

Reflections on the Organ Project: Envisioning the Possibilities

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This document was originally written for the Organ Task Force in April 2017 following the visit of Dana Kirkegaard and Taylor & Boody to the church and the extensive review of the church and the project at that time. It was my effort then to begin to put into words the vision that was emerging from that experience. This document was subsequently updated in October and published to the parish. This version is slightly updated.

Placement of the Organ

The relocation of an organ to the chancel is compelling. When the current organ was installed in the gallery in the 1950s that was probably the only possible option given the technical abilities of the time. But the downside, we've discovered, has been an organ not actually acoustically suited to the space, the physical disconnect between the choir and the organ, and sonic harshness. Chancel placement would resolve that, as well as creating other unanticipated positive opportunities.

Opening the Gallery

Relocating the organ would enable the restoration of the gallery to its former open design—a design many of us didn't realize had even existed. The ceiling that divides the tower stained glass window can be easily removed. The removal of the current organ and redesign of the balcony will open up the nave below to the light of the tower window. The balcony could be used for special musicians when needed for Easter, Christmas, weddings, and other special occasions.

Working with Taylor & Boody Organ Builders and Dana Kirkegaard

This presents opportunities we had not imagined. Taylor & Boody is a world-class organ builder right in Staunton, with a special love for historic Virginia churches. Dana is a world-class architect/acoustician with extensive knowledge and experience of church organ installations and especially Gothic Revival churches such as our own. They are especially interested in Grace Church and motivated to help us. We would have an organ appropriate for our historic building and configured to fit our sonic space.

Chancel Placement

The technology and craftsmanship now exists to be able to fit an organ on both sides of the chancel in spaces previously impossible and unimaginable. It would not block the sanctuary windows. The wood finish would fit into the existing aesthetic of the church.

Chancel Changes

For some inexplicable reason, the chancel design does not correspond with the nave design—even though they were both done during the rebuild of 1896. We had never noticed this before. This project would be an opportunity to bring the chancel into greater architectural correspondence with the nave and also create better acoustics. The capitals on the side arches also do not correspond with the nave design and so the removal of them would serve the dual purpose of creating space for the organ and creating better architectural consistency. The chancel ceiling would need to be modified in some manner and the carpet removed to wood for acoustical reasons. Chancel lighting would need to be modified.

Chancel Expansion

The placement of the organ in the chancel would result in a loss of some choir seating space. To compensate for this loss we could go to custom church chairs appropriate for the chancel. The two wood barriers currently between the choir seating and the center of the chancel could be removed or retained in some form that could be portable. All this would make the chancel very flexible and versatile for special musical programs and cultural events and also allow the choir space enough to be able to grow in the future.

The placement of the organ would also have the effect of crowding the pulpit and lectern space. Extending the chancel into the nave by 18 inches by removing the first row of pews would alleviate that issue and address other needs of the parish: the creation of more nave floor space for weddings and baptisms.

The Side Chapel

The organ installation in the chancel would require installing organ pipes and equipment in the alcoves on both the right and left, where the side chapel and the organ console are currently located. This would mean the loss of the side chapel. The side chapel has been an attractive English architectural feature that has nevertheless been searching for a purpose ever since it was added to the church in the rebuild of 1896. It is not a true chapel since it does not have sufficient space for actual use. It is actually more suited to an era when the Roman Catholic Church had solitary daily masses at side altars. So far, the only uses currently for the side altar have been healing prayers twice a month following the 9am Eucharist and the Altar of Repose during Holy Week. Each of these uses could be addressed in other ways.

The Chancel as a New Chapel

The presence of the organ in the chancel, along with the other modifications there, would have the effect of making the chancel a much more intimate, warm, and appealing space. The chancel could then be used as a new chapel space for mid-week and special services when attendance would correspond with that space. The chancel-as-chapel could be nicely used for small services of the Daily Office, Eucharists, weddings, and funerals. A small portable altar table could be built by Taylor & Boody that could be moved to the center of the chancel just outside of the gate to the sanctuary when needed, making possible face-to-face Eucharistic celebration and a more intimate experience. The table could be kept in another location when not in use. The existence of a such table would also make possible locating the Altar of Repose in the baptismal area during Holy Week. No changes are imagined for the sanctuary itself (the space within the altar rail including the altar). Sunday Eucharistic practice would continue as usual without any changes.

The Baptismal Font

Losing the side chapel to the organ installation would actually present an unexpected opportunity for better delineation and focus on the baptismal font there which easily goes unnoticed. An attractive wood screen with integrated organ pipes in that alcove would both hide the organ equipment inside and also, by its artistic design, serve to focus on the font. The carpet around the font could be removed and special wood flooring easily installed to further set apart the space of the font. Since the front of pews in the center of the nave would need to be removed for the chancel expansion, this would also alleviate crowding in the baptismal space when baptisms are performed.

The Nave

Suggestions for enhancing the nave in a manner more appropriate to the architectural period have included ideas such as removing the carpet to the wood underneath and replacing the carpet for more period appropriate runners in the aisles. The heating/cooling vents in the center aisle could be relocated and other vents could be installed for better air distribution and comfort. All of these changes would also have acoustical benefits. The light fixtures in the nave could be replaced now or later with locally-made artisan fixtures which would also be more period-appropriate, serve to reduce eye-glare, and enhance the lighting of the ceiling. The pew cushions could be retained.

“Back to the Future”

This organ project, as currently envisaged, could surprisingly serve two purposes not usually found together. It could make possible the restoration and enhancement of Grace Church’s historic architectural design features. It could also make possible new creative options for future gatherings of the parish and community for generations to follow.