



ORGAN SOCIETY OF QUEENSLAND INC.

Survey on Payment of Church Organists (2017)

Report to OSQ Committee

Introduction

At the OSQ Committee meeting on 1st May 2017, it was decided to consider the issue of payment of church organists. As its first move, the committee decided to survey the OSQ membership to ascertain the opinions held by members on this matter. Steven Nisbet volunteered to conduct the survey and report back to the committee.

A draft survey was drawn up and sent to Committee members for feedback. After minor modifications were made to the survey, it was sent by email to members on the OSQ email list, and posted to members not on the email list. Members were asked to respond to the survey items and send the survey back by return email. Responses were kept confidential. For those members who wished to remain anonymous, they could print the survey form, respond, and post it back. No names were recorded in the data collation process.

The survey contained items asking for members' opinions on the payment of church organists, and factors influencing such payments e.g. qualifications, skill, experience, and extent of duties (e.g. number of services and choir direction). Other items allowed respondents to nominate levels of payment for full-time and part-time positions, and fees for services of worship, weddings and funerals. Opinion was also sought on the Schedule of Fees published by the Society of Organists (Victoria) which was attached to the survey for reference.

A total of 89 surveys were sent out (76 by email & 13 by post). By 1st July, 16 survey forms were returned, being a response rate of 18% – which is not unusual for survey response rates. Although the response rate might be seen as low, the sample size is large enough for the data to be analysed and summarised, and for the results to be considered as valid.

Results

The results for each item are shown below, with response levels given to the nearest percentage.

Item 1: A large majority (75%) support the principle that organists should be paid for their services.

Disagree	Disagree slightly	Not sure	Agree	Agree strongly
0%	6%	19%	44%	31%

Points made by respondents supporting the principle include that recognition should be given to (i) the specialised skills that organists have, (ii) the professional training that many organists have undergone, and (iii) the time spent with preparation, practice, and travelling. Other comments included that (iv) organists should not be taken for granted, (v) the contribution that organists make to the worship of a congregation should be recognised, and (vi) organists are usually key members of the worship team. On the other side of the issue, it was noted that (i) some organists give their time as their contribution to the church, and (ii) some churches pay nothing because they expect organists to give their time as their contribution to the church.

Item 2: A large majority (80%) agree that payment of church organists depends on the local situation e.g. city churches compared to suburban and rural churches, and large compared to small churches.

Yes	No
80%	20%

Respondents noted that some churches find it difficult to pay their organists because of the small size or location (city, suburbs, rural areas) of the churches. However it was also noted that ministers are paid the same irrespective of the church’s size or location.

Item 3: A majority (62%) agree that payment of church organists depends on whether the position is for a full-time or part-time appointment, or being on a list of rostered organists.

Yes	No
62%	38%

It was noted (i) that time commitment should be recognised, and (ii) that, if the role includes being the choir director as well as organist, it should be a full time position.

Item 4: Opinion is equally divided on whether the payment of church organists depends on the level of organ qualifications.

Yes	No	Maybe
47%	47%	6%

On the “yes” side, it was noted that suitable qualifications were attained through proper training and hard work, and therefore warrant recognition through payment, as happens in most other jobs. On the “no” side, it was noted that qualifications don’t always guarantee an ability to do the job, as some “qualified” organists are not always good at accompanying hymns. Many noted that the ability to meet the needs of the congregation and satisfaction with performance are more important factors than qualifications.

Item 5: A large majority (78%) agree that the payment of church organists depends on the level of organ playing skill.

Yes	No	Maybe
78%	7%	14%

It was noted that a correlation between skill level and remuneration is fair, and that the skills for playing a large organ are quite different to those for a small instrument. The most important skill, however, was the ability to lead and inspire the congregation. One response offered the hope that all organists have enough skill to lead a congregation; if an organist does not have the required skills, then he/she should not be in the position.

Item 6: A narrow majority (58%) agree that the payment of church organists depends on the level of experience.

Yes	No
58%	42%

On the positive side, it was suggested that experience builds greater skills. On the negative side, many noted that talented young organists without much experience should still be encouraged.

Item 7: A majority (75%) agree that the payment of church organists depends on the number of services held per week.

Yes	No
75%	25%

Written comments included that time matters and that time is valuable; more services usually mean more preparation time. Two people included in their responses the well-known biblical quote from 1 Timothy 5:18 that “Workers are worth their pay.”

Item 8: A large majority agree that the payment of church organists depends on whether the organist also directs the choir.

Yes	No
87%	13%

Again, written comments included that time matters and that time is valuable; conducting the choir means more preparation time. Choir conducting is another skill that should be recognised through payment.

Item 9: A large majority (87%) agree that the payment of church organists depends on whether choir rehearsals are held.

Yes	No
87%	13%

Again, written comments included that time matters and that time is valuable. Hence choir rehearsal time should be recognised.

Item 10: *What levels of payment are appropriate in the following situations?*

(a) *Full-time position (\$ per annum):*

It was noted in the responses that the level of payment varies according to the local situation. Figures nominated by respondents varied from \$10,000 to \$50,000, and comments included references to the Australian minimum wage of \$36,000 (approximately), and the Australian average weekly earnings of \$61,000 (approximately).

(b) *Part-time position (\$ per annum):*

Figures nominated for a part-time position varied from \$5,000 to \$20,000, and included references to the Australian minimum wage of \$36,000.

(c) *One service (\$ per service):*

There was a great variation in the figures nominated.

Less than \$100	From \$100 to 149	From \$150 to \$200	Over \$200
30%	20%	30%	20%

Some respondents commented that the fee depends on the local situation e.g. city churches compared to suburban and rural churches, and large churches compared to small churches. Others commented that some churches expect the organist to play for no fee.

(d) *Weddings (\$ per service):*

There was a great variation in the figures nominated for wedding fees, from \$50 to \$250.

Less than \$100	From \$100 to 149	From \$150 to \$200	Over \$200
8.5%	25%	25%	41.5%

The most frequently nominated payment level was the “over \$200” category. There were comments that payment should be increased for attending rehearsals, playing challenging music, and for the late arrival of the bride.

(e) *Funerals (\$ per service):*

Again, there was a great variation in the figures nominated for funeral fees, from \$50 to \$250.

Less than \$100	From \$100 to 149	From \$150 to \$200	Over \$200
20%	20%	50%	10%

The most frequently nominated payment level was the category “from \$150 to \$200”.

Item 11: Opinions about the Schedule of Fees published by the Society of Organists (Victoria) vary, however there is general agreement with it. Some said that the Schedule is a good start and was a useful guide. However, some respondents said that it should take account of preparation time, practice time, time spent at meetings and consultations, time overseeing the condition and maintenance of the instrument, and time overseeing the choir library and choir robes, where applicable. One respondent

said that the pay rates in the Schedule are a bit low. Others said that many churches would have difficulty in applying the pay rates in their circumstances (e.g. small churches and rural churches). One respondent said it would be interesting to seek the opinion of the Musicians Union about the Schedule.

Item 12: Many respondents added further comments on the issue of payment of church organists. Most comments are supportive of the principle of paying church organists giving a variety of reasons: (i) organists are generous and reasonable and deserve due reward, (ii) getting a qualification costs money and time and effort, and should be recognised through remuneration, and (iii) organists with professional training and with professional standards of performance should be paid a living wage. By contrast, other comments include: (i) organists should offer their work as their contribution to the church, (ii) with declining attendances, churches find it difficult to pay their organists fees, (iii) some churches now have instrumental ensembles and song leaders, reducing the need for organ accompaniment of hymns, and (iv) it all depends on the church's ability to pay, especially in small and rural churches.

Discussion and implications

The survey results show that there is a general consensus that church organists deserve to be paid. There are many reasons for this, including (i) the time, effort and money put into their education, training and development, (ii) the time and effort that goes into their performance in the role as church organists, (iii) organists' high level of skills, and (iv) the positive contribution they make to the congregation's worship.

It is disappointing that some churches expect organists to play for nothing despite the organists' important role in worship, whereas ministers are not expected to preach for nothing. Further, most ministers (within denominations) are paid the same salary whether they are appointed to city, suburban or rural churches.

The Society of Organists (Victoria) has made a commendable move in publishing a Schedule of Fees to recommend to churches and organists. It is noted in the preamble to the Schedule (i) that most church leaders realise that if they want to have a decent standard of music in the church, they need to pay decent fees, and (ii) that it's fair to say that the more experienced and qualified the musician, the more he/she should be paid.

Similar comments can be made about the situation in Queensland. With declining numbers of church organists reported, it is important that a more professional attitude be taken by churches in the suburbs and rural areas as well as cities, to encourage and support high standards of music (including organ playing) which inspire congregations in their worship.

Finally, if talented music students are going to take up the organ as their primary instrument of study, there needs to be the prospect of organ-playing positions being available which pay a living wage to keep them motivated and inspired to reach their goals. The talents and efforts of such young organists will greatly benefit the whole church today and in the future.