

Grove United Methodist Church Organ History

By Robert (Bob) Johns

This is an account of the Grove United Methodist Church organs of the modern period of 1966 forward - the period when the church had modern organs, defined as instruments with multiple manuals and pedals. Before this period the music was provided by an electronic keyboard of the time disguised as a piece of furniture, much like many televisions of the 1950's were placed in a wooden cabinet so as to look like a piece of living room furniture.

In the mid 1960's Grove's sanctuary was remodeled and



a new organ was purchased. It was a **Baldwin Model 8-A** two manual electronic organ. The small console was located on the platform behind the choir pews on the left side of the

sanctuary. The two speakers were located in a room in the ceiling above the chancel area and projected sound directly down. The choir and pastors benefited greatly from its sound, but it did not project well to the back of the sanctuary, especially under the balcony. At this time, the front of the sanctuary was a bare wall painted the color of the rest of the room as you can see in these photos.

By the mid 1970's the Baldwin organ began to show its age resulting in constant maintenance. At this same time the music program was rapidly expanding. The Baldwin organ was no



longer able to support the music ministry adequately. A committee was formed to look at alternatives. There were then two major makers of electronic church organs, Rodgers and Allen. After much research and listening to organs from both companies, and discussing options for installation, a Rodgers organ was decided upon largely because it presented the opportunity to have actual pipes included with the electronic portion. This was a new technology at the time.

In 1979 a **Rodgers Classic Series 250** two manual organ



with pipes was installed by the Buch Church Organ Company of Ephrata, PA. Buch Church Organ Company presented a set of plans for wall mounted chambers to cover most of the

front chancel wall. The chambers are only 12 inches deep, but permit the entire front wall to project sound from speakers and pipes.



A total of 4 Rodgers tone cabinets, 2 on each side of the chancel, were lifted into place and a large pedal tone cabinet was installed in the existing ceiling chamber. The amplifiers for the

electronics were also in that chamber. Two blowers that supply the air for the pipes were located in the ceiling of the rooms directly behind the pipe arches. The electronics and the pipes worked in combination - the organ was not complete without both of them. The new console, although larger, was originally placed in the same position as the previous organ, and later moved off of the platform so more choir pews could be installed. The custom wood working was done by the New Holland Church Furniture Company. With the exception of the 6 large non-speaking facade pipes, and the TV monitors, the front of the sanctuary looks today as it did with the installation of this organ.





This organ not only better supported and led congregational singing, it reinforced

the choral and vocal music ministry and it enhanced the appearance of the chancel area as you can see in the before and after pictures.

The purchase of the organ was financed with funds that were raised or pledged through a church wide funding campaign and by folks "buying" individual keys and pedals in honor or memory of a loved one or group. These memorials were noted on a chart of the organ and then framed. This chart is still displayed on the wall of Memorial Hall today.

After about 30 years of reliable service this organ began to fall into a time of constant difficult repairs partially due to the oscillator technology used to create the electronic sounds. Oscillator technology was quickly being replaced with digital technology. With over 200 oscillators, it was expensive and difficult to obtain them when they failed. The Buch Organ Company was consulted and two solutions were suggested: Replace all of the electronics in the current console with digital technology or replace the entire organ with a larger more versatile organ. It was decided to replace the entire organ with a custom digital organ built by Walker Technical Company of Center Valley, PA.

The new organ would be a **Walker Aeolian Skinner Specification 351 Custom** digital organ purchased through the Buch Church Organ Company.



Fred Buch and Bob Walker, of the two companies involved, consulted with the Grove UMC Director of Music at the time (Craig Rider) and Organist (Bob Johns) to select a custom specification

(selection of stops and accessories) for the organ suitable for the size of the sanctuary and demands of the music program of the church. This organ was also designed to incorporate the pipes of the previous Rodgers organ to supplement the digital sounds. The pipes enhance the digital sounds, but the organ is complete organ without them.

The console for this organ is a 3 manual and pedal board unit. It is on wheels and can be moved for special presentations. When it was installed all of the electronics and speakers from the



Rodgers organ were removed and replaced with state-of-the-art components designed for the purist representation of the Walker digital pipe sounds. They

are arranged so that each division of the organ 'speaks' from the same place behind the facade. The amplifiers were relocated to a custom-built cabinet located in the room behind the pipes on the left side of the sanctuary for easier maintenance access. The room above the sanctuary now contains only the largest speaker for the lowest bass notes of the organ. The organ is equivalent to an 85-rank pipe organ. The sounds are the digitally recorded sounds of actual pipes in Aeolian Skinner organs from around the world reproduced as accurately as possible through speakers and the actual 'live' pipes in the sanctuary.

This organ was purchased with funds from the V. Matora Christy Bequest Fund. It was first used in worship on May 4, 2008 and was dedicated on October 26, 2008 as the V. Matora Christy Memorial Organ.

Robert (Bob) Johns is the current organist at Grove Church and has been serving here since June 1966.

For much more information about the organ and other interesting facts visit: <https://grovechurch.org/history/>