

## Staff Profile: Barbara Ritchie, Director of Music and Organist

*This is the third in a series of staff profiles, presented so that our St. Mark's family can get better acquainted with our staff. This time we are spotlighting Barbara Ritchie, our Director of Music since October 1984.*

*Donna Lunstrum, Connections editor*

### ***Tell us a little about your growing-up years.***

I grew up in Waterloo, actually staying in that area until after graduation from UNI with a degree in elementary education. My dad was an electrician, the kind of trouble-shooter who has the reputation of being able to fix pretty much any problem. He said he was a "priggler", his word for an inventor of sorts, and he built all kinds of cool things pretty much from scratch. So my younger brother and I grew up thinking that it was normal to have your own go-kart, model airplane with a parachutist, and mini-Model T to drive! My mother was a peppy, determined, and all around fun stay-at-home mom who was always there with love and support. Our family was very active at the Evangelical United Brethren Church, a denomination which later merged with the Methodist Church. Looking back on it now, my brother and I know that having parents who were Christians of great faith was a wonderful blessing.

### ***When did you determine that you wanted to be a church organist—or feel God calling you to do this?***

I knew from little up that music was something that I just had to be involved in. I had a favorite uncle who was an amazing musician, especially when it came to piano. So at family gatherings when I was young, everybody would gather round the piano, and after he'd taken requests for a while we'd all start to sing favorite songs and hymns. Vocally it wasn't always so beautiful, but there was something about those family times that stuck with me. When I was in high school the real call came in the form of a desperate church, my home church, needing an organist right away. I'd been playing piano and violin quite a while, was concertmistress of my high school orchestra, and was playing violin in the Waterloo Symphony. The catch was that I had never really played the organ. They agreed to pay for lessons plus \$2 per service that I played. I guess God knew that I wouldn't be able to resist such a great offer! So after my first lesson I took a deep breath and slid across the bench of the Hammond electronic organ at Calvary Methodist Church. (Wow! I'm thankful that they weren't recording the services in those days!) I fell in love with the organ, much to the dismay of my violin teacher who saw me as a budding concert violinist.

### ***Tell us a little about your family.***

My husband, Ron, is a retired Linn-Mar history teacher, as well as being my high school sweetheart. We live in Robins, just a short two-minute drive from the church. Our son, Andrew, lives in Iowa City where he is a test developer at ACT. Daughter Sarah lives in Cedar Rapids with

her husband Neil Schmidt, a project manager at Pearson, Inc. Sarah, a stay-at-home mom for daughters Ivy, 5, and Kate 7 months, sings in the choir and often plays special music on her oboe or harp at Sunday services. With family so close, we feel especially blessed to be able to spend time with our granddaughters.

### ***Tell us about your career path and how you came to work at St. Mark's.***

I guess you could say I've had at least two careers. For a total of 25 years I taught gifted education, first grade, and second grade in Cedar Falls, Fairbanks (Alaska), and Marion (Linn-Mar) before retiring



from elementary teaching six years ago. After my auspicious beginning on the Hammond organ in 1963, I served as organist at three United Methodist churches in Waterloo; First UM Church in Fairbanks; Calvary UM Church in LeMars, Iowa; and Marion Christian Church in Marion. While finishing my coursework and recital preparations for my Organ Performance degree from the University of Iowa, I learned that St. Mark's was looking for an organist. I've served as Director of Music and Organist at St. Mark's for the past 29 years and had the pleasure of working with ten pastors and seven choir directors.

### ***You make playing the organ or piano look SO easy. How long have you been playing? Do you ever get nervous about playing? And do you really have to practice?***

I've been playing in church for around a half a century (!) and have played for hundreds of baptisms, weddings and funerals. No, if I'm properly prepared, I don't get really nervous about playing, and, yes, I do still practice. . . a lot!

### ***Do you sing and/or play other musical instruments?***

Organ has been my focus, but sometime during retirement I hope to have time to get back to the violin, also, but definitely not on the concert stage!

### ***What's your favorite worship season? Why?***

Advent and Christmas are my favorites because of the wealth of beautiful choral and instrumental music. Even though it can be an exhausting season for musicians, the hushed wonder of Christmas Eve, especially the late service, is such a holy time.

*Continued on next page*

## Cont'd from previous page

### ***What's been your greatest challenge as an organist?***

Perhaps one of the greatest and most fulfilling challenges has happened within the last two and a half years as I've been deeply involved in the Opus 695 organ restoration project here at St. Mark's. From the day that we first inspected the E.M. Skinner instrument in the Bronx to today I've had the privilege of being involved at every step. In Chicago I watched it getting restored, and at St. Mark's I've seen it installed and beginning a second life. It's been a challenge, an honor, and a thrill. I look forward to many more years playing this marvelous pipe organ.

### ***Have you had any funny or unexpected things happen during worship services?***

Yes. One of the most memorable surprises happened when I was organist at a church that broadcast part of the service on the radio. One Sunday just as we were singing the hymn before the sermon and beginning the radio coverage a bat flew out of the stained glass dome above the congregation! It flew around while everyone, including pastors and staff, tried to keep singing and act "normal"! Luckily the confused bat decided to return to the ceiling dome and this organist's heart rate also returned to normal—by the end of the service.

### ***What is your favorite book of the Bible to read or study?***

Psalms is one of my favorites, of course, because of the musicality and emotion that is often expressed. So many of the Psalms have been used as lyrics for modern choral anthems that when a church musician reads them, the words almost dance off the page. I love that!

### ***We know that you and Ron do a lot of traveling. Tell us a little about some of your favorite destinations or most memorable trips.***

Over the past ten years Ron and I have taken 15 cruises, traveling to Asia, Africa, and South America as well as numerous trips to Europe. While we enjoy planning our own itineraries, we do count the three choir tours with Allen Koepke and friends among our fondest memories.



*Barb and Ron in Florence, Italy, with the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore (often called the Duomo) in the background*

### ***When do you feel God's presence most strongly?***

For me the quiet moments, such as walking outdoors under the stars, are times of closeness and assurance. As you might guess, many musical moments through the years have often brought that intense feeling of His presence. Sometimes right in the middle of performance you can sense that God has reached down and turned your meager efforts into something much more, something that can touch hearts as only He can do.