

# CHURCH-SPONSORED ORGAN SCHOLARSHIPS

Naomi Rowley

**T**HE following interview with Martha Fisher from Quakertown, Pa., highlights the value and importance of church-sponsored organ scholarship programs. Through her highly successful endeavors in this area that span nearly 50 years, Martha's experiences are an inspiration for all who aspire to motivate, recruit, and educate the next generation of organists.

*You've enjoyed tremendous success with organ scholarship programs in the churches you have served. How did your interest in this area begin?*

My inspiration came many years ago from Ronald Nelson who was at Westwood Lutheran Church, St. Louis Park, Minn.

*When did you first launch an organ scholarship program?*

I first started the program at Trinity Lutheran Church, Perkasio, Pa., where I served from 1958 to 1970. And I continued it during my tenure at Trinity Lutheran Church, Quakertown, Pa., from 1974 to 1985. It still thrives today at St. John's Lutheran Church in Quakertown, where I've been since 1985. I currently have ten students in the program. (Note: From 1970 to 1974, Martha did substitute organ work while teaching public school music and completing her master's degree, a program that included organ study with William Whitehead.)

*Are there prerequisites for students who wish to be considered for your scholarship program?*

An applicant should have a minimum of one year's experience in one of the church's choirs where the capability for working hard has been demonstrated. In addition, musicianship, as well as reliability and similar qualities, are assets for admission. The assurance of parental support is also an important factor.

At first I only taught organ to students who already had a good background in piano. However, I have subsequently modified this policy. I now will accept a student who has no prior keyboard experience. In such cases, both beginning piano and organ instruction will be provided simultaneously. This policy has eliminated my frustration of correcting bad habits of poorly trained pianists. In addition, students are able to begin organ at a much earlier age before they become too busy in high school. I feel this is essential, or the shortage of organists will become even worse.

*Do you teach from a variety of methods?*

I use the Auberger piano program published by Alfred; it is well structured and incorporates music theory as well as history. In addition, I use *Dozen a Day* published by Willis. I supplement these programs with simplified hymns on the organ as well as parts of the liturgy. Students also have a book of

Christmas carols; on Christmas Eve they play a half-hour prelude prior to the service.

Eventually, students progress to Clementi sonatinas and Mozart sonatas. At this point they are ready for more extensive organ study. I use organ methods by David Johnson and Flor Peeters; the repertoire includes J.S. Bach's *Eight Little Preludes and Fugues* and similar material.

*Are hymns also part of their organ study?*

Most definitely! Hymn playing is a high priority for my organ students. When they have progressed to the point of studying hymns, they each receive a worn copy of *The Lutheran Book of Worship* that they consider a gift of gold! At this time the Church Council also gives them a key to the building to accommodate longer and after-hours practice sessions. However, since St. John's is a busy place, the church is open very frequently for numerous activities; this enables students to have frequent access to the instrument for practice.

*Do students have opportunities for service-playing experience?*

Oh, yes! As soon as they are able, they play preludes and postludes. The more advanced students are my substitutes!

*How many students are currently studying in your scholarship program?*

At the moment there are ten. One student is in her 30s; another is a college student. Two students are in high school; the remaining ones are in the intermediate and elementary grades.

*How often do they receive lessons?*

The lessons are weekly. As their teacher, I am very busy. But the parents and congregation are very supportive. They love hearing the students play and also realize how valuable the program is for the church and the organ profession.

*Do former scholarship students continue their interest in the organ?*

About one-third of them become organists. Some play in churches in the New York area; others have church organist positions in the Quakertown vicinity. For the remaining two-thirds, the organ scholarship experience enhances their participation in church choirs, and definitely informs their membership on music, worship, and organ committees.

*Thank you for sharing insights regarding your organ scholarship program. May your efforts continue to flourish!*

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