

Organ

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Diekmann said. “We searched for a professional who was able to come for this concert, and he accepted our invitation,” Diekmann said. Blersch told the *Press & Dakotan* that he looks forward to playing for the celebration. “Dianne (Diekmann) and I have been talking about this event for a while,” he said. “The reinstallation of the church’s organ is certainly a huge milestone in recovering from the devastation of the church’s fire, and I’m excited for the opportunity to be a part of this piece of the church’s history.” Sunday’s audience will participate in the concert, Blersch said. “The concert will feature a variety of organ repertoire as well as some hymn singing by the assembly,” he said. “Since the organ’s primary role in worship is to lead the assembly in song, it seems only appropriate to showcase the newly-installed organ in this role as well as its capabilities as a solo instrument.”

STARTING YOUNG The 44-year-old Blersch has been an active church musician since being appointed organist of Peace Lutheran Church in Cincinnati at age 8. “My parents had a small electronic organ in their house as my dad wanted to learn to play. My mom tells me that, as a young child, I would sit at the bench for hours a day working my way up and down the keyboards, being fascinated with the instrument,” he said. “When I was 6, our church organist helped my parents find someone who would teach me. That was a little unusual for a 6-year-old to study organ — especially considering I couldn’t even reach the pedals yet and had to sit on large books to be able to see the music rack on the church’s organ.” However, Blersch remained undeterred in his love of the organ. “By the time I was 8, with my church organist’s encouragement, I began to play a hymn while she took communion. It wasn’t long before I was her substitute while she was on vacation and then agreed to fill in for her while she took a maternity leave,” he said. “As it turns out, she decided not

to return to the organ bench after her leave, and the church offered me the position — while I was still 8. I stayed in that position until I left for college, and my parents are still members at that church (Peace Lutheran in Cincinnati).” Blersch is a graduate of the Oberlin College Conservatory of Music where he received degrees in organ performance and music education, and of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he earned the Doctor of Musical Arts in Organ Performance. Best known for his creative hymn interpretations, Blersch regularly performs recitals and hymn festivals across the United States. His performances have also been featured on American Public Media’s “Pipedreams” and “The Lutheran Hour.” More than 80 of his compositions and collections are published exclusively with Concordia Publishing House. Four of his original hymn tunes are included in Lutheran Service Book (2006). His commissioned compositions include hymn settings for LCMS youth gatherings and conventions. He has also composed a setting of U.S. Poet Laureate Ted Kooser’s poem “So This Is Nebraska” for a performance at a convention of the American Choral Directors Association. Blersch has released two compact disc recordings of his own compositions and arrangements, entitled “Resounding Alleluias” and “On Christmas Night.” **A BITTERSWEET MOMENT** For Diekmann, Sunday’s concert will bring back a flood of memories. She vividly remembers watching fire and smoke consume St. John’s in the early hours of the 2009 blaze. “I was standing outside (the church on) the morning of the fire. The tears were just flowing, seeing everything go up,” she said. “I had just played the organ on the day before. I was the last one to play it before the fire.” The organ was lost, but firefighters retrieved the music, Diekmann said. “The sheet music was just black. You couldn’t see what was on the pages,” she said. “I still have it in a bag at home.” For the next year, St. John’s parishioners worshipped at Marian Auditorium on the Mount Marty College campus. The congregation moved back into its sanctuary 1 1/2

years ago, but the organists — Diekmann, Phyllis Nielsen, Donna Knodel and Sheila Peterson — used an electronic piano while the organ continued receiving repairs. “The large metal pipes were able to be cleaned and reused,” Diekmann said. “But all of the wooden pipes and the rest of the organ had to be replaced with new materials because there was too much damage.” St. John’s original organ came when the church was built in 1969. The organ, consisting of 11 ranks and 743 pipes, was designed and built by Charles Hendrickson Organ Company of St. Peter, Minn., at a cost of less than \$15,000. A dedication service was held Nov. 9, 1969. Manz was the guest organist. Charles Hendrickson, his wife Birgitta and 2-year-old son Eric attended. A \$25,000 update to the organ was done in 2006. After the 2009 fire, the organ has been rebuilt by the Hendrickson company. The organ has been enlarged to 12 ranks with 804 pipes and is valued at nearly \$200,000. This time, the major installation work was done by Eric Hendrickson. Charles, Birgitta and Eric Hendrickson plan to attend Sunday’s concert. Last Sunday’s dedication service featured the four St. John’s organists, who began playing as early teenagers in their home congregations and offer a combined 193 years of experience. The service consisted of favorite hymns and organ compositions selected by the organists. “Our organists love playing the pipe organ, and having it back is a joy,” Diekmann said. “There’s nothing like the sound of a pipe organ.” After spending 1 1/2 years playing an electronic piano, the St. John’s organists needed to reacquaint themselves with organ music, Diekmann said. “With the electric piano, there’s no pedal keyboard,” she said. “The music for the organ has feet that you don’t find with piano music. It’s a different music and inspiring.” However, the additional work of refamiliarizing themselves with the organ is well worth it, Diekmann said. She considers sacred music a special part of worship. “Martin Luther said, next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise,” she said.

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