



175th Anniversary Moment

“He who promised is faithful” (Heb 10.23)

THE MUSIC MINISTRY OF PAUL NICHOLSON

With the untimely death of music director Jim Rogner in 1995, First Saint Paul’s was faced with a vacancy in music leadership for the first time in twenty years. As with the death of Albert Beck over thirty years before, the congregation grieved over the loss of a much beloved leader, yet needed to make sure that basic music needs were met.

Once again, a candidate with training at Concordia, River Forest, was available. Paul Nicholson graduated from Concordia in 1985, and was already an experienced church musician. He had been subbing at First Saint Paul’s and then was asked to take the permanent position. He had to hit the ground running, because the 150th anniversary celebration was to take place in 1996. In that year he arranged the commissioning of compositions by four noted composers—Carl Schalk, Richard Wienhorst, Richard Hillert, and John Hirten—as part of the anniversary celebration.

During Nicholson’s twelve-year tenure, he expanded the scope of the music ministry. The Christmas concerts grew to include a chamber orchestra, and under his direction the choir tackled such ambitious pieces as Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio* (Parts I and II), Vivaldi’s *Gloria*, and Bach’s *Magnificat*, with orchestral accompaniment. Paul also introduced other lesser-known works at various Christmas concerts, including Randall Thompson’s *The Place of the Blest*, Arvo Part’s *Magnificat*, and Gerald Finzi’s *In Terra Pax*. For all these programs, choir and orchestra were in the front of the sanctuary, and an elaborate camera set-up inside the Christmas tree was used so that the organist in the choir loft could see the director. These elaborate Christmas concerts alternated with simpler “lessons and carols” programs every other year.

The professional attitude that Paul exhibited was recognized by the congregation, and starting in 2001, the music director position was made full time. This included additional expectations, such as occasional hymn festivals, but the increase to full-time status also recognized the work that Paul had already done. In his full-time capacity, Paul increased his work as a composer, writing psalms and verses for the choir, as well as orchestral arrangements of carols for Christmas concerts.

Under Paul’s leadership, the choir took four singing trips to Europe. These were wonderful opportunities for the choir to experience the thrill of singing in such spaces as England’s Canterbury Cathedral and Chartres Cathedral in France, as well as other historic spaces in Italy, Spain and the Czech Republic. The trips also provided the chance for the group to enjoy sight-seeing and camaraderie in these countries.

At the end of 2006, Paul ended his tenure at First Saint Paul's, having decided to focus on music inscription, that is, making professional quality scores for other composers and musicians, as well as to expand his piano accompanying work in the Chicago area. Paul continues to be an excellent organist, widely respected piano accompanist, and an accomplished composer.



*Paul Nicholson with the First Saint Paul's Choir
and orchestra at a Christmas concert in the early 2000s.*