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MEMORANDUM OF SITE VISIT

Date: 7 June 2005

To: Richard W. Hill, Chair
Organ Advisory Committee
Boston Chapter, AGO

From: Charles N. Clutz

Re: Pipe organ/acoustics
Park Avenue Congregational Church
Arlington, Massachusetts

Date of

Visit: 21 May 2005; 10:00 AM to 12:45 PM

General

The Organ Advisory Committee originally visited this church in 1988. It is a circa 1970 structure with a tongue and groove ceiling (probably a 3 inch nominal Potlatch deck) supported by laminated wood bents in a six-bay plan. Although there are many cracks result from this ceiling, they do not seem wide enough to affect the acoustical ambience. The walls are brick, including the rear wall of the organ chamber at the front. The floor is concrete with a 12 x 12 tile laid for a finish. The front has a raised platform for the ministers and choir with the organ console in the center and choral risers to each side with pews.

The organ grille is made up of vertical pieces about 4 inches nominal depth. When the choir is seated, it is not visible behind the vertical wood slats – a treatment similar to the organ grille. Glazing is kept to minimum except for the rear of the church and at the front right. The lower portion of the choir screen has grille cloth to allow for the transmission of sound. The center aisle has a carpet runner but none at the side aisles. There is quarry tile at the platform. The pews do not have cushions on them.

Acoustics

I listened to this space from the front to the back and could not detect a significant drop-off in decibel level. The laminated arches do a good job of diffusing the sound (both ceiling and wall surfaces), which reflects from the ceiling and columns, thus providing multiple reflections back to the listeners in the congregation. The brick walls serve to amplify the long waves produced by the bass notes in the organ. It helps to have the *16-foot Pedal Diapason* (an open wood stop) mounted against the brick wall in the organ chamber.

There is minimal absorption in this room and, as a result, the sound is quite favorable for organ, choral and congregational music (primarily hymns). The spoken word might be different,

however, since the requirements for it are quite different. One second at mid-frequencies is considered optimum. You should make certain that the speech reinforcement system properly amplifies speech and that there are no feedbacks from microphones.

Existing Organ

The organ was relocated to the church in 1971 from St. Mark's School in Southboro, Massachusetts. It was originally built by Aeolian-Skinner Organ Co. (opus 278) in 1919. The organ is laid out as follows left to right: Choir Organ in box; Great Organ unenclosed; Pedal Organ unenclosed with basses against organ grille; Swell Organ in box. It is basically a Swell/Great/Pedal organ with a four-stop Choir organ. The Swell organ is the largest division and deserves to be better heard. The *Swell 4 foot Oboe* probably should be returned to the 8-foot pitch as was noted by Scott Huntington at the meeting.

The reservoirs have been re-leathered and are in very good condition. The three manual console needs to have some work done on it. There are only three pistons per manual and it would be a good idea to go to a MIDI system and have several levels of memory. It would be of dubious value to have the console movable without having the ability to remove the screen, which blocks the organ console both physically and visually.

Recommendations

There are some notes that are dead and need to be worked on. The *Great mixture* does not go with the rest of the pipe work – it's too aggressive. The reservoir wind pressures should be checked against the original ones on the A-S shop notes. I had the impression that they might have been raised in the re-build in 1971.

The Swell box shutters do not open more than 30 degrees and they ought to be closer to 90 degrees. This adjustment can be easily made at the "dog" with three holes. This metal armature joins the vertical rod and trace connecting the shutters. There are probably only three or four stages of the pneumatic swell motor that are presently working as a result.

I would consider removing the choir pews and replacing them with chairs to provide more flexibility here. The risers might also be removed. They are floored with cork to kill footfall. Cork is better than carpet, but a hardwood would be even better for acoustics for the choir ensemble.

A few adjustments here and there would result in this instrument serving the church well, but the community as well. Perhaps, it's time to begin with some concerts that feature string quartets, voice and piano, choruses and other combinations of instruments. The room would then become better known outside of its function for Sunday worship services.

End of Report