

*Searching for the Elusive Organist; Organist Shortage Update;  
Where Are Tomorrow's Organists?*

by Laura Toland, Potsdam, NY

Those are just a few of the articles in my ever-thickening file, clipped from recent publications. Even the general public is aware of what organists have been watching with growing concern for at least a decade. Our ranks are aging, and there aren't enough young people studying organ to replace us. The statistics are rather dire; but that is not going to be the focus of this article. Rather than looking at the vanishing organist, let's focus on where organists come from; and, how they are developed.

This organist came for a small Lutheran congregation with an active Sunday school program. The entire department would meet together to sing hymns, before splitting into separate classes. Piano students as young as 11 or 12 years were encouraged to accompany these hymns, and sight-reading ability often grew in leaps and bounds. Two of us began organ studies at age 14, at the suggestion of our organist. Six months into our lessons, our organist resigned, the congregation had the courage to use me as an "interim" which lasted through my high school years. I was also asked to lead the junior choir, and one of those young girls started organ lessons. She went on to become a fine organist, despite the huge inadequacies of her first teacher!

What began the growth of a new organist? You might say it took a village. First there was an alert organist who had an eye out for young pianists. Then there were parents who were willing to provide lessons and practice time at church. The entire congregation was also partner to the effort, in their willingness to use young musicians who were far from perfect.

As I think back to those beginning (which hooked me for life), I recall the greatest difficulty was not pedal technique, or nerves. It was finding repertoire for a beginner. While good literature was being covered through lessons, it often took weeks or months to master just one little prelude, or fugue. My lifeline during that "interim" experience was an old collection of sixty short chorale preludes. It was played cover to cover many times, and they probably sounded pretty much alike in inexperienced hands. Those early years of study were a time of sacrifice and a little pain, for all of us. Still, an organist was launched.

Could a formula like that still be effective today? Are there still parents willing to provide for lessons? Are there promising young pianists around, and churches willing to utilize children that are less than perfect as musicians? Are children still inspired at seeing another child take on responsibility and succeed? Can an average organist give lessons if she has never taught before?

Let me tell you about Andy. I was employed as organist by a Baptist church in Huntsville, AL. Andy's grandmother was often preparing the church for a wedding while I practiced. She would bring four-year old Andy along, and he liked to move to the music. A few years later we began piano lessons. When his interest started to wane, we decided to do a lesson at the organ. The next week he came in with a gleam in his eye, and played three notes—which I recognized as the cue for the choral Amen, right on pitch. We continued to do his lessons at the organ. In no time Andy was completely comfortable with the console. He was especially adept to coupling keyboards; and would love to sneak the sforzando on when I wasn't looking.

At the time Andy began, there was no curriculum for the very young organist. We depended on some hymn and carol books that have a teacher's accompaniment included. On Sunday nights the two of us would provide a prelude, or a postlude. Having a partner gave Andy more confidence. He did very well and received much encouragement.

Other children (and their parents) started to express an interest in doing what Andy was doing. About that time, an ad appeared for the Leupold beginning organ method. I immediately

signed up to become a test teacher, and enrolled 7 young pianists, ranging in age from 7 to 11. These students felt grown-up indeed to be evaluating each of the pieces.

We all enjoyed the familiar hymns, as well as the variety of styles. The children were able to follow the registration suggestions themselves. The pieces were simple, yet sounded quite good. *Prelude* by Randolph Currie in book I (pg. 12) was the first piece Andy played by himself in church. He loved it. When pieces were too short, we might pair two together that were key related, creating our own ABA form. As the students continued to develop, we had at least one student playing a Sunday evening prelude almost every week. Each had plenty of time to learn his, or her, piece well, a great antidote for nerves. By the spring of that first teaching year, the music for our annual children's choir program was completely provided by children: preludes, postlude, and musical interludes between each graded choir presentation.

It is impossible to tell how many of these children will go on to become church organists. At the very least, they have had a positive musical experience, thanks largely to an attractive music curriculum they could handle. They will be the deacons/elders/committee chairpersons of the future. These children have already raised the awareness of their present congregation, who also found this "experiment" to be enjoyable. The most telling result: when I relocated recently, the organist search committee was charged with finding someone to carry on the training and use of young organists! The new organist is now also using the Leupold method books. We expect to see some of our students permanently on the bench.

Our local AGO chapter also found a use for this series. About 6 years ago we began offering "Pizza, Pipes, and Pedals" in conjunction with the Piano Teachers Forum. Students ranging in age from 7 to 16 were introduced to the wonders of the King of Instruments through demonstrations and videos. Most of them brought a short prepared piece to try on the organ. This program was expanded when a scholarship was created in memory of Les Johnson, one of our long-time members. Three scholarships were awarded the first year. Winners received six weeks of free summer organ lessons, plus a Leupold method book appropriate to their level. All three have continued their organ studies, and this year three more scholarships were given!

Meanwhile, up here in northern New York there is a shortage of organists. It's time to get to work...