

The Gift of Music

Understanding the Organ

The Organ Committee

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For the past several months, the Organ subcommittee of the Nave Renovation Task Force has been gathering information needed to facilitate moving our organ to the rear gallery. Our first task was to evaluate the condition and design of the instrument in order to determine if it should be moved "as is" or replaced with a new instrument. To that end, the committee retained the services of Erik Suter, organist and assistant choir director at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. to serve as our project consultant. After completely evaluating the condition of the present organ at St. George's, Erik and the committee determined that while certain individual stops possess a good tone, **the instrument does not have a unified mechanical or tonal design, is difficult to play and is unreliable. It should be replaced by a new instrument designed especially for the acoustics and worship requirements of St. George's, making use of pipes from the current organ where possible.**

To put things in perspective, here is a brief description of how the organ works:

The organ is made up of several interconnected systems, all of which must work together to produce music for worship.

- The console, which consists of several keyboards (manuals) and a pedal keyboard, switches for selecting which pipes should sound (stops), and a combination action, which allows the organist to program sets of stops and call them up at the touch of a button. St. George's has two consoles, one in the chancel and one in the rear gallery.
- The winding system, consisting of blowers, reservoirs, hoses and wind chests, that allow compressed air to pass through the individual pipes when the organist plays from the console.
- The pipes, made of wood or metal. There are four families of pipes: principals, flutes, strings and reeds. Pipes are placed in rows called ranks on top of the wind chests.

When an organ is designed, the builder takes into account the space available for placement of the organ and choir, the acoustics of the worship space, the architecture of the sanctuary and the musical needs of the community both in worship and for concert performances. At St. George's this process last occurred in 1875, when a new instrument built by Henry Erben of New York was installed in the rear gallery. Erben was a prolific builder of church organs during that time. His most well known instrument resides in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. Since that time, the organ has been added to extensively, the largest addition being the purchase of four individual practice organs from Mary Washington College in the mid 1980's, as well as some additional pipes, wind chests and new 3 manual console from the Organ Supply Company of Erie, PA. It should be noted that while we have a large number of pipes as a result of these additions, we also have a large amount of unnecessary duplication and additional maintenance. For example, there are 3 similar trumpet stops and six similar flute stops. Many of the current

pipes were never designed to play together. A good analogy would be a home theater system made up of six different sized speakers from six different stereos. They would create sound, but would not provide the warmth and blend that could be achieved by a system designed to work together.

In addition to differences and duplication in pipes, there are also upward of seven different types of wind chest, which causes uneven speech among the different pipes. These conditions would continue even if the current instrument were totally rebuilt. At present, ten to 15 percent of the instrument is not working.

In the final analysis, because of the age, condition and lack of unified design of the current organ, it would be more cost effective to replace it with a new instrument designed to meet the needs of St. George's. To that end, the Organ committee has begun a search for the right organ builder for our project. On Erik Suter's and John Vreeland's recommendation, the committee visited several instruments in the Washington DC and Williamsburg areas. These include:

- The Lively-Fulcher organ at the Old Presbyterian Meeting House in Alexandria.
- The Schoenstien organ at St. Paul's K Street
- The Dobson organ at St. Paul's Rock Creek Parish
- The John-Paul Buzard organ at St. Bede's Roman Catholic Church in Williamsburg
- The Parsons organ at St. John's Episcopal in Hampton

The committee will be also visiting several organs by DiGennaro and Hart, who currently maintain our instrument. It is our hope that we can select a builder within the next few months. The committee welcomes input and questions from members of St. George's, and would be happy to arrange for a tour of our current instrument. See John for details. We ask for your prayers and support in this important task in the life of St. George's.

God's Peace,
JHV