Tips on Taking Pictures of Your Church's Stained Glass Windows

Introduction

Thanks for considering taking pictures of your church's windows for use on the WELS Stained Glass Web site.

This site is dedicated to the stained glass windows found in our WELS churches. Because of the large number of churches that have stained glass, in general I have limited the glass to the more tradition "leaded" glass as opposed to the glass that is held together with resins. This glass can be recognized because it is often much thicker and the space between the glass often looks like it is embedded with small stones. It is generally stained glass that has been installed in the last thirty years or so. At this point I don't think I will have the time to include this kind of stained glass in the site, although you are encouraged to submit pictures for possible future use.

Large, Complex Stained Glass

Larger, older churches often have large, more complex stained glass windows. Here are some of the issues faced when taking these windows.

- Often the windows must be taken using special techniques and a "shift lens" to assure that that the proper dimensions are maintained and the window is kept in perspective.
- Large windows must often be taken in several segments.
- Sometimes telephoto lenses are needed to capture the symbols, which are often at a distance from the photographer.
- Often, parts of the windows are hidden behind the altar or back pews.
- Sometimes rooms have been added to the church, blocking off some of the windows from sunlight. These windows often have to be brightened with artificial lighting.
- Sometimes churches have thick walls and the windows are recessed into the walls. Parts of the glass cannot be seen and it takes special work in Photoshop to correct these problems.
- Sometimes the glass is translucent and you can see houses, trees, or cars through parts of the window. This is usually the most difficult problem to correct.

In these larger or more complex churches, it is probably best that I come and photograph the windows myself. Although, if you have experience with photography and have the necessary equipment, I can help you through the process.

Basic Windows.

The majority of WELS churches have more modest stained glass. They often have uniform windows with various symbols in the top. With a modest telephoto lens, these symbols can be easily photographed. They may have a larger window, but it is accessible. If this is the case with your church, you will be able to take the pictures with little effort.

Taking Pictures of Your Church's Windows

You will need a digital camera and a tripod. The digital camera should be at least 6 megapixals. It does not have to be a digital SLR. The tripod does not have to be the sturdiest, but sturdy enough

to steady the camera. You can take the picture with a shutter release or use the timer on your camera. It you take these precautions, the images will be sharp.

Our goal is to get the window to look like the photographer was directly in front of it, at its center—sort of like the photographer was hanging from a rope from the ceiling. This requires work in Photoshop, which I will do. But I need the proper images to enable me to do this.

Follow these steps for good results:

1. Set your camera on the highest quality JPEG it will create. If it creates TIFF images, that is better. If you have a Nikon camera, shoot RAW images. If your Nikon allows you to take RAW images and a JPEG at the same time, use that setting.

2. Take a series of snapshots (no tripod necessary) of your church. Begin at the altar and shoot in the clockwise direction all around. This will provide a frame of reference for the more detailed shots.

3. Begin with any window. Take a picture of the whole window, filling as much of the frame in your camera as possible. If the window is high up or if you must get close to it, estimate how close you are to the window and how high it is above you. Note those dimensions. This will allow me to adjust the image in Photoshop so it is as close to the true size and shape as possible.

Photograph larger windows in several segments. This will allow the final image to have the size and quality we need. When you take the segments, be sure they are separated by clear leaded lines. Stained glass is often made up of panels that are separated by straight pieces of lead. If your segments are bounded by these straight pieces of lead, the segments can easily be pieced together.

If a window is partially blocked, photograph the window as best you can from an angle. The proper shape and dimensions of the window can be arrived at by comparing it with other windows of the same size.

4. If your church has a series of side widows that are different only because of the symbols in them, take a picture of one window as a sample. Find the one that is best lit. After you have taken that window, zoom as close as you can and photograph each symbol in your windows. (Don't forget the symbol in the window you photographed as a sample.) Don't worry if the resulting image is an oval or slightly skewed. That can be corrected.

5. Choose a day with bright but overcast skies. Don't shoot on a sunny day. Windows look nice on a sunny day, but the light is uneven. Bright diffused light is best.

6. You may face other challenges. You may wish to take a quick series of pictures and e-mail them to me with your phone number. I'll evaluate what will need to done and we can discuss how to go about doing the work. It may be that I'll need a retake of one or more shots. Your goal is to supply me with images I can work with so the pictures of your church look like the rest of the pictures on the site. I will also be able to supply your church with high resolution images it can use in brochures, annuals, and congregational picture directories.

Thanks

I truly appreciate any help you can give. I am sure that quite a few churches will be on the site only because a member took the time to photograph the stained glass. You will receive credit on the web site for your work.