

Dr. James H. Vail
(Organist and Choirmaster, St. Alban's):

An Oral History

Early years in Glendale. I am just starting my 34th year here at St. Alban's, so I'll have been here 33 years in August. [...] [Give me a little bit about your background before we get into your time here at St Alban's. When were you born and where?] I was born in Los Angeles in 1929—the year of the crash. [...] you're a native!] Yeah, one of those few. Just before I turned six, my family moved from Los Angeles to Glendale, so I spent my formative years more or less in Glendale, went through all the school system there—Mark Keppel Grammar School, Eleanor Toll Junior High School, and Herbert Hoover High School.

Musical training. I was always interested in music, studied piano from a very early age. My sister was my first teacher. [How young were you?] Probably five. I always wanted to play the organ, all my life, but I didn't really start studying organ until my last year of high school, I think [...] I spent all my early years in the First Baptist Church of Los Angeles. We were Baptists, but it was a very liberal Baptist Church [...], not a Bible-thumping kind of a thing, and we had very good music. It was really more like a Presbyterian or Methodist Church, with very good music. In my junior year in high school (it was the end of the war [...] 1945), we had a new director of music come to our church—John Burke. He was an organist and choirmaster, and I was just enthralled with him. He was a graduate of Westminster Choir College in Princeton. He started a wonderful music program. There had always been good music, but it was even better then. [...] The church didn't want him to give organ lessons, but finally they allowed him to give me organ lessons, and that's when I started. I was seventeen, I guess. [What made you so passionate about the organ?] I don't know, I just loved the full rich sound of it, and it was a large organ that we had, a four-manual organ with a thrilling range of volume and colors.

Family background [You were raised a Baptist then; were your parents both Baptists?] My mother had been a Lutheran, and when she married my father, became a Baptist. They both came from Pennsylvania. [Pennsylvania Dutch? What ethnic background?]. Scottish, Irish, English, Welsh...all the British Isles. My father was from Erie, Pennsylvania. My mother was from Dallastown, near York, Pennsylvania [...]. So she grew up amongst the Pennsylvania Dutch. She knew them, but she was not Pennsylvania Dutch herself. [When did they move here?] This is interesting: shortly after my parents married, my father's sister married my mother's brother. My father and my mother's brother were roommates at Penn State, where my father was studying to be an engineer. My mother was brought up on a farm, and her brother brought my father to visit them on the farm, and that's when they met. [Do you still have connections in Pennsylvania. Family?] Yes, lots of them. The last of my mother's relatives was a very dear aunt who died just a year ago, and she was well into her 90s.

Move to California. My parents came out here just after WWI. My father had worked with the Navy department in Washington D.C. [...] I think it was 1919 [when] they moved to California. [He was an engineer, and your mother?] My mother was a teacher when she was younger, but then spent full time raising a family of four. I am the youngest. I have [...] two older brothers and an older sister who sings in our choir.

College. [... Tell me about your college years.] Well, I had planned to go to the University of Redlands, where my sister went. I finished high school in 1947 but my organ teacher, John Burke, had been a student of Alexander McCurdy who was one of *the* fine organ teachers in the country. When McCurdy was out here one time, he gave me a special audition and I was accepted as a student to the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. Curtis was founded and endowed by Mrs. Mary Curtis Bok Zimbalist. She was the daughter of Cyrus Curtis of the Curtis publishing company who published the *Ladies Home Journal* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. So it was entirely a scholarship school. There were only [...] 150 students enrolled. The teachers were either world-class solo performers—like pianist Rudolf Serkin or cellist Gregor Piatagorsky—or they

were the Philadelphia Orchestra first chairs. [La crème ?!] Yeah. [So you went right out of high school?] A half-year later. I was back there for four years.

First job. I got my first job at St. Elisabeth's Episcopal Church in S. Philadelphia, which was the Little Italy at that time. I was in Philadelphia this last summer and I went to see if St. Elisabeth's is still there. I experienced kind of a surprise. It *is* still there but it is now in a totally African American area and is a Church of God in Christ. But I was happy it is still there and that it is still used for worship. St. Elisabeth's was my introduction to the Episcopal Church. I knew nothing about it. It was a very high church. They had confession, bells and incense and everything. This was an eye-opener for a Baptist boy, but I was very curious. I was there during my first two years at Curtis. The second two years I was in another Episcopal Church in west Philadelphia—right next to the University of Pennsylvania—which is still there and going strong. [Which church?] St. Mary's, Hamilton Village. But at the same time, I was assistant to my teacher, Alexander McCurdy at his church, which was the First Presbyterian Church. That church performed an oratorio every Sunday afternoon from October through May! When he was occasionally gone on tour I got to play and conduct the oratorio. We occasionally had an orchestra, but usually Dr. McCurdy played these oratorios on the organ and conducted from the console—which is where I learned how to do that. [One a week? What a schedule!] Yeah, but that's where I learned a lot of repertoire.

War years. [So, you stayed in Philadelphia four years, and you played at various churches...] Then I went to Union Theological Seminary School of Sacred Music in New York. I was going to get my Masters there. [It] was quite a famous school, but I only was there for one semester because the Korean War had started and I was drafted into the army. I was sent to Fort Eustis, Virginia (near Williamsburg), and went through basic training there. [I] became a chaplain's assistant and had choirs while I was in the army. I was in the army two years, and most of the time was assigned to Southern Baptist chaplains (not northern Baptist) and they were Bible-thumping, hell-fire and brimstone, and all that sort of thing. I did *not* like it. After spending my formative years in a liberal Baptist church with good music, and four years in the Episcopal Church, I was very

unhappy. Sunday evenings, I would sneak off to Bruton Parish Church, Williamsburg, Virginia. Are you familiar with Bruton Parish Church? [...] The Rockefellers developed Williamsburg as a national reconstruction of colonial times. It was a very famous city during the Revolutionary War. George Washington worshipped in Bruton Parish Church. I would go to Evensong there. [...my favorite service of all!] I loved that, so I decided I was going to be an Episcopalian. I went back to Philadelphia on a leave, and went to my first church, St. Elisabeth's [to visit Father Roseboro, the rector. I had lived there in the rectory, my first two years at Curtis, and got my room and board. That was my salary: room and board at the church. I asked Fr. Roseboro to give me confirmation instruction. That weekend I just sat in his living room for three days in a row, asking questions. Then he took me to the bishop and I was confirmed. [...] [You've been an Episcopalian ever since—was that 40 years ago?] It was fifty years ago!

So, after the first year at Fort Eustis, in the army, I was either going to be shipped to Korea or Europe and I lucked out and went to Europe, to Würzburg, German where I worked at the base chapel. As chaplain's assistant I had a choir of Germans and Americans, because we were an occupational force at that time—Germans, and American military personnel or their wives—quite a nice choir. I played organ and conducted the choir for the regular chapel services, and we also did concerts there for the base and for the town. [Did you enjoy more the organ part of this equation, or the choirmastery?] At first I enjoyed more the organ part, but they later became more equal, and eventually I spent most of my life more on the choral side, although I've always played and loved the organ.

Back to Los Angeles. [You came to LA after the war?] I returned in January of 1954, when I was discharged, so it was too late to go back and pick up in the middle of the year at Union Seminary. I decided then to take some courses at USC. During that spring semester the head of the choral and church music department, Dr. Charles Hirt, convinced me that I should stay here and get my Masters at USC, because they had a department of sacred music [...]. I happened to be around when the long-time organist of St. John's Episcopal Church on West Adams, near the USC campus, died. Roland Diggie

was his name. I lucked out and got that job, so that convinced me that I should stay in LA. I was at St. John's and USC for five years, got my Masters in 1956, and continued on for the doctorate. When I started writing my dissertation, I got a job as full-time director of music at La Jolla Presbyterian Church.

[So you commuted?] Well, I did a little bit because I was teaching at Immaculate Heart College (which no longer exists)—a place up on North Western Avenue. I taught organ there and commuted, I think every other week, for about a year. I was at La Jolla Presbyterian Church as director of music for two years and had five choirs. It was really a full-time job. Then, when I finished my dissertation, Dr. Hirt, who was my mentor at USC, called me one day and said: “I want you to come and teach at USC.” So I came back to LA with my family (that was 1961) and I stayed at USC from '61 to '99—38 years. I also went back to St. John's, where I stayed for another 8 years. [What did you teach at USC?] I taught Choral Music, Conducting, Choral Literature, Church Music. One of my favorite classes was Music of the Great Liturgies, which started with the Jewish Liturgy, early Christian, Eastern Orthodox Liturgies, and then the Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican Liturgies. We would study the liturgy and music of each church, and at the end of each unit we would attend services at these places. I took them to a Synagogue, then to a Greek Orthodox church and so on. [So they really got a sense of the living tradition. What was your dissertation on?] My dissertation was entitled “The Choral Eucharist in the Anglican Church from the English Reformation to the Oxford Movement.” That was from the beginnings of Anglicanism, when the Episcopal and Roman Churches parted ways and the Church in England began having services in English, up to the “high church” movement, which started in 1833. I started with music written for Masses in English before the First Prayer Book of 1549 and continued through the rapid political and liturgical changes over the next three centuries.

Musical Tastes. [How would you describe your musical tastes and how have they evolved?] Well, I've always been on a “classical” track, I suppose you could say. I enjoy popular music—my brothers were really into jazz and we listened to a lot of 1930's and 1940's jazz. I enjoyed that, but I never had the ability or desire to perform it. In terms of

so-called “classical” (I say “so-called” because that’s not a really good term, because it really refers technically to the music of the second half of the 18th C. by Haydn, Mozart, etc. But people say “classical.” [Yes, generically] Yes. I enjoy all periods of music, from Medieval and Renaissance music to the present. I think there is nobody, absolutely nobody greater than J.S. Bach. Close behind are Brahms, Mozart, Stravinsky and Benjamin Britten.

Why St. Alban’s? [How did you come to St. Alban’s?] In 1961 I had returned to Los Angeles with my wife. [When did you marry?] Barbara and I, her name was Barbara Di Iullo; she was half-Italian. She was singing at St. John’s when I went there in 1954 and that’s where we met, and we married in 1956. She sang with me there (and here) and still does frequently. We’ve been separated since the mid 1980’s but we still are best of friends. [You have how many children?] Two children. Both of them grew up here in St. Alban’s. My son, Steve, married a St. Alban’s girl, Nancy, and they have one child, Anthony, who is now twelve. They live in Encinitas, down near my wife, my daughter and my granddaughter, in Oceanside. Steve is a boat-repair person. They lived in Lake Tahoe for years. Now he works with boats down there. He’s going back to school. He thinks he wants to be a teacher. He’s 44. My daughter, Susan, is 43 (just 11 months younger than Steve) and she has a daughter, Elayna, who is 5 and a half. [Is your family musical?] They all studied music. None of them pursued it. [...] But my children and grandchildren are absolute delights in my life.

[Do you see St. Alban’s as your parish? When you’re here, is it part of your devotion?] This is my parish now. [How did you come here?] After my being at St. John’s the second time, from 1961 to 1969, Parker Jones, St. Alban’s second rector hired me as Organist-Choirmaster in 1969. So my family moved. We were living at the time in Gardena, in an area that is now Carson. We moved to Woodland Hills at the same time we came here.

[What was St. Alban’s like then?] It was a little bigger. It had been a lot bigger a few years before I came, but California had that proposition (I forget what it was called).

[Equal Housing?] Yes, apparently they lost a lot of people at that time. When I came here we had two services: a 9:00 a.m. service, during which the Junior Choir sang every Sunday (I directed the Junior Choir as well). The adult choir sang at the 11 a.m. service. There were actually more people at the 9:00 a.m. service; a lot of families came. But after a few years, I think I helped talk the clergy into combining the services, because neither one of them was full. I said: Why have two services when we could have one great service? (Actually there were three services, because there has always been an 8 a.m.; but that never had music). [...] Let's just combine them and have a 10 a.m. service. So they did, and for a while we had pretty big crowds at 10 a.m.; then they dwindled. [Why?] Well, all mainline churches were losing members—and have been up till now. I don't know why, but they did. I think in the last several years we've been doing better.

Music Director at St. Alban's. [Were you replacing anyone or did you start the music program here?] There was a man here by the name of Harold Hanson who had been here for a long time. I only met him once. He had two or three choirs, but I believe that, except for a Christmas program, they sang only for the regular church services. They didn't have a concert series as such, and I told Parker Jones [that] if I came I would want a concert series similar to what we had at St. John's. He agreed to that enthusiastically and we've had such a series ever since. [One of the gems!] Well, I think so. And I look at it as a major outreach of our parish, because we have big, often overflow, crowds at those events. A large part of the audiences are non-parishioners. I know some of them who have later become parishioners. [...How many people do you think come to St. Alban's because of the music?] Well, that's very difficult to say. [Do you think it's significant?] I wouldn't want to hazard a guess, but people tell me that often. Recently, a prominent member of the parish introduced me to a clergyman and said, "Oh, my wife and I started coming to St. Alban's because of the music," and I had no idea after all these years. So I was really surprised. I don't think that the music alone is a good reason to come to church, but I don't think it's bad to choose to come to a parish because you're happy with the music—as long as everything else is right.

Musical Preferences: no praise choruses! [Have you had detractors because of the music?] There are a few people who think that I, and some of the members of the choir, are élitist—whatever that means. [Because of the music that you choose?] I guess. Maybe because we don't sing enough catchy hymns. [But you've had *Sacred Harp* music, I know.] Oh yes, because I think some of those are very strong tunes [...], early American, simple, sturdy music; and I don't object to that, but I will not do praise choruses, if you know what that is, so called "religious pop." [...] I'm just not interested, and if I should ever be told to do that, I would not, at this point in my life. I know I have had students who accept that as a fact of life and they will do it (they will do good music too). Although I think that taste is a very interesting thing, some people say you're a snob if you say: "this is better music than that." I suppose it all depends "where you're coming from," as they say. On the other hand, good taste is developed through a process of sophistication. When you study music you learn: this is good harmony because..., or this is not good harmony because... And so, there is a standard. Taste can be taught. I know it can because I've been a teacher all my life and I know what teaching excellence in music and style can do to people. I think that encouraging the congregation to appreciate and want good music should be a very definite goal of a music director. This is what I've tried to do. [And one who happens to also be an educator!] Yes. [...] [But you've also done recently a little explaining what "antiphon" is, and that sort of thing.] Yes I throw some of that in. It's not a school, so you can't spend all your time doing that

Planning Sunday Music. [How do you put together your music for every Sunday? What kind of a schedule do you follow?] Well, all those years that I was teaching (I retired from USC in 1999), [...] I got into the habit of choosing all of the music from the 1st of September through Christmas. I would do that during August when I was away from school because I knew I wouldn't have time to do it week by week when teaching. There simply wasn't time. In August I chose all the hymns, the service music, the communion services, the anthems, the organ music, every single bit—so I'd be ready. Then, during Christmas vacation I would choose the rest of the year's music from January through July. And I still do that, just because I've been in the habit of doing it. [Map it all out...] I map it out and I choose very carefully the music to fit the lectionary, so that the hymns

and the anthems (as much as possible) fall under the theme of the day, as found in the Psalms and the lessons.

Music for Norm's retirement. [Obviously, very well thought out. How did you plan Norm's retirement, last Sunday?] Well, he basically did that. Fr. Norm, Greg Pottie and I got together over lunch to discuss the service. I said: "Norm, I want you to tell me what your favorite hymns are." So he wrote a list, which included every one of those that we sang, plus a few others. We couldn't do them all, you know. But I was very pleased with what he chose. [Wonderful! It worked very nicely.] He invited Frances Young, our long-time soprano soloist, to come and sing, because he enjoyed all the years that she was here. [...] Interesting thing: I had chosen a different prelude. I was going to do a Vaughan Williams piece, and just about 3 days before the bulletin was going to be printed, he said "can I throw something at you at the last minute?" I said sure. "Craig [his son] says that he thinks that the Toccata and Fugue in D minor by Bach is the greatest piece in the world, and he just loves it—anyway can you get that in?" I said: "Sure, I've been playing that all my life; that's no problem. Normally, I would play that as a postlude but I planned on a piece for trumpet and organ for the postlude. Why don't I play that for a prelude since it's a big festive occasion?" But I was really floored, because Craig has never said one word to me about the music, [and] he was always around. [But listening!] After all these years, he said he loved that piece, and I was very happy about that.

St. Alban's Choir. [It was a very wonderful service—music not the least of it. Tell me about the St. Alban's Choir: how it developed, its history, its productions, its special projects. You traveled with them, didn't you?] Yes, we took 2 tours to Europe, one in 1988 to England, France, and Belgium, ending up in Amsterdam. That time we went with St. Cyril's Choir (it's a Roman Catholic choir), where my friend, Bill Beck is the organist-director. And then we went again in 1998, 10 years later, to Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia (Prague). That was with another group, not a church group, the Mansfield Chamber Singers. Those were the 2 tours that we took. But the choir: We've had about 40 members ever since I came here, maybe 30 the first half-year. I set up a

music series right off the bat. We did Brahms' *Requiem*, with orchestra. I attracted people that wanted to sing that kind of thing, as well as things we sing on Sunday morning. [...] We've never paid more than the 4 soloists. I'm proud of the fact that we get the kind of results that we do with 98 % volunteers. Because other parishes (All Saints Beverly Hills, All Saints Pasadena, and others have a lot of paid—if not all, most. [How many in the choir are also parishioners?]) 85% maybe. [So it's part of their devotional practice, to sing in the choir?] That too. Almost all of them go to communion. Quite a few of them have taken instruction. They became Episcopalian, [but] were not when they joined the choir.

Joys and Griefs. [What have you enjoyed most about your time here? What have been some of your greatest joys and your greatest griefs?] Well, I think I enjoy every Sunday morning. The Eucharist, the liturgy that we do is very exciting and meaningful to me. Of course, I always look forward to the midnight mass at Christmas, and I love the Easter services. I'm very fond of Palm Sunday. I think that's a wonderfully varied service, where we start with the joyous blessing of the Palms and the palm procession. And suddenly there you are, with the stark contrast of the Passion story. The *concerts*—that's my life. Conducting an orchestra, chorus, soloists, organ, is what I wanted to do all my life. [...] I find joy in having a chance to practice and give my organ recitals and all that. Grief? Flaky choir members [...] I'm only joking, because they're amazingly dedicated people! [You're a harsh task master!] I know that. Yes I am. I am and they know that, and I need to lighten up more than I do. I know that is my biggest problem. I get too serious! But I truly love the choir. I love working with them to try to mold every piece we sing into a work of art worthy of offering to God.

The sad thing to me is the fact that parishioners are very generous, very supportive, and donate to our annual fundraiser (that is going on right now)—but so many do not seem to come to the concerts for some strange reason, as much as I would like. Here we do a Verdi *Requiem*, a big mass of Haydn, or one of the Passions of Bach, and a disappointingly small number of parishioners come out to hear us. I don't know why. It does grieve me and I don't know what to do to get them to come. When they do come, I

feel glad. [I think driving is one of the problems, you know. I can walk here, but I'm one of the few.] Probably, and the fact that if they're here in the morning and have to come back in the afternoon [...] But even if some don't come, that doesn't detract from my feeling of joy and satisfaction from the fact that many, many people do come and enjoy it. To me it's part of our parish's mission in greater Los Angeles.

Music as Outreach. [Do you feel that it actually helps St. Albans as well? Does it bring people in? I mean: besides the concerts, in contributing to St. Albans?] I don't know of any way to determine how many might come and become a permanent part of St. Alban's, but to me, whether they do or not, it's what they get out of being here that's crucial. And what is a church for if not to inspire people? 98% of what we do is sacred music and we are ministering to people. They keep coming back, so they must be getting something out of it. Maybe most don't join the parish as permanent members, but some of them do.

[Do you have any regrets, things you might have done differently, looking back?] No, I can't think of anything. [Well done. Have you worked well with the rectors over the years—actually there have only been two.] Parker Jones and I had a fine relationship. Norm and I have always gotten along really well. Norm was wonderful to work with because he was never overbearing in any way and has appreciated what we do.

Weaknesses and Strengths of St. Alban's. [What do you feel are some of the weaknesses and strengths of St. Albans, in general? I'm not talking to you now as a music director but as a parishioner.] Well, I've been very pleased to see the young families coming in. There was a period when the church school was pretty skimpy and I think it's a lot better than it was 5, 6, 7 years ago even. That's great, because if you don't have young families and children, it's pretty sad. I think that the perennial problem is what do you do after they go through Sunday school and get to high school and college age and just sort of drop? I don't know what the answer is. This is not just St. Alban's problem but a problem of the Church. How do you keep people engaged through the young adult period? Some may come back later on, but there is that hiatus. [They're

doing other things in their lives, during the college years.] There's always that "I had church pushed down my throat all the time I was growing up, and I just don't want to go now." [No guarantees, I suppose.]

UCLA Ministry. But as I say, I don't know that that is a fault of the parish. I think that ministering to the university is terribly important. We need a higher profile with UCLA than we have. [How do you think that might develop?] Winnie was a good help in that and hopefully her successor will be too. But on the other hand, we don't seem to have huge numbers of students coming over...I would love to see more faculty members involved here as well. [We usually have quite a few people connected with UCLA.] Well, we do, we do. I think more now than we used to. But one always wishes...

Interviewed on October 1, 2002
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[transcribed by Franca Del Giudice Poldi; edited by Luisa Del Giudice & James Vail]

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