

# THE WINDOWS MADE IT POSSIBLE

by Laura Summer



Many times, when a building is ready for stained glass windows, the budget is exhausted, and the windows must wait until a future fundraising effort is made. But in a small church in Hillsdale, NY, the windows literally made the building possible.

In 1999, land was purchased by a small congregation of The Christian Community with the intention of eventually building a new church. The Christian Community, Movement for Religious Renewal, is an international movement for the renewal of religion, founded in 1922 in Switzerland by the eminent Lutheran theologian Friedrich Rittlemeyer with the help of Rudolf Steiner, Austrian thinker and mystic. It is a church centered around the seven sacraments in a renewed form. Camphill Architects of Aberdeen, Scotland, was enlisted to design a church that would fit into the Taconic/ Berkshire region (on the New York/Massachusetts border) but would not be traditional in its architecture, a church that could hold something new. Church fundraising efforts began in 2000.



*The color scheme in these windows installed in a Christian Community church in Hillsdale, New York, moves from red toward the front of the church to blues toward the rear of the building.*

In 2002, the fundraising effort was at a plateau, and the building committee wondered where to turn. The answer came unexpectedly. The materials for the stained glass windows were promised as a dona-

tion from Don Samick of Lamb Studios. When told of this donation, architectural engineer Chris Hoppe said, "Great! Now that we have the windows, all we need are the walls to hold them up."

And so began the campaign to “Support” the windows. Each window would be in memory of one or more people for whom families and friends would take on the task of raising the funds to support “their” window. In the end, enough funds were raised to begin the building process.

When I was asked to design the stained glass windows for the church, I was asked to compose the design in such a way that the colors and composition would not distract from the sacramental activity of the church but would rather be in service to what happens there. I wondered, “How can I express the process of being filled with God without being representational?” I didn’t want to create pictures of religious themes; I wanted to have people experience a process.

At first I made many small sketches. The floor of my studio was literally covered with paper. Then I made large panels of paper the same size as the windows. These I lined up in the studio in approximately the relationship that they would be in the church. Although I had worked professionally for 13 years as an artist, the effect of these huge white panels was overwhelming. I called a colleague and said, “Where in the telephone book do I look up ‘Great Artist,’ because this job is definitely beyond me?”

Because no such listing was available, I decided to plow ahead. The first question was, “Which window would be in memory of which person?” I felt that it was an artistic decision, and so I tried to balance the people, (some of whom I had not known), front to back, left to right, as I would balance a painting. I hoped that, in some way, these people who had died would assist me in a design job that was clearly over my head.

I wanted to work with stained glass as a medium that begins with structure and the movement implied by structure. The lead lines provide a framework and should be beautiful in themselves. I began with the support bars, as these were the



*The stained glass windows were donated to the congregation by Donald Samick of Lamb Studios. Following this donation, new life was breathed into the congregation’s fundraising efforts to build the new building.*

thickest of the lines and had to be designed very early in the building process. Since these had to be straight, I arranged them at angles so that they implied a curve. I then worked with the lead lines themselves to create a field of moving lines that would carry the color toward the front of the church. Into this web of movement I inserted vertical lines to carry the reds as they increased from back to front.

In stained glass windows, the lead lines are, of course, fixed to each other. I wanted to also have lines that were “free,” so I indicated where on the glass we would paint these free lines.

As I worked with designing the lead lines, I was aware of how the color would be incorporated. I completed the patterns by coloring the spaces between the lines. Because I worked with a variety of colored media, watercolor, pastel, and collaged colored paper, the final intended color was often carried mostly in my imagination. I worried that this would be a problem for Dominique Raeuber, who was to construct the windows. I wondered

if, faced with my patched and crossed-out patterns, he might just throw up his hands in despair.

I need not have worried. As soon as Dominique saw the patterns, he immediately understood what I was trying to do. Together we chose glass, and then the project moved out of my hands and into his. As an artist, it is an amazing process for the design that you have agonized over to be executed by another artist. It is an experience of faith that what is possible by two people is greater than what is possible by one.

The colors in the windows move from mostly blue toward the back of the church to mostly red in the front. I wanted to create a feeling of reverence by working with the color violet, but I did not want to use violet glass. In using reds and blues, the feeling is of a changing, dynamic relationship, but the color of the light coming through the windows is various shades of violet. This light can be seen on the deep bays around the windows, which are flooded with tones of purple, lilac, and magenta.



The two windows near the altar are quite different. The priests wanted the light around the altar to be clear, and, since these two windows were in memory of two children who had died, it seemed appropriate that they be more light-filled, clear and full of movement. We used both clear, and German opal glass in tints of peach, goldpink, beige, and pale green.

Because we used Lamberts glass from Germany, there is a spill of colored light, not only on the window bays but also on the shiny stained concrete floors. When the outside light is strong, brilliant abstract “paintings” appear on the floor and reflect up on the walls.

The walls of the church are painted with a technique called *Lazure*, in which multiple transparent washes are applied to create a surface of dynamic color. When the windows were installed, I realized that the red of the windows toward the east needed to be echoed somehow in the apse. Although there is red in the

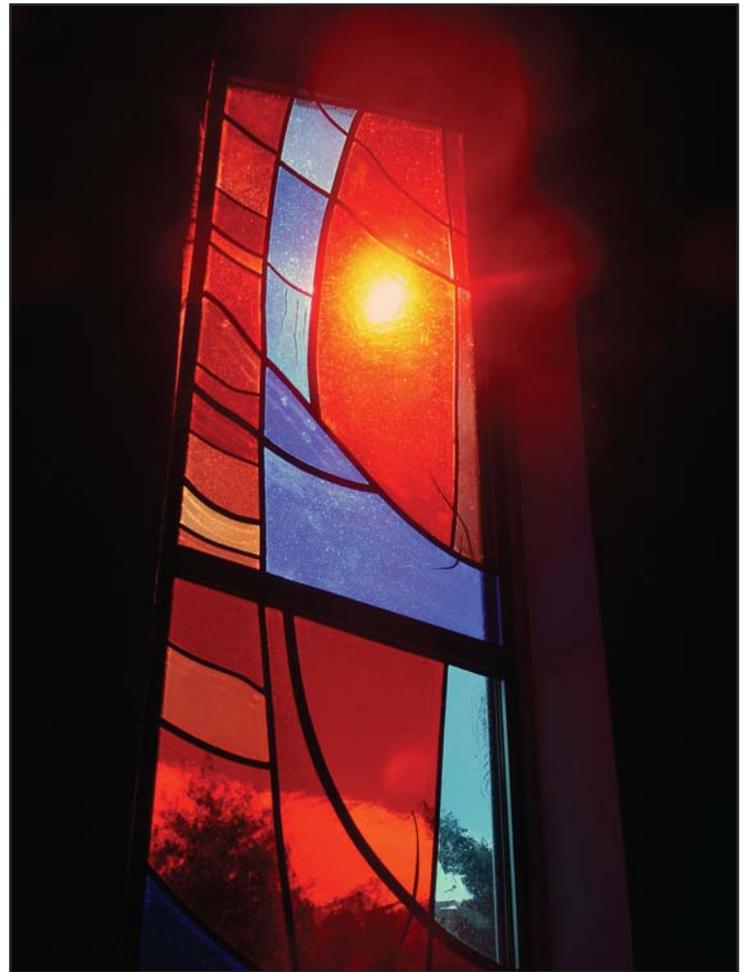
*Left: These windows, fabricated with Lamberts mouthblown glass, project vivid color onto the walls, which are painted with the Lazure technique.*



painting that hangs over the altar, the distance from the window to the altar was too great. To solve this, I painted an abstract play of reds, oranges and golds on the wall that slants toward the apse. Light from the two clearer windows on the south does sometimes fall on this wall, but, even when it doesn't, there is a play of color there. People often ask, "What is that color coming from?"

Entering the chapel is a threshold experience. For the individual, it is a pilgrimage toward the altar; for the congregation it is an embracing gathering space. The one is emphasized by the rising ridge and strong rhythm of the intersections, and the other is expressed in the open gesture of the footprint and the embracing curve inscribed by the 12 exposed rafters. The communion step marks the transition into the apse with its distinctly upright proportions. The curved and gently tilted east wall encompasses the altar yet seems permeable into a realm beyond. There is an element of playfulness in the serenity of the space, a subtle asymmetry and gentle variation in the left and right experience. Simple yet beautifully crafted details prepare the grounds for the vibrant interplay of color and light. The space is captivating but not talkative, small but generous in its gesture.

Being asked to design the windows and to work with the interior surfaces of the church was a challenge few artists are given. I am deeply grateful to everyone who supported me throughout this process that was sometimes grueling, often joyful, and always filled me with awe.



*Top, this and facing Page: The left and right wall banks of windows.  
Above: Window detail, right wall forward window.*

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