

32963 Article, 7-13-10
by Rev. Drs. Casey and Bob Baggott
Community Church of Vero Beach

Pulling Out All the Stops

Here's a riddle: What relies on stops to run, whispers and roars, can make us laugh or cry, and needs lots of air? If you guessed the pipe organ, the king of musical instruments, you were right.

This past week we dedicated a brand new Lively-Fulcher organ in our church's sanctuary. Its diverse array of four-thousand plus pipes will sound to lead us in worship, undergird our singing, and help us to express the full content of our hearts and souls – from joyful praise, to deepest lament, and every believer's awe and wonderment.

Watching the planning, design, construction, assembly, and tuning of such a fine instrument has been thrilling because this will surely be a once in a lifetime experience. Such masterpieces as these great organs are intended to last for hundreds of years, accompanying a congregation and the community it serves through many, many lifetimes. Countless life-events will be marked by our new organ as it offers its voice for weddings, confirmations, baptisms, memorial services, and even ordinary but sustaining weekly worship. And our new organ will offer its full, rich, complex voice for concerts as well.

We may take for granted that sort of intimate linkage between churches and organs. We may think that organs are a nearly mandatory component of Christian worship, but it hasn't always been so.

Music has a long and strong link to worship across the ages, of course. Historians note that in pre-Christian eras lutes, lyres, drums and bells were used to accompany worshippers. But interestingly, the earliest Christians typically used none of these in worship. They most often used only their voices, without accompaniment. In fact the term, "a capella," literally means "in the manner of the chapel," that is voices singing without musical instruments.

But as these early Christians were perfecting their simple vocal harmonies, in Byzantium emperors were commissioning the construction of dramatic, air-driven pipe organs for state occasions. In the year 757 an eastern emperor sent one of his pipe organs as a gift to the King of the Franks, the father of Charlemagne. Over the next two centuries, European monks became the most skilled builders of the kings' grand pipe organs. Finally, when one of these organ building monks went on to become Pope Sylvester II in 999, the organ made its firm and final leap to the church.

To theologians the linkage seemed destined. Throughout the latter Middle Ages, theologians made frequent analogies between the organ and the cosmos. They compared the mechanical and tonal intricacy of the organ to the interconnectedness of the components of the created order. The wind power of the instrument was, for them, a reminder of the wind from God that hovered over the very waters of creation and brought the world into being.

Although today we have other machinery that rivals the mechanical complexity of an organ, and guitars and synthesizers are to be found in churches along with these grand instruments, the linkage of church and organ seems permanent. After all, where is it more appropriate than in the worship of God, to pull out all the stops?