

# SEARCHING FOR THE ELUSIVE ORGANIST

## (A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE)

Lawton W. Posey

It's getting more and more difficult for churches, particularly small ones, to procure an organist these days. I would expand this to say that finding a church pianist is not easy either. The church I serve recently conducted a search for, first, an organist, and failing that, for a pianist. While we were able to locate a student pianist with considerable skills, I have become increasingly dismayed at the lack of younger persons who might like to have a "playing job" in a local church. The wages are, of course, modest, but the opportunities for skill building and exposure to the inner workings of a religious tradition are great.

I'd like to share some reflections, not only on our search but of my own experience in becoming, in my younger years, a church musician. I believe that part of the problem we face in having a pool of skilled keyboard players rests with the churches themselves. This does not dismiss the role of culture change, the declining importance of mainline churches, and the apparent shift away from classical music instruction in home and school.

It may be too late to stem the tide. It is not too late to divert at least a small part of the stream that has led away from church music as either a profession or an avocation.

I recently reflected on my own personal history. When I was about ten years of age, I began to play the piano at my home church, which did not then have an organ. My efforts were limited to little piano pieces played during the collection. Later, as my piano skills grew, I accompanied hymns for Sunday school and learned by doing. I am sure that I bent a few eardrums from time to time! In high school, armed with some basic organ playing skills garnered from my reluctant music teacher, I auditioned for the organ playing job at the local Navy chapel. The instrument was a pre-war Hammond Model B. Wonder of wonders! The salary was \$25 per month. Back in 1953, there were probably several student organists in town who could have performed the job I snagged. I know for sure that in Charleston, South Carolina, there were a substantial number of high school students who could play the piano better than I. Moving ahead to my college days in the late 1950s, I can attest that there were several students at Davidson College who could have played services at

churches of considerable size. Some, like Arthur Lawrence and Harry A. Wells, were already accomplished players in their student days. So when I became organist at the local Methodist church (again on a Model B), I knew that I was quite lucky, since there were more organ students looking for jobs than could then procure them. The pay was higher: \$40 per month! That would buy a good bike in those days. Today, of course, things are different.

In my present home city, Charleston, West Virginia, I know of only one serious organ student enrolled in a college organ program. In a nearby town there is a local high school student who is already playing advanced recitals. There may be others but I do not know of

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them. This scenario may be repeated in any number of small cities and towns across the United States and Canada. If that student were to advertise as being available for a job, there would be several offers of employment.

I wonder what things will be like when the cadre of capable organists in my town begins to shrink due to age and infirmity? With some exceptions, the local organ playing pool is made up of mature people, gifted and well trained, but some could be considering retirement in a few years. Most who wish to work are probably employed. This is in an area where there are several outstanding organs by such builders as C.B. Fisk, Holtkamp, Schlicker, Schantz, and E.M. Skinner (recently restored). What of the places where elderly electronic organs are in weekly use?

A musical colleague of mine, hearing my lament, noted that the cathedrals (and by this, I believe he meant larger churches) will always have organists. Perhaps so. If he is correct, what of the small places, the congregations of 250 members or less who still desire to have

a traditional music program for worship? It is that congregation that I am thinking about now.

Let me go back to my own congregation's search for the elusive organist. For our present position, which involves one rehearsal and one service, we advertised in the local newspapers and in the newsletter of the local AGO chapter. Some responses came immediately. Each person we spoke with was sincere, interested in church life, and had been playing in a local church. We soon gave up on locating an organist, since no candidate had any interest in the organ at all. Some candidates quickly admitted that they were not used to the more or less traditional church music used at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church. This is not to imply that these candidates lacked talent. Their musical experiences were, in the main, in traditions quite different from ours. Some of the candidates could play by ear, a skill many church musicians lack.

Two persons did exhibit keyboard skills, could do some sight-reading, and had experience playing in church. One of these will soon begin working with us on a regular basis and we are delighted to have her. Still, other than the times that I may play a prelude or offertory on the organ, our 20-year-old Rodgers remains mute for the present. I am hopeful that our new pianist will be interested in organ instruction as she continues with us.

Now, for the big question. Will the pool of church musicians continue to shrink? What might be done to assure churches of smaller size that they will be able to procure persons to play their expensive instruments in the future. I'd like to offer some modest, and not very original, suggestions.

First, the highly successful AGO Pipe Organ Encounter program needs to be expanded. The Kanawha AGO Chapter, to which I belong, put on an excellent POE in the summer of 1996 with distinguished teachers and a sampling of youth and adults who had some interest in the organ attending. At our POE there was an opportunity for the student to sit at the organ and either play prepared pieces for that instrument or try out piano pieces on the manuals alone. Various periods of instruction and orientation made up a full week. In an address I gave at the opening of the POE, I encouraged the students to listen to the

sound of the organ, to ask questions of the teachers, and to enjoy their musical experience. I am encouraged to think that the POE and related programs will do much to increase interest in the church organ. A POE also offers help for adults who may have little organ background who find themselves uncomfortably ensconced on the organ bench. These people are sometimes called "occasional organists," and they are, if I have the right information, many in number. In my area a "Practical Organist Encounter" (POE+) is planned for this coming summer.

Second, I believe that local congregations need to prepare children and youth to provide accompanimental services to their own congregations. This means that churches will seek out younger participants who are either taking piano lessons or would, if encouraged, take instruction. The piano and organ instruction should be paid for out of the church's budget, and experienced church musicians should be engaged to serve as teacher/mentors for these fledgling supporters of the religious organization's life of song. Martin Marty, Lutheran pastor, lover of music, and distinguished professor at the University of Chicago, encourages ministers to seek out persons who have potential for service to the church rather than just to let the "spirit" do the moving. I believe this active seeking to be part of the solution to a mounting problem. Can you see the talent in a certain ten-year-old and say to that child, "I believe you have musical gifts. Would you like to learn to play the organ for church?"

Would it work? Who knows? It is worth a try. If it's impossible for a small local congregation to offer the actual teaching, a consortium of local churches or the AGO chapter might run its own "musical academy." The cost in time and energy would be great. The rewards might be greater.

Spiritual leaders and pastoral musicians need to create a climate of mutual respect and encouragement, becoming role models for youth. They can make the church professions, including the musical ones, attractive and appealing. As a lad, I wanted to be like this organist or that minister because I saw in them qualities of faith and concern, qualities of skill and devotion that were worth emulating.

Let me return to my autobiographical sketch at the beginning of this piece. The musical encouragement I received took place in a small suburban congregation that had just four employees. There was the minister, who devoted himself to the pastoral care of the church members and was in touch with the needs of young people. There was the janitor (a youth himself), who saw to it that the church was orderly and clean for all services

and who was ever willing to engage any youngster who came by in conversation. There was the religious education director, who encouraged young people to consider church work and who took many of us on pastoral calls in a shabby 1941 Ford she could barely keep running. There was the organist-choir director, who played morning and evening services on an elderly one-manual Estey reed organ and on a nondescript upright piano. She and a Sunday school teacher taught us kids how to sing, allowed us to play the instruments, and never put us down when we "goofed." She offered me opportunities to play for services from time to time, and when she was out sick honored me by asking me to substitute for her for a few weeks. (I was 16 at the time.)

Was the organist a great musician? Possibly not. Was the pastor destined for bigger places? Definitely not. Did the director of religious education snag a lucrative job, and trade in her Ford for a stately Lincoln? Of course not. The janitor did become a doctor of ministry and has given distinguished service to the denomination for over 30 years. I became a pastor, and have retained my interest in the musical life of the church for five decades.

What these persons had in common was devotion to the task, a love for the congregation they served, and a desire to serve God. There is hardly a day goes by that I don't remember them thankfully. These people were role models for a generation of young people, many of whom have given service to the church as professionals and dedicated lay people.

The music scene is changing rapidly. The revolution will be as great as the one that took place when someone set up a primitive organ in a cathedral that had only known unaccompanied singing, or when J.S. Bach presented his alternative renditions of the Lutheran chorales at St. Thomas Church. We cannot stop change. Cultures will alter ways of doing things. New technologies have already arisen and are viewed by some with suspicion and by others with anticipation. (I think of a local funeral director, an organist himself, who has just installed a new digital electronic organ in his chapel that can "play the service" without human intervention.) Big changes are on the way! Congregational song may wax, then wane, then take on a new shape. The biblical testimony is that we are to sing unto the Lord a *new* song, an admonition that may have caused discomfort to the ancients who would have limited sacred song to works of art composed by officially recognized composers.

Do we not wish to keep the tradition of living people offering living music to living people alive in our day? If so, I suggest the following:

- We can *encourage*. As pastoral and musical leaders, we can encourage the young to take a look at the possibilities in church music.
- We can *innovate*. We can turn the church into an academy, not only of theological and biblical subjects but of musical ones as well.
- We can *introduce*. Let us continue the good work of the POE and related programs for "occasional organists."
- We can *adjust*. What we cannot do is see a return to the glorious '40s and '50s when the professional cards in the national magazines devoted to the organ took up page after page, and when every playing job had several qualified applicants.

Let us not abandon the search for the elusive organist. As we search, let us create them as well.

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