

Transfiguration Organ Project Begins!

Fig Life, October 2004 – Joel Martinson

Work has begun on the search to find a builder for a new pipe organ for our beautiful church building to lead us in our sung worship. Fr. Godwin and I met in June to select a slate of parishioners who had expressed an interest in the project and/or brought various expertise which would be needed throughout the process:

Fr. Jerry D. Godwin
Joel Martinson
Robbi Dietrich
Robert Doyna
Hollye Fisk
George Gilliam

Ted Hole
Patty Horsley
Jonathan Maedche
Pat Shaughnessy
Linda Zrubek

We met for the first time on July 1, and our agenda included reviewing the following list of requirements for the organ, developed by committee member Jonathan Maedche, an organist and former member of the Schudi Organ Company here in Dallas.

1. Lead congregation in singing hymnody and liturgy.

The instrument will need to be powerful enough to lead a full congregation and not overwhelm chanting and small groups. Herein the importance of foundational, unison tone (8' Principal or Diapason), and a variety of stops, enabling the organist to lead congregational singing in many different ways. To be effective, the instrument will need to project well into the sanctuary (free-standing and encased) and be close to the people.

2. Accompany choirs and solo voices in the service.

The instrument must be able to accompany a broad range of voices, from the petite, clear voices of children to the mature, rich voices of adults. The Anglican choral heritage is also diverse, from the anthems of William Byrd and Orlando Gibbons, to the expressive works of Howells and Vaughan Williams. These alone necessitate at least one expressive division. Certain specific needs also come to mind: strings, solo stops, combination action (to rapidly change stops). Keeping the instrument close to the singers would also be important.

3. Provide voluntaries for the services and play for special occasions.

There are diverse offerings here: preludes, postludes, communion music, accompanying instrumentalists, playing processions for weddings, etc.

4. Be a wonderful instrument for recitals, alone or with others, for the edification of the parish and the community.

Transfiguration has long been a supporter of the arts and a venue for many performance groups. After considering the specific requirements for the parish, one should consider what kinds of instruments are already within the community and how a new instrument at Transfiguration would balance those around in place in our metropolitan area.

We also discussed various considerations and decisions which would need to be made throughout the process, including a placement in the gallery to accommodate the largest number of choristers and instrumentalists, modifications to the gallery heating and air conditioning system, the type of organ action – mechanical or electric, etc.

The day that I was hired by Fr. Godwin, he presented me with his mandate for a new instrument here – that it be “notable” and that it be “by a builder not currently represented in our area.” Taking this into account, I shared a list of organ firms with the committee who had already built in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, including several recent instruments which have received fine publicity by Scott Cantrell in the *Dallas Morning News*. We also looked at a slate of ten notable builders which are absent from our area, mostly from the USA and Canada, but also one from England.

Our next meeting on July 26 was an “organ crawl,” and began in the gallery of Transfiguration with a “tour” of the sounds and qualities of our present Aeolian-Skinner/Robert Sipe organ of 13 stops. We then went to Saint Rita Catholic Community to see the French-inspired 30-stop organ built by Gene Bedient of Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1992. This is a mechanical-action (“tracker”) organ like ours, but with a much broader, warmer sound, and much more colorful possibilities. Our evening finished at Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church with a tour of their large 3-manual (keyboard) electric-action Goulding & Wood instrument installed one year ago. This instrument, made in Indianapolis, had a lot of the “bells and whistles” found on electric action organs installed in the front of churches including an easily moved console. At the end of the evening the members of the committee who were present decided that it made sense for our project to look for a mechanical-action organ builder, since this type of action has been tried and true for centuries, is simple to maintain, and will last for around 100 years without major repairs. They authorized George Gilliam, Jonathan, and me to contact potential builders to find availability and waiting time for building our instrument, costs, and organs we should see – both the closest to us, and their most representative.

Meanwhile, photos of the church interior, choir gallery and current organ were taken and posted on our website for potential builders to review. Drawings of the gallery were assembled, and recordings of representative organs from builders were compiled and combined onto demo discs for committee members to hear.

Our third meeting on August 23 consisted of reports regarding our research calls to builders, a discussion of some of the recordings to which we had listened, and the next steps in the process. After hearing information gathered from a leading organ expert from England, we decided to follow his advice and look to builders in the USA and Canada. He deemed these to be the best in the world, with a highly-informed building practice taking into account historic styles of organs and using this information to produce instruments for today’s churches.

We had good news from the builders with whom we had corresponded: most were able to work an organ such as ours into their schedule in 3 years, with some being able to deliver as early as 2007 or as late as 2010. Some of the builders commented on how

impressed they were with our parish by the information they received from the Transfiguration website. One in particular said, “you’re exactly the kind of church we like to build organs for!”

Over the end of September and early October, Jonathan, George (also a former member of the Schudi firm) and I will make at least two trips to view organs by four builders on our short list. Depending upon what we find, we may see instruments from one to three additional firms.

Our visits will include playing similar music on all instruments, including solo organ works, hymns, service music and choral accompaniments. We plan to record these visits in order to share the information more fully with the other committee members. We will also look inside the cases to inspect the workmanship, and take photos.

Dallas has many fine organs, including the very prominently-placed C. B. Fisk organ at the Meyerson Symphony Center. We hope that the work we undertake will bring an instrument to Transfiguration which will inspire us in our worship, to sing to new heights, and to give the Greater Dallas community a wonderful gift which will delight ears and eyes for years to come.