

BATH AND WELLS DIOCESAN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

ORGANS – REPAIR OR REPLACE?

Churches vary in their requirements, but our fundamental concern must be the use of music to enhance worship and the Glory of God. This advice concerns mainly village churches. Town and significant churches have larger organs and the merits of repair or replacement where they are concerned must be given special individual attention. The worship of God requires a worthy instrument and good music.

1. **The Requirement.** This is the first item to address. Some churches have a sung service with music, hymns and perhaps a choir every Sunday. Other churches have one or two services a month with hymns, perhaps a canticle, and music before and after the service. Some organists may not be attracted to playing an electronic instrument and others may not be attracted to playing a pipe organ with limited capabilities.
2. **The Cost.** This is the second item to consider – the relative cost between repair and replacement. Although a church may not be able to afford to repair their organ immediately, it may be able to repair it at some future date. A good pipe organ, especially if it is of historic and/or musical value, should be retained if at all possible. It is also possible that the current organist is not experienced enough to get the best out of the existing organ – that is not a satisfactory reason for change. The repair of a good instrument is likely to be the better option in the long term.

Some considerations in the debate about electronic organs:

1. The life span of an electronic instrument is unproven and repair is problematic because technology advances quickly and parts soon become obsolete. It cannot be assumed that digital organs give trouble free service. Electronic organs can react adversely to fluctuations in voltage. Damp and dust can also cause problems. A good mechanical action pipe organ will give good service for more than a hundred years, needing ongoing expenditure only on tuning and small maintenance work. Electronics, whether part of a pipe organ with electric action, or a digital instrument, will need major renewal or complete replacement several times within the same time span.
2. The sound of an electronic organ may at first seem impressive – it will probably be played to the potential buyer by an expert – but in time the instrument will be revealed for what it is – the copying of a pipe organ. These instruments are not at their best when playing for choral and congregational music. A pipe organ – even a modest one – moves a considerably greater amount of air than an electronic instrument and so its sound carries and supports a congregation much more efficiently.

3. The electronic organ can sit uneasily in an old church. A light or dark coloured veneer is probably not appropriate. A quality case of solid wood is required. The placing and housing of speakers also requires special and sensitive attention. With the exception of the very smallest of churches, it is always necessary to place the sound somewhere above the congregation and away from the organist's knees. The speaker cabinets should be appropriately coloured and fit well into the architecture.
4. If an electronic organ is obtained care should be taken to see that it is appropriate to the size of the building, neither too large nor too small. A play back system should also be considered. It is then possible to record hymns and voluntaries and play them back when no organist is available. It is also possible at the turn of a switch to transpose music into more suitable keys with huge benefit to smaller congregations.

Do not assume from the above comments that we are against the installation of electronic instruments. In many cases they provide the most suitable and practical solution to the problems facing so many parishes nowadays. It is important that churches consider all the alternatives open to them before arriving at a decision. The short-term solution is not always the best. We must consider our future congregations and allow them the benefit of our good long term planning.

Always approach us at an early stage in planning for informal advice. This could well save a considerable amount of wasted time and energy pursuing inappropriate schemes.

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