

Communal Wisdom and Organ Crawls

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In October of 2014 the Twin Cities (Minnesota) Chapter of the American Guild of Organists sponsored an organ crawl. Not surprisingly, it included interesting music, fine players and playing, contrasting organs and spaces, and a variety of attendees. The variety of attendees needs to be highlighted. Organists and those with organ interests were there, but so were congregational members with a wide variety of vocations and interests. This reminded me of a congregational experience I had with organ crawls.

I was once called as a Cantor to a church that told me it did not sing very well. Its pastor and search committee asked if I could help. Yes, I said I could do that. The organ was clearly in bad shape, and they asked if I could help them figure out what to do. I said I was not an organ virtuoso nor an organ expert, but I could provide them with resources and figure it out with them. The church formed an organ committee, I supplied them with data, and we went to work.

We needed to hear various possibilities. So I found churches in the area with contrasting organs from as wide a spectrum as possible, and we set out on organ crawls. The ground rules were that at each organ I would play exactly the same contrasting pieces and lead them in singing exactly the same hymns. (I—their normal organist—played, not a virtuoso who might try to sell them a particular organ.) The committee's requests that I tell them what to do receded. I had resisted those requests and had told them we should decide this together, not unilaterally. They began to discern differences and what these differences might mean in their building with their congregation, its singing, and its musical possibilities. The committee requested proposals from excellent builders and decided on one of them. The organ they chose fit the space beautifully in sight and sound, and it represented good stewardship of resources.

I learned that congregations are smart. They can choose a representative committee well. People with very little background in a given area can learn and discern well, hear well, and constructively figure things out for the good of the whole. Organ crawls were central to this project—for normal human beings, not organ enthusiasts. (That all normal people hate organs was shown to be a modern urban legend.)

When I lead forums in churches, I often am asked, "Why didn't anybody tell us this before." We sell one another and the Christian gospel short. The gospel teaches us to treat each other honestly and well, the way God treats us. If we assemble all the information we can, make it available to all of us, and

work together with requisite checks and balances, we can do amazing things. Our “life together”—to use Bonhoeffer’s words—benefits musically as well as otherwise from our shared communal wisdom.