldview Resource Center (aka Church Library) using a professional hanging system from Lafontsee Galleries (learn more [here](#)). The professional hanging system was a must for our space as the walls are cinder block. Not only does the system keep us from having to drill/repair over and over again, it also allows us to rotate art from the permanent collection as well as the various exhibitions (see our exhibition history [here](#)) with ease. We now have approximately 80 linear feet of wall space equipped with this system in a variety of areas (e.g., main foyer, rotunda, hallways, resource center). Two of the areas are high traffic (i.e., rotunda and hallways) and so we've installed custom stanchions along the lines of [CSP's system](#) (you might also consider [Absolute's stanchions](#)).



If you decide to go with picture hangers I would recommend [Ooks](#).

In addition to these designated spaces, we've hung work in the sanctuary and displayed sculpture and mixed media on custom stands in the main foyer and rotunda. For the Bowden exhibition at left I fabricated several

stands using OSB, wrapped the display surface with black linen and covered the books with custom acrylic panels before affixing information cards to each stand.

Your space will be completely different. You might not even have much space, but that doesn't mean that you can't exhibit work. Get creative and use the space you do have even if that means an outdoor, off-site (check [this](#) out) or an [artist salon](#).

Connect with your church's artists

Too many times we forget to reach out to the members of our own assembly. Before you bring in work by some other artist be sure to connect with your church's artists and show their work. We showed a lot of landscapes in the early days, and there's nothing wrong with that. We even showed the work of one of our members who is a master wood turner in an exhibition inspired by 2 Timothy 2:21: Vessels for Honor.



Besides affirming their work as created good and redemptive word, exhibiting their work enables them to use their gifts and for the rest of the body to receive and be blessed by their gifts. You'll be amazed by the number of artists, wood workers, quilters and fine crafters that come out of the woodwork once you start explicitly valuing their work by exhibiting art in your church. And if you're looking to introduce art to folks who aren't used to looking at it starting with people they know is a great way to build bridges (you might also encourage them to check [this](#) out).

Establish an exhibition schedule

We started pretty aggressively, with exhibitions lasting 1-2 months running back to back. More recently, we've had to back off due to budget constraints. That being said, you'll need to determine what's right for your church. I would suggest starting with 2-3 exhibitions per year: Advent/Epiphany, Lent/Easter and an optional third exhibition in the summer. I've always tried to rotate church, local and national artists as well as artistic styles (e.g., representational, abstract, impressionistic) and mediums (e.g., oil paintings, watercolor paintings, graphite drawings, woodcut prints, linoleum prints, sculpture, mixed media, etc.) as different folks will connect with different styles and mediums.

We've never paid for an exhibition, though if you make use of a [CIVA traveling exhibition](#) or an exhibition from the [Bowden Collection](#) paying is entirely reasonable as there are costs associated with putting these exhibitions together (e.g., the works themselves, crating, maintenance, etc.). Either way, you'll be responsible for S/H and likely for insurance as well. Be sure to have these conversations up front as many artists have had bad experiences and may already

be reticent to send you or your church thousands of dollars of art. That being said, once you've logged several successful exhibitions artists and institutions will be more willing to lend you art. Let's just say we didn't start with Rembrandt's Prodigal Son etching, but after three years of exhibitions, Calvin College was kind enough to lend us the work for a summer exhibition. And be sure to make a list of the works on loan as well as their values, whether or not they're for sale, condition of works/frames, the dates of the exhibition, etc. and have the artist and a representative from the church sign it before making a copy so that the artist and church have a copy. This form will come in handy for insurance purposes as well as inspection at the end of the exhibition.

One final note, I've always given the artists a gift (usually a book like Ryken's *Art for God's Sake* or Wittmer's *Heaven is a Place on Earth*) and a thank you card signed by at least myself and usually the pastoral team as well. Aside from the gesture, it's a meaningful way for your church to give back, stretching their notions of what it means to be an artist and a Christian. Whenever possible, you might consider purchasing one of the works for your permanent collection and/or encouraging church members to consider purchasing works for their homes in an effort to cultivate this very important work.

Make a catalogue

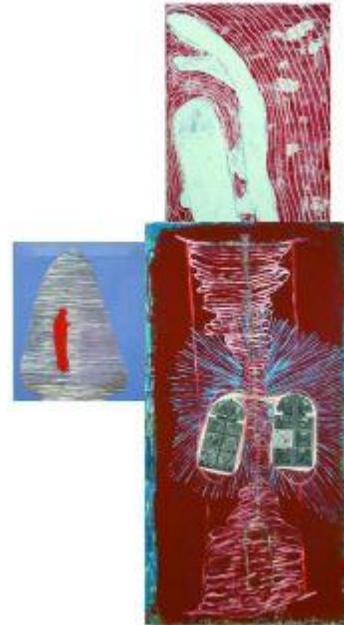


I've done everything from an announcement in the bulletin to an exhibition postcard or booklet depending on the size and purpose of the exhibition. I designed the booklet at left for a Lenten exhibition in an effort to help our body enter into this unfamiliar season through the work of Wayne Forte and Julie Quinn. I provided a bio of the artists (from their websites), a brief description of their respective work as a whole and then descriptions of each piece in the exhibition. The back of the booklet included suggested reading as well as a small sponsors section as we had raised a portion of the

printing cost with the support of several local businesses.

I've already mentioned it, but again, I ended up editing and publishing [Art that Tells the Story](#) (Gospel through Shared Experience, 2011) as a sort of catalogue of our permanent collection for our church, and this in addition to its more general purpose as an attempt to tell the Story through commonly observable, shared experience; in this case, art.

More recently I worked with a designer on a folding card for an exhibition of Alfonse Borysewicz's work "Blessing" at St. Augustine and St. Monica Catholic Church in Detroit. The top and left-side panels fold onto the center panel just like the original hinged triptych. These sorts of custom designed and die cut pieces are a bit more expensive than a standard postcard, but again, you'll need to make the decision based on the purpose and budget of each exhibition. You'll want to work with a reputable printer. I use [Resource Communications](#) - just ask for Hank (616.822.5357).



Whatever you do, just remember that you're the bridge connecting the church who often has difficulty engaging the arts and artists and artists who often have difficulty engaging the church. Whatever you need to do to help them engage the work, whether that means postcards and booklets, discussion over dinner or a book, website and/or seminar, give it all you've got, take praise with humility and criticism with grace. You're doing an important work.

Begin collecting works

You don't have to have a permanent collection, but if you have the space and budget I'd definitely recommend that you consider establishing a permanent collection of work that your church can engage on a regular basis. If you decide to do so be sure to discuss and record parameters for the collection. While we value and show a variety of work, we only purchase works that tell the Story (i.e., Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation). You might start with an inexpensive woodcut and move on to oil paintings and sculpture, but however you go about collecting, its helpful to view it as supporting the artist and their work as opposed to purchasing something of value. Your support makes possible their work. The work you receive is a small portion of that creative output and that output is, according to the Story, both created good (i.e., useless) as well as redemptive word (i.e., useful).

If you're looking for additional help, be sure to check out the following resources:

Books

[Fiona Bond, Arts in Your Church](#)

Sandra Bowden, ed., *Helps in Planning and and Developing Church Related Galleries*

Articles

[Makoto Fujimura, Abstraction and the Christian Faith](#)

Organizations

[Christians in the Visual Arts \(CIVA\)](#)

[International Arts Movement \(IAM\)](#)

Chris Brewer is the founder and director of gospel through shared experience – a conversation intended to change the way the Church thinks about and practices evangelism – as well as the editor and publisher of [*Art that Tells the Story*](#).

Chris, his wife and two boys live near the East Sands in St. Andrews, Scotland where Chris is working on a Ph.D. in Divinity ([Theology, Imagination and the Arts](#)) with David Brown at the University of St. Andrews.