A New Church Organ

To rebuild or replace?

By SCOTT RIEDEL

A parish faces many options when deciding to make a change with its church organ. Should the parish move or rebuild an existing organ, or replace it with a new or used pipe or electronic instrument? The list goes on. Is the pipe organ of "tracker," electro-pneumatic, or electro-mechanical action? Will it be in a case or a chamber? What is the appropriate stoplist? How many speakers are needed in the electronic instrument? Where should they be located? Might the electronic instrument have some real pipes? And so on.

Two questions often remain: Which of the many hundreds of organ companies worldwide will be selected to develop a complete design and build the appropriate organ? And how will the congregation afford the investment?

Such were the options and questions before St. Luke's Church, Madison, Wis., nearly four years ago. The study and research by committee, congregation, rector and consultant have resulted in the installation of a mechanical action "tracker" pipe organ of 12 ranks, sets of pipes, built by the Visser-Rolland Associates of Houston, Texas.

St. Luke's is a parish of 300 communicants located in a capital city and home to the University of Wisconsin. Members of the parish are of diverse backgrounds. The worship space seats 160, and is of excellent acoustical character for liturgical worship.

The parish owned a small pipe organ, over 60 years old, that had served many good years and was worn out. An organ committee was established, with members representing the various concerns of the congregation. A consultant was hired who could serve to coordinate and facilitate the process. Many options, technical data, and presentations were evaluated.

Rebuilding the old organ was found to be both costly and of limited promise; thus, replacements were explored. The various replacement organ types were listened to and inspected by the committee — from electronic to pipe, from "computer" to "tracker." Each was evaluated against the basic criteria:

First, the proper organ must meet the musical needs of the congregation — especially leading hymn singing and accompanying the choir and soloists.

Second, the proper organ must meet the acoustical needs of the space; for example, not being too quiet nor too loud, but adjustable for the best tone in the room.

Third, the proper organ must be well built of appropriate materials for long life and durable service, with low maintenance costs.

Finally, the proper organ must demonstrate good stewardship and financial responsibility.

The importance, perception, practical application, and response to these criteria by a parish are as varied as the parishes themselves! For St. Luke's, musical needs called primarily for hymns and choir accompaniment. Bright, clear tones were most appreciated, with Romantic styles being secondary. Acoustically, the building is supportive and sympathetic to liturgical music and speech, having no sound absorbing materials such as carpeting or acoustical tiles in the nave. Therefore, a large organ was not needed. Because space in the gallery was limited for organ and choir, an organ with a small "footprint" and easy accessibility was required.

The committee selection of a mechanical action organ, and the Visser-Rolland pipe scaling and voicing style in particular, produced the right and clear tone desired. The few ranks are more than adequate, even robust, in the fine acoustics. The organ is physically small only three and one-half feet deep. The organ company also provided all of the "custom" design work necessary to make the organ fit the space, both tonally and visually, even creating carvings of the stylized St. Luke symbol in the case front.

To show the congregation the need for a new organ, the committee prepared a series of "live" demonstrations, forums and written literature. Having the understanding and support of the congregation meant having their financial support, making the raising of funds easier than the committee expected. Modest pledges, thank-offerings, and memorials were received, and special fund-raising events included yard sales, benefit concerts, a raffle and even a garden tour.

The end result is an organ that serves the parish and that is shared with the entire community in concerts and services. Most important, the organ represents a project that brought the entire parish together in work and worship.

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