

Church's Organ Has Long History

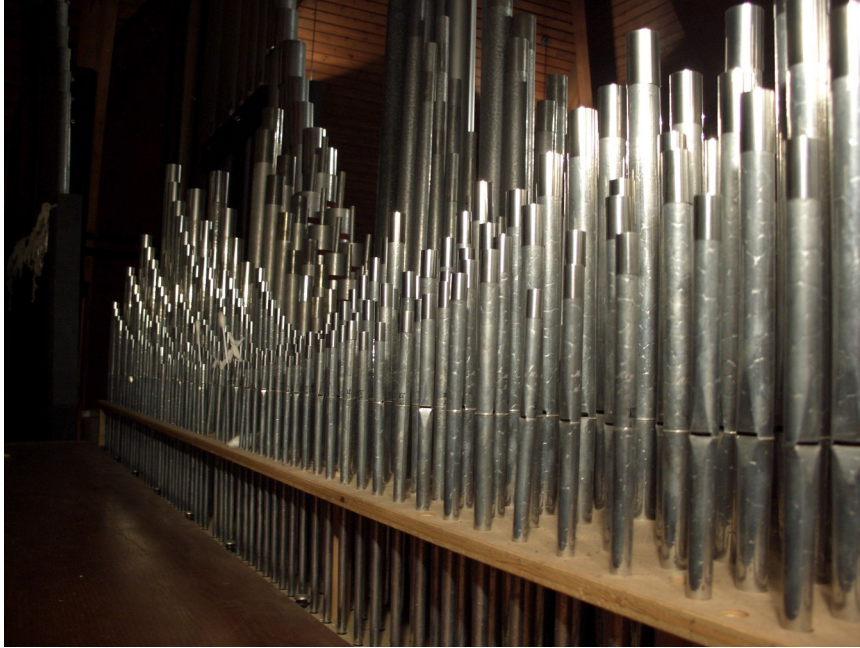


The organ in the church sanctuary was built in 1938 (opus 977) by the illustrious Aeolian Skinner Company of Boston, Massachusetts, based upon a design by tonal director G. Donald Harrison. It was moved from its original home at Hollins College in Hollins, Virginia (a suburb of Roanoke), and reinstalled here at First United Methodist Church of Commerce, Texas, in 1970-71 by James Sandling of Dallas.

The church edifice itself was completed in February of 1968 at a cost of \$450,000. The first service was held in the new building on February 25, 1968. The organ, purchased for a mere \$10,000-12,000, required the expenditure of an additional \$12,000 to transport it to Commerce and another \$10,000 to rebuild the front of the church to accommodate the instrument. So, for about \$34,000 the church got an organ then valued at \$100,000. To replace the organ today with one of similar size and quality would cost more than \$1,000,000. Installation of the organ began in September of 1970. Upon completion of its installation, the organ was officially consecrated in church services and recitals. Mrs. Dorothy Richards, the church's organist, gave a short recital prior to the sermon on April 18, 1971. Norma Stevlingson, the organ instructor at East Texas State University, located across the highway from the church, performed a solo recital that afternoon, performing music by deGrigny, Bach, Franck and Alain. On the afternoon of April 25, a choral performance, given by the East Texas State University Chamber Singers under the direction of Charles Nelson, was interspersed with renditions of solo organ music by Alain performed by Maurice Thompson, a student of Miss Stevlingson.

While the organ was consecrated soon after its installation it was not dedicated until eleven years later, because an organ in a Methodist church cannot be officially "dedicated" until payment for it has been completed. Dr. John Burkett, organist at the church since 1975, played the dedicatory recital on March 1, 1982. It was the performance on that program of *A Trumpet Minuet* by the blind English composer Alfred Hollins that led to the first major addition to instrument.

Thanks to a generous gift from Dr. Russell Hayes and his wife Mary of Dallas, the organ gained a new voice in 1985. A set of 49 State Trumpet pipes built by the Trivo company of Hagerstown, Maryland, was installed by the Garland Organ Company in early 1985. The new trumpet pipes were first heard on February 17, 1985, during a service especially designed by Dr. Burkett to display the new sound. The concluding postlude was none other than Alfred Hollins' *A Trumpet Minuet*, this time heard with the sound intended by the composer.



Dr. and Mrs. Hayes' generosity did not end with that one gift, but was extended in 1987 to make possible the purchase of a new set of mixture pipes, as well as a two-foot principal stop, to enhance the high end of the Great organ's pitch spectrum. The new mixture pipes (made by Laukauff GmbH) replaced the original, rather dull sounding mixture; the two-foot principal, however, was a new addition to the instrument. The new pipes were first heard publicly during the service of March 17, 1988. A formal presentation of thanks to Russell and Mary Hayes

was made during the Sunday service of May 15, 1988.

The new Great mixture emphasized the tonal deficiencies of the mixture on the Swell division so that it too was replaced in 1994 by brighter, more energetic-sounding pipes. This mixture, however, was not new, but was instead taken from the organ in the First Baptist church of Homer, Louisiana. The pipes, which were made by pipemaker Stinkins of Holland, were purchased with regular church budget funds. Some of the pipes from the old mixture stop were mounted on a new and separate windchest in the Swell chamber to serve as a new two-foot principal stop, a desirable feature which was lacking in the original organ.

In 1997, a cymbelstern made by the Reuter organ company was installed in the Swell division. A cymbelstern is a set of little bells mounted on a circular plate that are repeatedly struck as a motor rapidly turns the plate. This delightful tintinnabulation has been available on German organs for centuries, and provides an ear-catching addition to the performance of certain pieces by J. S. Bach and other composers. The cymbelstern, which was purchased with funds from the regular organ repair budget, was first heard during the morning service of April 20, 1997. Unfortunately the motor of the cymbelstern quit working in 2021. So in 2022 a new cymbelstern was purchased and installed on top of the Swell division box behind the horizontal trumpet pipes. After some experimentation, this location was found to provide the best egress for the rather subtle sound made by the device.

Another addition to the Skinner pipe organ was made possible by generous donations from Dr. Vance Underhill and his daughter Erin and her husband Richard Eads in honor of their beloved Charlotte Underhill. Charlotte, a well-known dealer in antiques, was tragically killed in a car accident some years ago. As a lasting memorial to her, a set of clarinet pipes from a defunct Pilcher organ was installed in 2003 by Dan Garland of Fort Worth. A new windchest, upon which to place the pipes, had to be constructed. It was located next to the Choir division, just leaving room for a human being to walk between the new chest and some large, wooden pedal pipes on the other side. A tremulant was also installed to provide the organ's equivalent to a vibrato, sometimes employed by human clarinetists. The rich, warm, reedy tone of the clarinet was first demonstrated during the Sunday service on April 6, 2003.

Since Dr. John Burkett became organist of the church in 1975, the task of tuning and repairing the instrument was taken over by Dan Garland of Fort Worth. A number of repairs and additions (mentioned above) have been made over the years. In the late 1970s the main chest was releathered. In the fall of 1981 the church's financial board authorized the completion of the releathering of all the organ's air reservoirs.

photo by Ron Thomas



By 1992 it had become clear to Dr. Burkett that the entire organ console was becoming less and less reliable mechanically. In a memorandum to the church he enclosed a one-page summary proposal by Dan Garland detailing changes that should be made to the console. Over the succeeding four years, that proposal was enlarged and refined to suggest a complete overhaul of the console. The exterior was refinished and provided with new keyboards, drawknobs and drawknob jambs, tilting tablet couplers, expression pedals, a plexiglass music rack and light, etc. The worn and sluggish electropneumatic mechanism in

the interior was gutted and replaced with modern solid state circuitry, including a 32-level memory made by Solid State Logic. The number of general pistons (affecting all stops) was increased from six to twelve and local manual and pedal pistons from six to eight. This greatly increased the flexibility of the instrument. The pedals, while not new, were refurbished and provided with new silver wire contacts. New contacts were likewise provided for the manual keys. The bottom and middle keyboards can now be reversed to make the performance of some European organ music easier. Four pistons allow for the possibility of adding a MIDI interface to the organ at some future time.



In addition to the above, all the so-called "primary valves" in the seven chests of the organ were releathered and completed refurbished. The old electro-mechanical relay switchboard was replaced by a new solid-state system and all electrical cabling was replaced. Two new rectifiers were installed in the organ chambers to convert incoming alternating current to the direct current needed to run the organ.

In 2007, the duct that provides wind from the blower in the maintenance room to the organ in the sanctuary was re-routed through the wall separating the two, to prevent the intrusion of water into the mechanism of the organ. This problem, which recurred three times over a period of years, occurred because the air duct originally ran underneath the building. Here water collected, because of a poorly functioning sump pump, and the water would infiltrate the inevitably rusting metal duct. The

most recent incident caused the organ to malfunction so badly that the piano had to be used in church services from early April to mid-December of 2007. Thanks to the re-routing of the air duct well-above floor level, the organ should never again have to remain silent because of infiltrating moisture.

The main air reservoir in the maintenance room again required releathering in the summer of 2023. Air was escaping through holes in the aging leather connecting the upper and lower halves of the reservoir. The John Wolf organ company (formerly run by Dan Garland, now retired) removed the reservoir, took it to their shop in Ft. Worth, made the necessary repairs, and reinstalled it in the space of a week. As a result, only one church service was conducted without the organ.

The organ in First United Methodist Church is now mechanically enabled to lead the congregation musically well into the 21st century. Will future repairs be needed? Of course. Anything as complex as a large pipe organ requires periodic attention and, on occasion, massive repair. But the reward of regularly hearing beautiful music on a magnificent instrument more than compensates for the cost of occasional repairs. As a result of First United Methodist Church's continued munificence, future generations will be able to enjoy the multifarious sounds of a fine pipe organ.

Organ Specifications

GREAT

16 Violone (originally labeled Contra Geigen)
 8 Principal
 8 Bourdon
 8 Spitzflute
 4 Octave
 4 Rohrflute
 2 2/3 Twelfth (originally labeled Quint)
 2 Super Octave
 2 Doublette (originally labeled Super Octave)
 2 Fourniture IV
 8 Trumpet en Chamade
 8 Clarinet
 Clarinet Tremolo
 Gt. to Gt. 4
 Chimes

SWELL

8 Holz Gedeckt (originally labeled Stopped Diapason)
 8 Viole de Gambe
 8 Viole Celeste
 4 Principal
 4 Triangular Flute
 2 Octave
 1 1/3 Plein Jeu III
 16 Bassoon
 8 Trumpet
 8 Oboe
 Sw. to Sw. 16
 Sw. to Sw. 4
 Sw. Unison Off
 Cymbelstern
 Tremolo

CHOIR

8 Gemshorn
8 Gemshorn Celeste
8 Metal Gedeckt (originally labeled Singendgedeckt)
4 Nachthorn
2 2/3 Nazard
2 Spitzflute (originally labeled Blockflöte)
1 3/5 Tierce
8 Orchestral Oboe
8 Trumpet en Chamade
Ch. to Ch. 16
Ch. to Ch. 4
Ch. Unison Off
Tremolo

PEDAL

16 Principal
16 Violone (Gt.)
16 Bourdon
8 Octave
8 Gedeckt Pommer
4 Nachthorn
2 Blockflöte
2 2/3 Mixture III
16 Posaune
8 Trompette
Chimes

INTERMANUAL COUPLERS (above Swell manual)

Gt. to Pd. 8	Sw. to Gt. 16	Sw. to Ch. 16	Ch. to Sw. 8	Gt./Ch. Reverse
Gt. to Pd. 4	Sw. to Gt. 8	Sw. to Ch. 8		
Sw. to Pd. 8	Sw. to Gt. 4	Sw. to Ch. 4		
Sw. to Pd. 4	Ch. to Gt. 16			
Ch. to Pd. 8	Ch. to Gt. 8			
Ch. to Pd. 4	Ch. to Gt. 4			

OTHER FEATURES

Pistons: 12 generals (duplicated by pedal toe studs), 8 for each manual and pedal
Reversibles: Sw. to Pd., Gt. to Pd., Ch. to Pd. (duplicated with toe studs), full organ
Manual/Pedal piston links for Great, Swell and Choir
Set and Cancel buttons
Expression pedals: Swell (Great and Choir unenclosed)
Crescendo pedal
32-level Solid State Logic memory with standard and 3 programmable crescendos