

AGO MEMBER SURVEY REPORT ON DEMOGRAPHICS, COMMUNICATIONS, AND TRAINING

The First of Three Reports from the Marketing Committee

ABOUT THE SURVEY

In October 2014, the Marketing Committee conducted a survey of *Past, Present, and Future Members* of the AGO. The purpose of the survey was to help Guild leadership better understand the makeup of the membership and the professional challenges it faces. With this kind of information, we hope the Guild can more effectively tailor its programming and services to meet the needs of its 16,000 members.

There were 5,692 respondents to the survey, including 4,788 current members and 656 former members. Members from 291 out of 303 chapters participated, in addition to 151 independent members. Ninety-one chapters had participation levels of 40% or above. Among chapters with fewer than 20 members, the Chippewa Valley chapter took the lead with seven out of its nine members (80%) participating. Among chapters with 20–99 members, the Youngstown chapter took the lead with 31 out of 47 members (66%) participating. Among chapters with more than 100 members, the Northern Virginia chapter took the lead with 62 out of 130 members (47%) participating in the survey. This extremely large and diverse sample, representing almost a third of current membership, makes it possible to generalize confidently from the survey sample to the entire AGO membership.

The Marketing Committee has begun the process of sharing its survey analysis with committees overseeing all areas of Guild activity. In addition to basic demographic data, the analysis includes data on participation in chapter meetings, conventions and certification, communications, training as an organist, employment, and service playing. A remarkably detailed and useful view of the AGO membership is emerging from our data.

The Marketing Committee’s full 102-page report may be viewed at <http://www.ago-past-present-future-member-profile>, or by simply searching for *Member Survey* at [Agohq.org](http://Agohq.org), or by using the QR code found at the end of this article. In this and

subsequent issues of THE AMERICAN ORGANIST, the committee will summarize the report’s findings. The present report begins with demographic data on current members. It concludes with data concerning members’ levels of training as organists. In the next issue of TAO, we will report on member participation in Guild activities including chapter meetings, conventions, and certification. Finally, in a third report, we will report matters pertaining to employment.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Age of Current Members

The survey’s first question asked members to indicate their birth year. Responses to this question enable the Guild for the first time to see statistical confirmation of trends that many members have been observing informally for years.

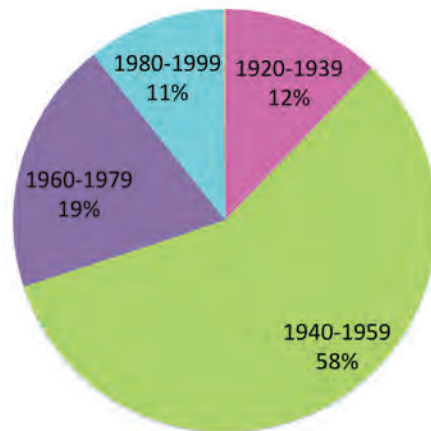
Current AGO Member Age Distribution

When we look at the overall AGO membership age distribution (see graph below), we see a precipitous decline in the number of members born between about 1955 and 1965. Members of the postwar baby boom cohort (born 1946–64) are strongly overrepresented in AGO membership. The effect of this population bulge

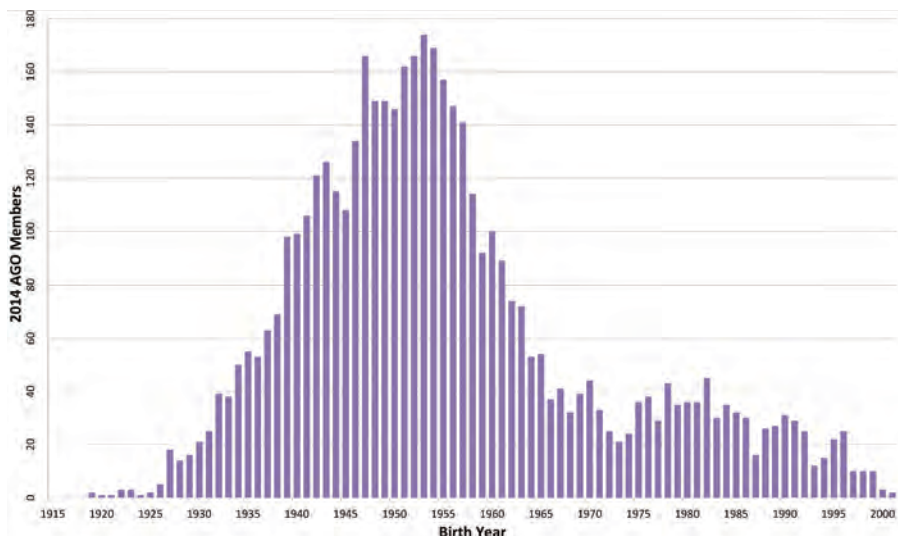
has been dubbed the pig in the python of American society. Almost every sphere of life in the United States is affected by the rise and decline of this cohort.

When the membership is examined in 20-year segments (pie chart below), it is apparent that more members were born in the years 1940–59 than in all other years combined. Members born in those two decades (currently ages 54 to 74) comprise approximately 58% of the membership. The relatively small percentage of members born during 1920–39 (12%) is not surprising. But the small percentage (19%) of members born between 1960 and 1979

Current AGO Membership in 20-Year Birthdate Segments



Current AGO Membership Age Distribution



(ages 35–54), combined with the small percentage (11%) of members born in 1980–99 (ages 15–34), points to a challenging demographic reality facing the Guild.

The snapshot above highlights the critical importance of enhancing the AGO’s value proposition to millennials and young organ students. The cohort of AGO members born after 1980 is underrepresented in the Guild compared with its baby-boomer parents’ generation. Enhancing membership benefits for young organists and increasing opportunities for young-member interaction must be high on the agenda of every Guild committee.

**Future Membership Projections**

While we don’t have a crystal ball to look into the future, we have used a statistical model based on current membership to help us understand where AGO membership may be heading. The implications for current and future AGO structure are dramatic.

The graph above (right) helps us visualize the projected change in AGO membership over the next three decades, when its outsized baby-boom cohort has aged out of the organization. In viewing these charts, total membership is represented by the total area encompassed under each of the colored lines.

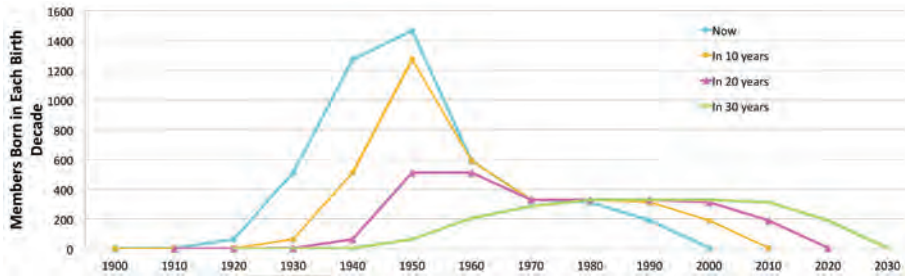
These projections are based on the assumption that current membership patterns will continue in the future. We recognize that it would be possible to make other assumptions. It is conceivable, for example, that, in coming years, young and middle-aged organists could begin joining the Guild at a much higher rate. Employing this more bullish assumption could change the projection of the number of members born *after* 1960. It is worth noting, however, that in using the present statistical model, we were able to retroject 2004 membership numbers to a high level of accuracy—within 1% of the historical data.

In absolute numbers, with October 2014 membership at 16,000, our model projects:

- 12,000 members in 2024
- 8,700 members in 2034
- 6,900 members in 2044

These projections suggest that the American Guild of Organists will undergo significant changes in the coming decades. Innovation in all areas will be required to attract organists not persuaded by the

Current and Projected AGO Membership



Guild’s current value proposition. By increasing and diversifying its offerings with an eye to the diversity of its membership (as reflected in the full survey report), the Guild can increase its relevance to 21st-century organists.

**Gender**

Overall, Guild membership is 60% male and 40% female, varying significantly from the U.S. population as a whole, which is 51% female and 49% male. It is interesting and counterintuitive that the gender imbalance is most pronounced among the younger members. Looking at members in terms of the decade in which they were born, we see the following gender ratios:

Member Birth Decade	% Male	% Female
1920s . . . . .	54 . . .	46
1930s . . . . .	47 . . .	53
1940s . . . . .	53 . . .	47
1950s . . . . .	59 . . .	41
1960s . . . . .	69 . . .	31
1970s . . . . .	74 . . .	26
1980s . . . . .	74 . . .	26
1990s . . . . .	72 . . .	28

**Ethnicity**

Ninety-four percent of members self-identified as white/Caucasian. Three percent preferred not to answer. Two percent identified as Asian/Pacific Islanders. One percent identified as black/African-American. The highest *percentage* of nonwhite respondents was found among the youngest members of the Guild, with 10% of members born after 1970 self-identifying as nonwhite. Nevertheless, because of the disproportionately large number of members born in the 1950s, the

largest *number* of nonwhite members was born in that decade.

**Proximity to Educational Resources and Organ Recitals**

Sixty-six percent of members report living less than 19 miles from an institution of higher education where organ is taught. An identical 66% of members report living less than 19 miles from a venue where they could regularly expect to hear concert organists in recital. Nineteen percent reported living 20–49 miles from these resources. Eight percent reported living 50–99 miles from these resources. Four percent live 100 or more miles from these resources.

More than 10% of members in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, Southeast, and Great Lakes regions live more than 50 miles away from these resources. More than 15% of members in the North Central, Southwest, and West regions live more than 50 miles from such resources.

**Language**

Asking members what language they regularly speak at home revealed that English is the primary language of 98% of members. The second and third most heavily represented languages were German and French, with 0.4% and 0.2%, respectively.

**COMMUNICATIONS**

The present survey was administered solely online and was thus biased to members with Internet access. Forty percent of respondents indicated that they receive most of their news from TV and radio. Thirty-nine percent of respondents indicate that they receive most of their news from the Internet. A significantly smaller percentage, 21%, receives most of their news from print media. Not surprisingly, younger members (born in the 1980s and 1990s) receive about 80% of their news from the Internet. These patterns of me-

dia usage among young members pose a challenge to the AGO, which relies heavily on print media to communicate with its members.

Respondents of all ages report ready access to electronic technology and substantial daily time online. Sixty-eight percent of members report owning a smartphone. Fifty percent of members born in the 1980s report that they connect online most frequently with a smartphone. These statistics can help leadership visualize how members are receiving communications from the AGO so they can develop materials appropriate to the emerging formats.

Forty-eight percent of all respondents indicated that they spend between two to three hours online each day. When we looked at the correlation between hours spent online and member age, we found, not surprisingly, that older and younger members are highly divergent in their patterns of Internet usage. Forty-three percent of members born in the 1980s report spending four or more hours a day online.

While 23% of members report that they never use social media, 48% report logging onto social media at least once a day. When we look at these usage patterns by birth decade, we see that 60% of members born after 1980 report logging into social media two or three times a day. The importance of social media to young members may be difficult for middle-aged Guild leadership to fully grasp.

## TRAINING AS AN ORGANIST

The survey asked respondents to characterize their training as an organist by choosing one of the following options: *no training, largely self-taught, a few private lessons, many private lessons, bachelor's degree in organ, master's degree in organ, or*

*doctorate in organ.*

One of the most surprising findings to come out of the survey was the 31% of members who describe their training as *many private lessons* (chart below).

These members constitute the largest single category in terms of level of training. The second most frequent category was master's degree, with 25% of respondents selecting that description. Thus, the distribution of respondents is heavily weighted on either end of the level-of-training continuum.

When we aggregate all those members with less than a bachelor's degree in organ and all those members with a bachelor's degree or more in organ, we see that members who do not hold a degree in organ comprise 47% of the membership while those with a bachelor's degree or more comprise 52% of the membership. It is noteworthy that these two groups are approximately equal in size. This dichotomous population will obviously have very different needs and interests. One-size-fits-all approaches to Guild programs and services will run the risk of not matching the needs of half of the membership.

Reflecting on the very different levels of training of the members of the AGO, councillors may wish to consider fashioning multitrack approaches. In particular, the relevance of the AGO's mainstay certification programs as currently structured should be examined in the light of these findings. How could the program be tailored to meet the needs of members who do not hold degrees in organ, mindful that they comprise about half of Guild membership?

## SUMMARY

The shifting demographic patterns,

changing communications modalities, and diverse levels of training as organists revealed in the survey present the American Guild of Organists with considerable challenges.

No single initiative can respond to these challenges. No single committee can respond to them alone. Rather, every officer, member and staff member of the AGO will be challenged to *innovate* to find new, more effective, more satisfying ways to deliver benefits to members and prospective members of all ages. The era when deans and councillors could simply follow the playbooks handed down by their predecessors is past.

We believe leaders at all levels must be emboldened to try something new, recognizing that the possible danger of doing so is overshadowed by the certain danger of *not* doing anything new. We hope that insights gleaned from the survey will assist the Guild in increasing and diversifying the benefits of AGO membership, ensuring the future health of the organization.

AGO MARKETING COMMITTEE

Preston Dibble, Chair

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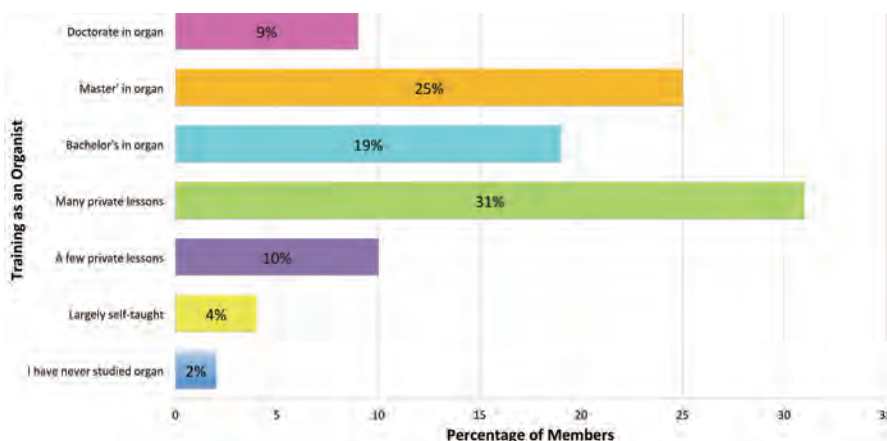
Communications

Sarah F. Harbison, Survey Advisor



*The Marketing Committee invites your comments at [marketing@agohq.org](mailto:marketing@agohq.org).*

Current AGO Membership's Training as an Organist



The survey has been conducted under the pro bono supervision of Sarah F. Harbison. She recently retired as senior advisor for research and evaluation in the Office of Population and Reproductive Health, Global Health Bureau, USAID, where she provided leadership and technical assistance to the design of programmatic research and project evaluation. Harbison has worked internationally for more than 30 years in various research and evaluation-related capacities.