

MUSINGS: WHAT'S IT WORTH TO YOU?



Since many of us reevaluate our budgets and financial allocations at the end of the year, I thought this would be a good opportunity to raise a subject suggested by my Denver colleague Joyce Shupe Kull (former national councillor for education). It happens to relate to a report I mentioned last month: the membership survey conducted by the AGO Marketing Committee and published in the April–June

2015 issues of TAO. In that report, the committee noted that the main reason cited for nonrenewal by lapsed members was that “the cost of membership outweighed its benefits.” I urge you to reread the committee’s recommendations for improving the “perceived value” of membership, some of which echo proposals made by our Long-Range Planning Task Force in 2010. But the question I want to examine here is this: What is an AGO membership actually worth?

One of the primary benefits is a subscription to this magazine (including both print and online versions), currently valued at \$65 per year in the United States. If you’re a student, therefore, you’ve already more than covered the \$40 cost of your membership; if you’re a “special” member by reason of age or disability, you’ve practically made up the \$75 cost. But if you are paying \$100 for a regular voting membership, is it still cost-effective? Let’s look at some of the other benefits of membership, many listed in a handy table on the AGO website (which, by the way, is a free resource with nearly 300 pages of content).

If you want to attend a regional or national convention and are not an AGO member, your regular registration fee will be \$100 higher; in other words, a member receives a discount equivalent to the cost of membership. Similarly, if you want to take an examination for AGO certification and are not a member, you pay a \$100 surcharge. A member also receives a 10% discount on educational resources and other items purchased from the AGO store. The Long-Range Planning Task Force recommended that we pursue even more discounts for AGO members—perhaps involving vendors of recordings, books, and sheet music, or affiliated organizations that would offer reciprocal reductions in dues. Although it would be impossible to assign an exact dollar amount to these benefits—after all, the more you use, the more you would save—I can personally attest that a substantial percentage of my own organ education has come from the AGO certification process and attendance at conventions.

That doesn’t even include chapter programs, which have also provided me with a good deal of education (and entertainment).

Discounts of 10–50% over public ticket prices, or even free attendance, are commonly afforded to AGO members. Most chapters also offer newsletters and directories, whether printed or digital. Networking with other members, cited by the Marketing Committee as the single most important perceived benefit of membership, is an invaluable bonus. If you participate even at a minimal level, you can easily cover the \$39 share of your regular membership fee that goes to the chapter.

Let’s say you’re completely uninterested in continuing education or organ and choral programs, but you still want to earn income as a professional organist or church musician—unlikely as that may seem. Does the AGO have anything else to offer? As a member, you’re eligible to participate in a number of insurance plans including liability, life, disability, health, auto, and home. If you’re not already covered by an employer or spouse’s policy, that insurance could save you thousands of dollars in times of need.

The most valuable benefit of all might be the national and local job-placement services that are available only to AGO members. Perhaps you could find a position on your own, but your range of opportunities will inevitably be more limited. As a substitute organist, I can realistically attribute 100% of my organ income to AGO contacts. I know of a few nonmembers who also do substitute work, but their invitations have got to be fewer. Again, the value of this benefit could add up to thousands of dollars a year.

Thanks to the new system for national collection of dues, you can easily pay your membership fees online with a credit card, giving you the advantage of postponing the actual payment until your statement is processed. To make things even better, assuming you declare

your organ income on your tax return, your dues are deductible as a business expense. Depending on your state and your income bracket, that can reduce your actual cost by 40% or more.

If you’re planning to make a career in organ performance or sacred music—and particularly if you’re still young—the AGO’s lifetime membership has to be the greatest bargain going. For \$3,000 (which can be paid in installments), you will be free of dues, both national and chapter, for the rest of your life. (Contact AGO Headquarters for more details.) Based on my above calculations, you could make up that cost in a single year. Of course, we hope you will continue to support the Guild with additional tax-deductible donations or estate contributions as your career blossoms.

With apologies to MasterCard, I might summarize my analysis as follows: *Annual national dues: \$61. Annual chapter dues: \$39. AGO membership: priceless.*

DAVID VOGELS, CAGO

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