



AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS

Chapter Leadership News

November 2022

## A Seat at the Table for Everyone

Dear Chapter Leaders,

In October, I had the opportunity, via Zoom, to join several deans' meetings in the Great Lakes region and to participate in many chapter board meetings. One issue that everyone discussed was the challenge of promoting attendance at chapter programs among members who are newcomers to the organ, serve as substitute organists, or do not have an AGO certification. How do we get past that mindset? I like to believe, as I'm sure you do, that the days of elitism have passed, and that every chapter member will be welcomed and respected, regardless of their skill level. Rumor has it, however, that there are still some chapters whose members exhibit a sense of elitism, which is antithetical to the mission and vision of the Guild. Did you know that our 2019 member survey showed that over 50 percent of our members were not serving as full-time organists? If these members are the majority, then why would anyone not want to make them feel respected and welcomed?

In September, I had the honor of serving as the keynote speaker for the San Diego chapter's 100th anniversary. In dean Rodney Girvin's inspirational welcome speech, he talked a lot about inclusion and cited his own experience when he first joined the chapter. He was concerned that he might not "fit in," because at that time he was a pianist. He shared his membership journey, including the encouragement and mentoring he received from fellow members when he made the decision to study the organ. It was a transformational experience that ultimately changed his life and career. He told the audience that, no matter where they are in their careers, whether they were organists or organ lovers, they need to know that there is a place for them within the life of the San Diego chapter. I vividly remember Arreon Harley-Emerson's powerful presentation at Leadership 2022, during which he said that it is not enough to let someone know that there is a place for them at the table—you must invite them to *join* the table. During the Year of the Young Organist, so many of you successfully included young organists in events, demonstrating how much you valued their membership. Let's make this the Year of Inclusivity by inviting everyone to have a seat at the table.


This issue of **Chapter Leadership News** will cover the following:

- ✓ Leadership Profile: Brenda Weiser, CAGO, Dean, Potomac (Md.) Chapter
- ✓ North Carolina's Statewide AGO Meeting with the American Theatre Organ Society
- ✓ Upcoming Online Programs
- ✓ Boston AGO Chapter's Evening Self-Care Retreat
- ✓ New AGO Chapters
- ✓ Columbia (N.C.) Chapter's 90th Anniversary
- ✓ Chapter Visits



Elizabeth George  
Chief Membership Officer

## Profile of the Month: Brenda J. Weiser, CAGO, Dean, Potomac (Md.) Chapter

A portrait of Brenda J. Weiser, a woman with short, straight, light grey hair and bangs. She is smiling slightly and looking directly at the camera. She is wearing a dark purple or black top. The background is a blurred green foliage.

**What's sitting on my desk right now** (it's actually a repurposed dining room table) are notes and minutes from the last two chapter meetings, a stack of TAOs, an organ music pile for upcoming substituting jobs, past bulletins from the substituting jobs that I have had, and notes and thoughts for upcoming chapter events.

**If I weren't doing this, I'd be** at the gym, cycling, traveling, taking long walks, and being with the grand girls.

**When I'm not at work:** Please refer to the first two questions, as I'm retired.

**The best advice I ever got:** When the job becomes a chore or no longer feeds you, then it is time to move on. Yes, there are times of tedium in every position, but when that becomes the status quo, your inner flame will flicker and eventually die if you don't move on. There's a time to stay and there's a time to go.

**What keeps me motivated serving as chapter dean:** I am an organizer, and therefore I enjoy overseeing the work of the executive committee, which instigates and manifests interesting programs and venues that serve the organ population. I also enjoy the contact with others, and the collegiality that ensues when we gather with a common cause. I really do enjoy encouraging newer and not-so-new organists to keep growing and doing what they do best: inspiring others with their music.

## North Carolina's Statewide Meeting of the American Guild of Organists and the American Theatre Organ Society

Mark Andersen, district convener and dean of the Central North Carolina chapter, shared the following.



On Sunday, October 2, at 3:00 p.m., North Carolina's first-ever statewide meeting of the American Guild of Organists and the American Theater Organ Society was held at the Carolina Theater in Greensboro, N.C. Leaders from the Central North Carolina, Durham–Chapel Hill, Greensboro, Charlotte, Sandhills, and East Carolina AGO Chapters were in attendance. Bill Webber from the Louisville, Ky., chapter (who was in town for a few days) was invited to join the group as well. Mac Abernathy, a member of the Carolina Theater's organ maintenance crew, welcomed everyone and then included me in a brief talk on the differences between theater organs and classical organs. Next, we showed a twelve-minute silent movie—*Mighty Like a Moose*—with me improvising at the organ.



It was a very successful meeting of minds and talent, and I had the honor of installing four new officers of the Greensboro chapter. The meeting was received well by all, and everyone agreed that they wanted to participate in more joint chapter events. The bonus was that we were successful in convincing a few new members from ATOS to join the AGO!



## Monday, November 14, 7-8 pm ET Chapter Leadership Discussion: What's Keeping You Up at Night?

Let's face it, just about everyone who is currently serving in a leadership position, has had challenges adapting to the "new normal." The purpose of this open forum is for participants to share pain points, frustrations working with board members and any other issues that are impacting their ability to be a successful leader. We will not be recording this discussion and we encourage you to submit questions ahead of time (these can be anonymous) prior to the webinar. This discussion, moderated by AGO Councillor for Membership, Vicki Schaeffer, will include panelists from the Committee on Membership Development and Chapter Support. Please submit your questions to Vicki Schaeffer, [membership@agohq.org](mailto:membership@agohq.org) or Elizabeth George, [elizabeth.george@agohq.org](mailto:elizabeth.george@agohq.org). Please register [here](#).



## Chapter Leader Brown Bag Lunch Wednesday, November 16, 1-5 pm ET Growing and Retaining Your Membership

Come lunch, munch, and crunch with other chapter leaders during *your* lunch hour. This Zoom session will last four hours, so that no matter what time zone you are in, you can join fellow chapter leaders in the same time zone. Example: Chapter officers on Central time can log in at noon, those on Eastern time can join at 1:00 p.m., etc. Four Zoom rooms will be set up for you to join automatically. No registration is needed. Just show up with your thinking caps on, and don't be afraid to share some wild, hairy, and audacious ideas with one another! I'll be popping in and out to make sure everything is going smoothly. Join [here](#).



## Evening Self-Care Retreat

*Boston chapter sub-dean Catherine Meyer shared the following.*

In May 2019, Boston's Handel and Haydn Society had just finished playing Mozart's *Masonic Funeral Music* when—immediately following the last note—a young boy's voice could be heard exclaiming "Wow!" in that still space. Because the hall was so quiet, the boy's reaction was heard by everyone, causing the audience and ensemble to erupt into laughter and applause. Artistic director Harry Christophers told the *Boston Globe* that

“these sorts of moments . . . are just electrifying for us, and actually just make us realize exactly what we’re here doing.”

Sometimes we have to be absolutely still in order to truly experience life’s most powerful moments. We musicians understand the poignancy of silence while we are creating music; taking a moment for a rest is nothing new to us. Arthur Schnabel said, “The notes I handle no better than many pianists. But the pauses between the notes—ah!—that is where the art resides.” We teach our students that the rests are just as important as the notes. Silence gives us time to digest the sound, and without it, our listeners don’t have the chance to prepare themselves for more.

So why is it so hard for us to follow our own advice when it comes to real life? There are always more rehearsals to prepare for, emails to send, errands to run, calls to make. Attempting to return to a “normal life” while still in the midst of a pandemic has only exacerbated this problem. To-do lists are longer. Employers expect more. We are busier than ever, with no end in sight. But where is our rest?

What tools can we share to help reduce stress and create community? How can we be supportive in practical and logistical ways? What are concrete things we can do to help our colleagues find more meaning in their work? How can we create moments of quiet together so we can hear the “wow” in our daily lives? I took these questions to the Boston AGO Chapter’s program committee, which I chair, with the idea to hold an Evening Retreat of Self-Care for Liturgical Musicians.

Our retreat began at 7:00 on a warm Sunday evening in October, in the intimate chapel of a large and beautiful Episcopal church just north of Boston. After spending a few minutes greeting one another, our chaplain, Rev. Brett Johnson, called us together with a quote from Parker Palmer: “Self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to share with others.” He reminded us that providing care for ourselves first is essential, as it prepares us to extend our hands to others. He then led us through a centering meditation where we focused on our breath, making time for stillness and quiet.

Janet Kessenich, owner of Spiral Energies and author of *Music Lessons for the Spirit*, spoke from a chapter in her book about the contrast between sound and silence. “As we walk in the cadence of life, how do we insert rest and repose?” Janet pulled out her tuning forks, struck them, and rested them on each of our shoulders so we could hear and feel their vibrational power. Participants commented on how quickly they felt transformed by the vibrations, which brought a sense of calm and groundedness.

Karen Aalto, a musician and daily meditator who is in the discernment process for the priesthood, led the group through a walking meditation. In just five steps, with each foot slowly and gently placed in front of the other, we were asked to focus on each subtle aspect of the step: how it feels to contact the ground, how the foot rolls through to the toe, shifting the weight of the body as it moves forward. This simple meditation can reduce stress, improve digestion and circulation, prepare the body for quality sleep, and be done anytime, anywhere. People were then invited to sit or lie down in a comfortable position, as I began to play my set of crystal bowls. Each bowl is tuned to a specific vibrational frequency, corresponding to one of the seven main chakras (energy



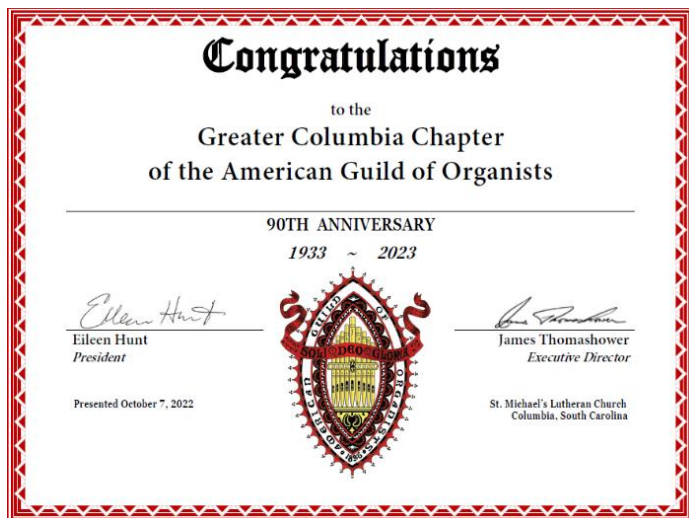
centers) in the body and is rung by rubbing a suede stick around the outside of the bowl. In this practice, typically called a “sound bath,” the bowls create a resonance that “washes” over the body, inviting a state of mind filled with peacefulness and deep relaxation. Popular in many yoga studios, sound baths seek to balance our physical, emotional, and mental systems, restoring a sense of harmony and rejuvenating the spirit.

Rev. Johnson ended the retreat with the well-known “Be Still and Know” centering prayer, where the words from Psalm 46 are repeated slowly in five consecutively diminishing sentences: “Be still and know that I am God . . . Be still and know that I am . . . Be still and know . . . Be still . . . Be.” At the conclusion of this prayer, everyone was invited to stay in their quiet space for a few moments, allowing themselves to return to a normal state of consciousness before reemerging into conversation. We all need occasional “wow” moments to remember why we do what we do, and to bring us the peace of mind necessary to continue doing our work in the world. I hope to see more chapters offer opportunities like this—to simply slow down and enjoy the power of rest.

## We Welcome Two New AGO Chapters

It is with great pleasure that I announce the formation of two new chapters in the Southwest region. Members of the soon-to-be-disbanded North Louisiana chapter were granted the formation of the **Arklatex** chapter. Its territory, while centered in Shreveport in northern Louisiana, will expand into the southernmost part of Arkansas and far eastern Texas.

We also want to welcome the **Permian Basin/Concho Valley Chapter**. Members include those from the disbanded Midland chapter, as well as those located in outlying areas such as San Angelo, which is located along the Concho River in west Texas. Many thanks to Southwest regional councillor Sheryl Sebo and district convener Louellen Meyer for their hard work and support in the formation of these new chapters!



The AGO wishes to congratulate the Greater Columbia (S.C.) chapter on their 90th anniversary!

## Chapter Visits



### London (Conn.) Officer Installation October 2, 2022

Phylicia Ross, manager of member engagement and chapter support, had the pleasure of attending the luncheon and officer installation of the New London AGO Chapter, which took place at St. John's Episcopal Church in Niantic, Conn., on October 2. The event also included performances by Roberta

Bitgood Scholarship winners Katy King, Stephen Johnson, and Stephen Gamboa-Diaz.

### Trains, Planes, and Automobiles September 19–23

An invitation to attend the 100th anniversary of the San Diego chapter, planned for September 19, prompted me to think about scheduling a road trip up the coast of California, with the intention of visiting as many chapters as possible.

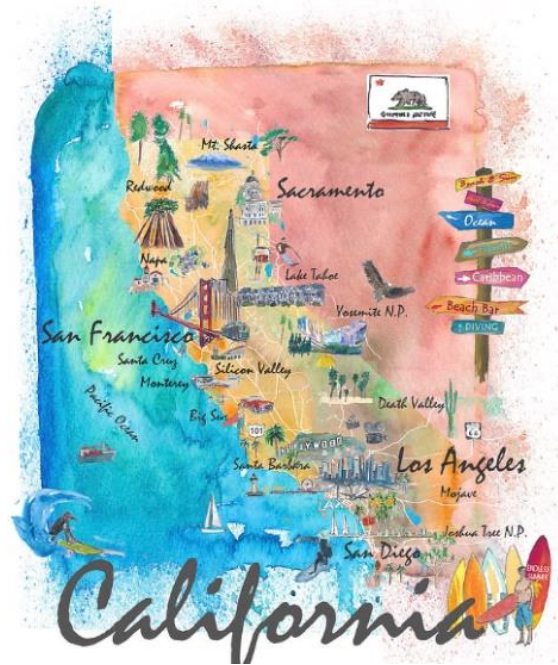
#### Day 1: San Diego

The week started off on a high note (no pun intended), when I had the pleasure of serving as keynote speaker at San Diego's very special anniversary celebration. It truly was a wonderful night, full of testimonies by chapter leaders sharing what they found special about being a member of the chapter, and it included the dedication of a new organ that was donated by the family of a beloved past member.

There were plenty of cheers, tears, and toasts throughout the evening. I want to thank the entire board for making me feel so welcomed!



Pictured left to right are Rodney Girven, dean; Nelson Dodge, West regional councillor; Elizabeth George; Christopher Cook, former dean; and Leslie Wolf Robb, councillor for communications





### Day 2: Los Angeles

Picture left to right are Nelson Dodge, past dean and west regional councillor; Scott Anderson, sub-dean; Elizabeth George; and Kevin Cartwright, dean

I boarded Amtrak's Surfliner train, which follows the California coastline north, to visit with the Los Angeles chapter. It was such a pleasure to (finally) meet with some of the executive leadership of this chapter. We discussed their upcoming year of programs and podcasts, and they shared some interesting information about the docent training for the Orgelkids kit that they share with the Orange County chapter.

### Day 3: San Francisco



I flew from Burbank to San Francisco. Due to a convention that booked every single hotel room in San Francisco, I ended up staying 20 miles south of the city in San Mateo. It was a bit of a hike up to the Mission District (thank you, Uber) to meet with James Parrish Smith and Daniel Gonzalez—dean and sub-dean of the San Francisco chapter—but it was well worth the trip! Over dinner, James and Daniel shared that one of their goals for this year was for the chapter to be perceived as being more inclusive. They also hoped to collaborate with the San Jose and Palo Alto/Peninsula chapters south of them. For the past two years, this chapter has produced a

wonderful recital honoring Black History Month, and I am looking forward to what they are planning for their February 2023 event. Pictured, left to right, are James Parrish Smith, Elizabeth George, and Daniel Gonzalez. And yes, we did share an adult beverage.

### Day 4: Palo Alto

One of the silver linings of staying in San Mateo was the opportunity to take the Caltrain south to Palo Alto to meet with Elisabeth Pintar, dean of the San Jose chapter, and Rani Fischer, dean of the Palo Alto/Peninsula chapter. We met on the campus of Stanford, which is really impressive. These two women shared that their chapters have been extremely successful through collaborating on programs and with other arts organizations. They are looking forward to partnering with the San Francisco chapter on future events.





Elisabeth Pintar, dean, San Jose chapter



Rani Fischer, dean, Palo Alto/Peninsula chapter

### **Last Stop: Healdsburg**

My husband joined me in San Francisco, and we headed north to Sonoma, where the Redwood Empire chapter is located. Somehow, I had missed meeting dean Paul Blanchard when he attended the Seattle Convention, so it was wonderful to meet him and the chapter's sub-dean, Janice Timm Hawthorne. Paul plays at a church in Healdsburg, but Janice is located farther north (and nearer the Redwoods) in Ukiah, where she is a choral conductor for Mendocino College. While this chapter is considered "extra small," they stay active, and members enjoy meeting with one another and planning organ crawls.



Paul Blanchard



Janice Timm Hawthorne

I truly feel blessed to have had the opportunity to spend time with these dedicated, passionate, and creative California chapter leaders, who contribute their time and talents in serving their members and the national organization. You are what makes the AGO so very special. Thank you for your leadership and service!

After all of those trains, planes, and automobiles, I decided to take a few days of vacation, returning to one of my absolute favorite parts of the country, touring many vineyards and tasting some extraordinary wines in Sonoma County and the Napa Valley.



Cheers!