



Holy Water

Creating works of faith is a rewarding opportunity for some builders. Here are four religious projects and the stories behind them.



By Shabnam Mogharabi Patio Pools & Spas' involvement in faith-based building began about 15 years ago, when the company completed a Holocaust memorial for a local Jewish community center (shown here). The waterfeature included a broken, cracked pillar to symbolize the lives shattered by the tragedy. Since then, the firm has built dozens of baptisteries, fountains, waterfeatures and swimming pools for local churches and pastors. "Throughout history, life has always been centered near water — the spiritual side of water, the life-giving water, the healing water," says Mark Ragel, president of the Tucson, Ariz.-based firm, a *Pool & Spa News*

Top Builder. "And that's important in the church environment, which is why you see tremendous opportunities throughout the country," he adds. "There's always a water element in the church."

Ragel is one of many pool builders designing aquascapes for faith-based organizations. Fueled by a surge in spirituality since 9/11, attendance at churches, synagogues, temples and prayer centers has

skyrocketed. In fact, more than 750 mega-churches boast a weekly attendance of 2,000 or more, and church construction was up more than 10 percent nationwide in the spring, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

This boom has carried into the world of water, as pastors, rabbis and congregations look to create attractive, meaningful places of worship.

"Just as they were centuries ago, churches again are becoming the center of communities," says Greg Barron, president of the National Association of Church Design Builders, a nonprofit trade group in Arlington, Texas. "People are trying to find a place to ground themselves."

As the following four projects demonstrate, spiritual aquascapes don't have to be secular to be divine.



Acclaim Pools, LLC

The Woodlands, Texas

Designers: Steven Toth and Mike Dawson

Project: Private pool, lay pastor's residence



In the Bible, Jesus tells his disciples, "No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) During most of his childhood, Steven Toth's client, a lay pastor, read this quote over and over again as it hung above his dressing mirror.

When Toth, the owner of Acclaim Pools, LLC, in The Woodlands, Texas, began consulting with the client about his backyard, it became clear that he wanted to share similar words with his children.

To create a dramatic solution, Toth took a verse from Philippians 4:13 ("I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me")

and had it carved into a block of granite. The stone was placed behind an 8-inch-tall, sheer-descent waterfall. As the lay pastor's children walk through the house and into the yard, they can immediately see the striking black-and-white words, reminding them of their father's spiritual guidance.

Many of the client's friends tried to deter him from the project, saying that the blatant inclusion of Scripture might lower the value of his home. As a solution, Toth styled the granite in such a way that it can be easily covered in tile if the homeowner decides to move.

Upcoming work of faith: A baptistry at the Woods Edge Community Church, also in The Woodlands. It will feature natural rock fountains and interweaving Bible verses.

In the designer's words: "Working on [religious] projects is a great way for people to communicate their faith and what they stand for in a nonthreatening way," Toth says.

"In this area, the baptisteries and fountains outside the edifices are becoming grander and playing more important roles in the churches."



KINGSWAY POOL & SPA



Kingsway Pool & Spa

Arlington, Texas

Designer: Michael Smith

Project: Indoor fountain, Crossroads Christian Church

Crossroads Christian Church has a congregation of 5,000, and they wanted a waterfeature prominently displayed in the church foyer to balance the scope of the edifice. Still, space was limited: The best location for the fountain was a 200-square-foot area between two staircases.

Michael Smith, president of Kingsway Pool & Spa in Arlington, Texas, decided to capitalize on vertical space by installing a column cascade surrounded by 24 laminar jets. The glasslike streams of water catapult toward heaven from holes that were

hand-carved into the natural stone coping.

One concern voiced by church officials was that the sound of moving water would be distracting during Sunday service. By manipulating the hydraulics and valve positioning, Smith and his team were able to achieve a dramatic visual impression while keeping the sound level at a calm, meditative level.

The style of the indoor fountain is mirrored in a larger outdoor feature. With a 60-foot diameter and more than 60 laminar jets, the exterior fountain serves as an appealing call to worship.

Upcoming works of faith: A number of project leads have come from advertising in *The Shepherd's Guide for Greater Tarrant County*, a local phone directory for Christian companies.

In the designer's words: "We had to make sure the fountain was elegant and distinctive, but it also had to harmonize with the church and sanctity of the building," said Gary Smith, general manager of Kingsway. "This was the first waterfeature that we've built like this, and we'd love to do it again."



Shasta Pools & Spas

Phoenix

Designer: Jeff Ast

Project: Baptistery,
Christ Church of
the Valley

Jeff Ast is a member of Christ Church of the Valley in Phoenix. So the vice president of construction at Shasta Pools & Spas, a *Pool & Spa News* Top Builder, didn't hesitate to donate a baptistery when it was needed.

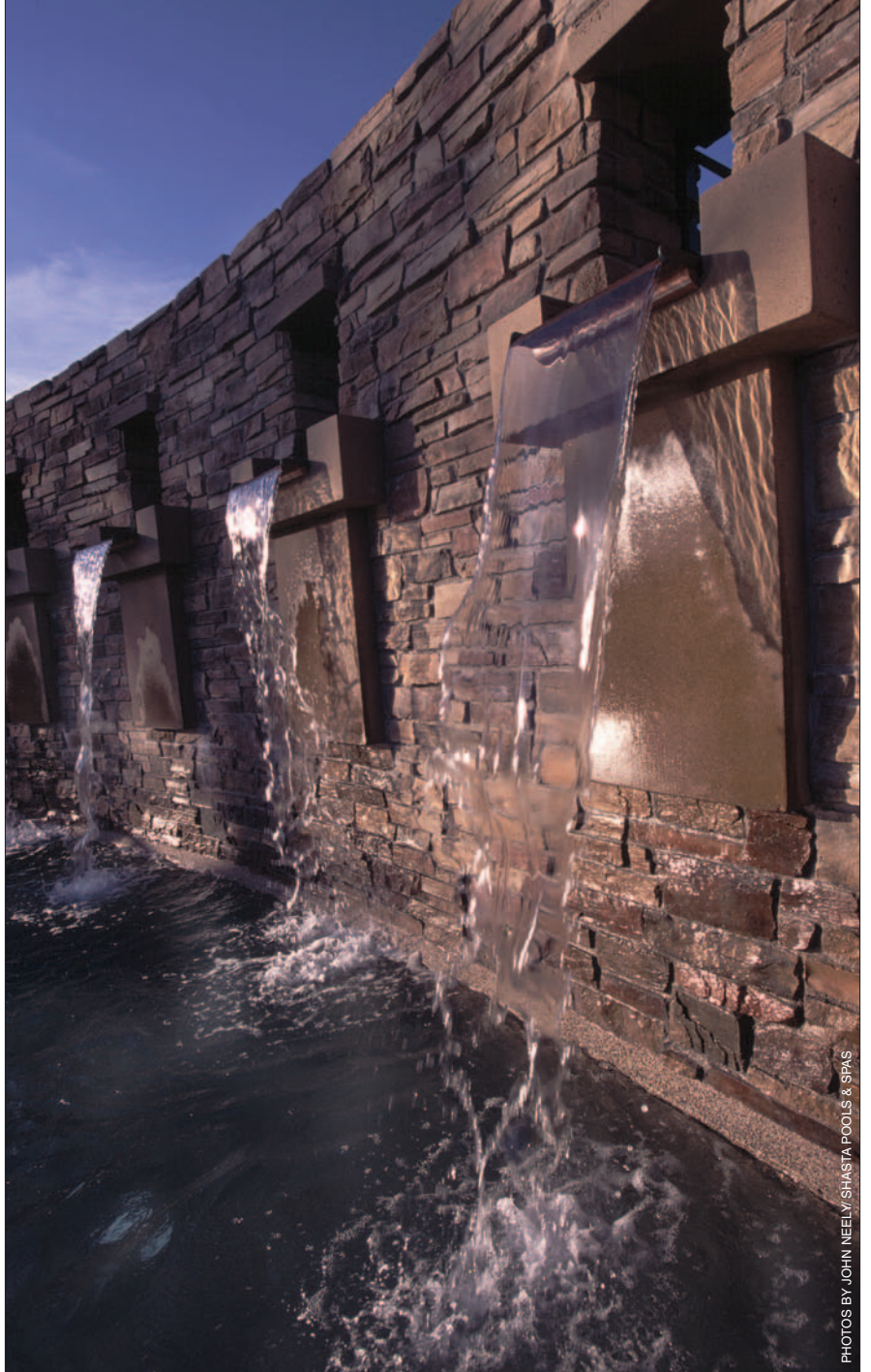
Using stacked stone and copper, the large pool reflects the church's architecture. A 40-foot-long, reverse negative edge wall is lit from below with a dozen 400-watt lights, creating a dramatic monolith.

A 274-foot runnel featuring 18 fountains travels away from the main pool. The bubblers are at seven elevations, and the project soon became a testament to Ast's hydraulic ingenuity. He donated many hours to configure and test the pressure so that each fountain reached to the same height.

Just over a year ago, Ast attended the first baptism ceremony in the aquascape. It was clear to him that prayer and careful planning had made the project a success.

Upcoming work of faith: A 4,000-square-foot pool with two slides for a Christian youth ministry camp in Williams, Ariz.

In the designer's words: "It's difficult to concentrate on church building only. It's not a large arena, but it seems like it's picking up. In the last few years, we've had a dozen bids for baptisteries and such," Ast says. "We love that we're Christian owned and operated, but we're not going to use God to sell pools. We'd rather stand on our reputation as a pool builder."



PHOTOS BY JOHN NEELY/SHASTA POOLS & SPAS



Sacred submersion: Five elevated copper scuppers (above) fall into this striking Phoenix baptistery (far left), which is used by the pastors for monthly baptisms. Meanwhile, a hydraulically perfected runnel (left) transports water from the pool through the church's courtyard.



Patio Pools & Spas

Tucson, Ariz.

Designer: Mark Ragel

Project: Baptistery, Pantano Christian Church

Pantano Christian Church was undergoing a major renovation and wanted to add an outdoor waterfeature. What began as a small, three-tier fountain quickly became an elaborate undertaking.

First, an architect proposed an L-shaped, 40-foot-long water wall. Church leaders liked the idea, but wanted more. Ragel suggested installing a baptistery at the end of the water wall. And because baptisms often occur at Christmas or Easter, the project needed to be designed like a heated pool-spa combo.

The water wall is made of flagstone and drops into a free-form baptistery with a subtle pebble finish. Lit from the bottom, the water rises grandly to the flagstone edge.

Ragel says the biggest challenge was working with local building codes, which classify baptisteries as pools. Rather than erecting a fence, he installed a grate inside the water to keep the pool 18 inches deep when not in use. The project also includes a small, artificial rock waterfeature to accent the facility's prayer garden.

Upcoming work of faith: A contemporary-style waterfeature for a local synagogue.

In the designer's words: "I can't tell you how many people were once drug addicts or alcoholics, and they found spirituality one day, and that baptistery will change their lives forever," Ragel says. "That was my contribution to help my fellow man."

"With these projects, it's mainly through word-of-mouth [referral] that your name spreads," he adds. ■

Tips for working with faith-based organizations

When it comes to finding religious projects, it helps to have a little guidance — and not just from divine intervention. Here are some ideas to keep in mind when working on faith-based pools and waterfeatures:

1 Don't think in strictly business terms. While construction at a house of faith often feels like a commercial project, a place of worship is not a "business" per se. To best manage this relationship, you have to understand the structure and mission of the specific religious community with which you're working.

2 Tout your experience. Just because you can build a shopping mall fountain doesn't mean you can build a baptistery. If you've worked with any faith-based organization in the past, make sure you tell your religious clients. Experienced builders

frequently know how to deal with the complexity of these projects and can offer new, innovative ideas.

3 Be prepared for a slow process. The church decision-making process can be significantly slower than in the private sector. Faith-based cultures and some church constitutions specify that decisions must be approved by numerous individuals or committees. This can cause construction to lag if there is disagreement.

4 Don't expect a single authority figure. Churches rarely have one person who can speak for the entire group. Pastors typically work with congregational leaders and committees. So if you think one phone call to a single source will always answer your question, you'll be quickly disappointed and frustrated.

5 Understand the financing. Many builders donate 100 percent of the cost of a project. Others offer projects at cost. Unlike publicly funded projects, church construction often is financed through private pledges. A drop in donations could mean delays. Keep in mind that any materials or labor you donate are tax-deductible.

6 Reach beyond the Christian market. While Christianity is the dominant U.S. religion, opportunities exist in other faiths. Consider advertising in Jewish neighborhoods, Islamic newspapers or Buddhist temples. Consult with family and friends of various religions to determine how the needs and requirements of each community differ.

— S.M.