Purchasing an Organ

The purchase of a new church organ, or the extensive repair of an existing instrument is a major event in the life of a congregation. Selecting an organ wisely is important as it is the main musical instrument of the church. It is heard during almost every worship service, and it is often in use more than fifty percent of the time spent during a service. A fine organ is likely the single most expensive fixture, other than building and grounds.

When a committee is charged with the selection of a new instrument, or with confronting an existing organ suffering from age and disrepair, it should not make any premature decisions without benefit of adequate information. For example, a committee should not assume, without study, that "an electronic instrument is always less expensive than a pipe organ," or that "the new organ should be located exactly where the old one was." The committee needs to know what type of organ or equipment is available in which price ranges; understand the purpose of the organ; discover musical, liturgical, acoustical, and financial parameters; and know the types of organs and mechanisms available and the limits and merits of each.

Whether the congregation be liturgical or evangelical, Roman or Protestant, or whether the building be classic or modern, the organ will have similar, but usually not identical functions. The primary function is to lead the hymns sung by the congregation, as well as the accompaniment of choirs, soloists, and the performance of "voluntary" music (preludes, offertories, and postludes).

Location of Organ

In order to perform these tasks well, the organ (pipes or speakers) and console must be located relatively close together. Choir singers, instrumentalists, and soloists must also be placed in proximity to each other and the organ so that good pitch, blend, and rhythmic accuracy can be maintained between all musical forces. All musical forces (organ, console, choirs, etc.) must be placed for good acoustical projection to all members of the congregation. A rear gallery location often works well. No portion of the musical forces should be behind obstructions that inhibit tonal egress.

Size of Instrument

Once the organ is properly located, the size of the instrument can usually be determined on the basis of the physical width of the organ space available, the acoustical character of the room, and the seating capacity of the congregation. Minor remodeling, structural reinforcement of the building, or acoustical improvement may also be necessary to accommodate either an electronic or pipe installation to its best advantage.

Criteria for Selecting an Organ

The exact type of organ or mechanism to be employed is an important issue, with many options to choose from. The committee must listen to and inspect existing organs of various types, and weigh the merits of each option. The following is a typical set of comparative criteria. Each type of instrument, from different builder will have significant differences. There is no "generic" organ, for each is a mechanical device, and each is an individual artistic creation.

1) Sound. Does the committee appreciate the musical tone, the volume, articulation, blend, color? Does the tone match the preference and style of music used by the congregation? Does the organ fit the acoustical nature of the room?

2) Workmanship. Is the organ built of durable, high quality materials? Is the organ given its musical speech in the room and the acoustical environment that it will function? Are all parts neatly and carefully made?

3) Mechanism. Does the type of

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will cause an organ committee to avoid recommending or selecting a truly fine and proper instrument for their church. They assume that the congregation will not accept the organ or price, and simply settle for something that is “cheaper.” The “cheaper” organ will actually cost more because of repair and replacement costs. A cheaper instrument simply will not last as long as an organ of quality. A fine, well built organ is an investment that will increase in value; it will meet the needs and noble purpose of the worshiping congregation; it will last for decades; and it will ultimately cost less. Congregations may be reluctant to initiate an organ project because the size of the organ fund at the beginning is modest. It is only after meticulous study; and research and discovery of a builder, design, and fine instrument for the church, that the congregation can become excited about funding a project. If the committee has come to their decision and recommendation in a responsible way and has communicated the purpose, process, and need with the congregation, the congregation will respect the selection and support the project.

The committee should adopt a specific plan to inform themselves of as many issues and options as possible very early in the process. Limiting the “field” to the few organ salesmen or brochures that happen to find their way to the church seldom results in the best selection. Church organ salesmen, for example, are generally responsible individuals and sources of good information, but they have their own product to sell. The many options must be actively sought and critically evaluated. Once the options are known, references must be checked, past purchasers and performance checked, as well as the present reliability and stability of the company. An independent organ consultant can be a valuable resource to the organ selection committee. A person qualified in the many scientific, technical, and musical aspects of the organ, who is not the representative of any manufacturer can guide the committee and help them to know the issues and options. The consultant can also aid in the development of a design and stop-list, help in the understanding and comparison of proposals submitted by different manufacturers, and report as to the proper performance by the manufacturer as an organ is installed. An organ consultant must be very carefully chosen on the basis of qualifications, sensitivity to the needs of the church, and integrity, and will be an invaluable asset in a “once in a lifetime” project of a church.

The church throughout the ages has used music as an expression of celebration and praise. The organ is the chosen instrument because of its majestic tone, and accompanimental abilities. Of all the instruments, the organ can provide the greatest variety of tone, color, and pitch at the control of one musician. Only the organ can be designed with regard to its size, disposition, and musical voices, to precisely fit the acoustical environment. It is because a fine organ is a vehicle of praise, and an instrument full of variety and ability that it can meet the musical needs of the worshiping congregation.

The investment in a superb instrument is not only in the financial best interest of the church. The organ, along with all other tools of worship, must be as fine as possible to achieve their noble purpose.

Appendix A
Pipe Organ Actions

1) Mechanical (commonly referred to as “tracker”) action is a direct mechanical linkage between keys, stops, and pipe valves. This action offers the player the most sensitive control of pipe speech, offers greatest mechanical longevity, best tone production, and best tuning stability. Because of the mechanical linkage, the relative placement of console and pipes is limited to close configurations.

2) & 3) Mechanical pipe organ action with electric stop action, and electric slider chest actions employ many of the devices used in mechanical action, with electromagnets used to operate some mechanisms. There is a greater variety of placement configurations for console and pipes.

4) Electropneumatic action employs a system of electromagnets and leather pneumatics to open and close pipe valves. A great number of console and pipe placement configurations are possible. Leather will deteriorate over time, but modern leathers can last longer than in former years, as lower wind pressures now used, submit the leather to less stress.

5) Direct electric action uses an electromagnet placed directly beneath the pipe in the windchest as the pipe valve. This action does not employ perishable leather parts to a large degree, but can cause wind to enter the pipe rather abruptly.

6) Unit or duplex organ action is an organ system that uses either electropneumatic or direct electric pipe valves, and through a special wiring system allows registers of pipes to be played at multiple pitches by the organist. This system can offer relatively great flexibility from relatively few pipes. Clarity and balance may be lost due to duplex use of pipes, and by playing pipes at a pitch distant from the main pitch of the register. The unit organ is an appropriate solution in particular situations, especially for smaller churches.

Appendix B
Electronic Organs
A variety of electronic instruments are available, each with many noticeable differences. The manufacturers offer numerous styles of console controls (e., drawknobs, stop tabs, tilting tablets, lighted tabs or drawknobs) and many console options. Some console options are in common with the pipe organ and some are usually found only in the electronic organ. Examples of these are the key transposer, and alterable voice cards (where computer cards inserted into the console allow the organist to add musical voices that are not found in the original stoplist of the organ). Electronic instruments and models of many sizes are available. Both the number of stops and the number of speakers determine the size of the electronic instrument. Generally, a greater number of speakers provides better results, the goal being not increased volume, but increased clarity. Models which have speakers located in the lower portion of the console are designed for home or rehearsal use, and are inappropriate to the church.

Although there are many options and variations among the electronic instruments, each provide sound by electronic production, not through natural acoustical means. Typically, the electronic instrument attempts to recreate the complex combination of frequencies, wave patterns, and transient tones produced by real organ pipes.