

## Report to the Committee



# RUCC ORGAN PROJECT

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## **Introduction & Goals**

The single goal of this report is to provide information to the Organ Committee of Redlands United Church of Christ, for whom I have many fond memories, as I was the first organist and also served as Organist/Choir Director for many years.

I do not have any particular “axe to be ground” as it were, except that I hope that the music of the church, through the selection of a new organ can be strengthened and can be put it in an advantageous position for future growth and prosperity.

## **History**

A pipe organ has been fundamental to the RUCC since the very beginning. When it was established, the organ that was in the old Congregational Church, a 1902 Austin was left behind. RUCC then began as a tenant church sharing facilities with the Methodists who had a brand new von Beckerath organ. This was not only a baroque revival organ, and as such very different from the Congregational Austin, but it was a very extreme example. However highly regarded in the community, the organ had some very aggressive and strident sounds that were not conducive to choral accompaniment. For this reason, right from the start, the RUCC choirs often also performed with piano accompaniment.

After a time, the Methodists changed ministers and the founding RUCC minister Bruce van Blair moved on to another church in Mercer Island in Washington. For a year, there was no minister at RUCC. Various members of the congregation provided sermons and a sizeable surplus of funds were accumulated. The church invested some of those funds in the Noack Organ that was for sale by one Dr. Fenimore, a prominent surgeon in Houston, Texas. This was a very famous organ and appeared in an important German book about tracker organs in America entitled *Die Orgelbewegung in Amerika, or The Tracker Organ Revival in America* by Uwe Pape, a German organ expert. The picture on the cover of this report is taken from that book. The organ was brought back to Redlands and reassembled in the chapel of the Baptist Church. After a while, RUCC left the Methodists and began using the chapel of the Baptist Church.

Thereafter, the organ served while the RUCC was meeting at the Baptist Chapel, later, during first phase building at the property on Olive and Bellevue and when the Sanctuary was built, in its present location.

After being used in the current location, the limitations of the instrument were made more apparent by the size and acoustic properties of the sanctuary and by increased demands placed on the instrument. Leading a hymn on the Noack in the sanctuary was not a particularly inspiring experience for anyone. That, of course, was never the intention of the instrument in the first place. It gave reliable

service, with a minimum of mechanical issues for 38 years. The church has clearly benefited from their modest investment.

### **Needs of the Congregation and the Music Program**

From a performer's perspective, the type of organ that is resident in a church directly effects the choice of music that is played there. When the Noack organ was built, American musicians, especially organists were heavily influenced by the baroque revival, which began in the 1950's but reached its peak around the time of the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of JS Bach in 1985. A lot of early music was being played. The Noack organ was built with this sort of literature in mind.

In Bach's time, finding an organ of this type in a church was not at all unusual and a lot of literature was available for musicians in the 1970s. Church musicians at the time believed that music had to be in its original state, exactly as the composer had intended and it must be played on appropriate instruments. Arrangements were to be avoided and transcriptions of orchestral music or music from other genre such as piano works were never to be played by serious musicians. Music that did not fall into these parameters simply wasn't selected for performance but thankfully, there was plenty of suitable music from which to choose. Things have changed.

The baroque revival played itself out after three or four decades and musicians, audiences and congregations began to appreciate music from other eras, notably the classical and romantic. More Mendelssohn and Franck was being played and less Froberger and Buxtehude.

### **An Instrument to meet current and future needs**

At a meeting of the organ committee in 2021, concerns were shared about the ability of the Noack Organ to meet the needs of the current music program. Dr. Fenimore's little Baroque house organ wasn't able to adequately provide hymn leadership, choral accompaniment or organ voluntaries suitable for worship services.

This is not an unreasonable criticism of the instrument at all. When contacted early on in the process, the original organbuilder Fritz Noack was happy that the organ was still being used but felt that the congregation was probably ready for something that could do more.

Consensus on a set of basic desired capabilities was reached . The instrument should have two manuals and pedal, it should have an expression enclosure, it should have enough tonal variety to accompany hymns, anthems and provide basic service music. Ideally it should have an adequate combination action.

In order to accomplish a project of this sort, the services of a qualified and experienced organbuilder are needed. Steuart Goodwin is now retired. I am not willing to take on another building project of this sort in any capacity except as a consultant.

I recommend a builder that is willing, and able to assist RUCC with this work. His name is Sean O'Neal and he has done several projects of this sort.

### **Challenges and Limitations**

The project will not be without challenges. The first of these is lack of available space. When the architect designed the sanctuary, adequate space was allocated for the Noack, but that is about all. Space available is 124" in width by 84" deep with a maximum height of 150".

Several organ builders have been asked over the years to provide a solution to this challenge. Steuart Goodwin, a respected Redlands-area organ builder's solution was to create an area above the Narthex and put an organ there. Another organ builder's solution was to make the organ a hybrid pipe-digital instrument. Not much enthusiasm was found for either of these ideas.

At the 2021 committee meeting the task was given to find solutions to the space limitation challenge that didn't involve relocating the choir or engaging in an architectural remodel to provide adequate space. The committee wanted the organ to be a pipe organ without digital sounds, to use the space available and to not exceed the amount of funds that had already been set aside for the project.

### **Research**

There are several sources for possible solutions to this challenge. One would be word of mouth. Several organbuilders were contacted to see if they had anything available and some possible solutions were considered.

The primary source of information was the internet. One of the obstacles that were encountered was directly or indirectly brought on by the COVID pandemic. Most churches were closed, no one was answering phones in the offices, and so collecting information was difficult. Many organ projects became less urgent and projects that were begun in the years before the pandemic were often put on indefinite hold. As a result many organ builders closed their shops temporarily, had stopped answering their phones and many stopped updating their websites. Some have apparently stopped answering their emails.

Nevertheless, many organs were considered. Of these, about 80% were disqualified, mostly because they wouldn't fit in the available space. Some had already been sold and some were too expensive. Of course, a brand new, custom designed instrument was not in the budget.

### **Next Steps**

1. Organs by some of these builders can be visited. There is a Schlicker of similar size and design at Faith Lutheran Church in Yucaipa. There are smaller Schoensteins in Los Angeles and Oxnard that are similar. There is a Casavant organ in North Hollywood that would have some similar voices on it. (it has been substantially rebuilt with many new pipes, and it is larger)

2. Selection of an organ
3. Contracts with the owner/builder
4. Relocating the organ to either RUCC or the organ shop of Sean O'Neal.
5. Installation/modifications
6. Tonal finishing

### **Disposition of the Noack Organ**

I spoke to Didier Grassin, the new President of Noack Organ Company. He related to me that this organ has a particularly fine design and appearance. The pipe shades were personally hand carved by Fritz Noack himself. (He referred to them as his "little fishies"). However, there is not much demand for organs of this type right now. In fact, there was one in the shop right now that had been for sale for some time. Here are two possibilities.

- The organ could be advertised for sale in organists' publications and the American Guild of Organists website.
- The organ could be listed with the Organ Clearing House.
- The word could be "put out" to local organ builders.

### **Recommendations for the future**

1. Savings for future