

# PLAYING "FOR THE GLORY OF GOD ALONE"?

Glenn Edward Sadler

On the American Guild of Organist's crest, it states: "Soli Deo Gloria" ("For the Glory of God Alone"). In this exploratory article I should like to offer a brief inquiry into the membership's interpretation of this motto. I must admit from the beginning that I do not have a definitive interpretation or answer to the questions I will be posing. I only think that these are vital questions that should be faced.

For the past 50 years I have been an organist in almost all the mainline denominations and am currently playing services for two churches (Lutheran and Methodist) and have taken on the responsibility of director of music. Although I had undergraduate training in organ, I do not have an advanced degree in music (my PhD degree is in English literature; for the AB I took a double major of literature and organ and later studied organ extensively. I am not a concert organist, although I have on occasion given public concerts, usually playing selections one would play in a church service).

The main question I should like to pose for the AGO membership's consideration is: how do we, individually or nationally as a professional organization, interpret the motto on the AGO crest, "For the Glory of God Alone"? In the past several years I have become aware of a growing professionalism in church music, which is beginning, I think, to have an effect on how we conceive of ourselves as organists in the church and the role of the AGO in its mission and message to the public. I am aware that there is no easy answer to defining the relation between one's calling and one's salary. And yet, many church leaders and lay people today are beginning to question how the organist or choir director's dedication to God is related to his/her contractual demands.

There are at least two strong approaches to the question of the role of church musicians (and you can see that I am now including soloists and instrumentalists.) We are, because of our training and experience, professionals who should demand a salary equal to our talent, training, and experience. We render a service that is (most organists probably feel) worthy of fair financial compensation. Doesn't the church pay the secretary, the custodian, the treasurer (sometimes), and of course the minister, priest, or rabbi? These persons all fill professional positions within the church. (At one time, the same people who now hold these positions also had a primary job, so that they could support themselves as servants of God.)

Many of the churches for which I have played services have paid soloists and almost all offer remuneration or honorariums to guest soloists. It is expected. Many of these musicians are not members of the churches where they perform. But suppose a member of a certain church who is totally qualified and professionally trained plays for the service. Should he or she also be paid? If so, should we not pay the Sunday school teacher who, through years of experience, is equally talented and qualified and renders a dedicated service "for the glory of God alone"? Or perhaps certain members of church boards



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should be paid as well? At what point in the remuneration ladder do we stop?

Of course, we might argue, not all churches have professionally trained musicians. There are still small churches where the organist receives only public recognition for services rendered and perhaps is given a potluck supper in his or her honor. (Certainly most organists and directors of music are given public recognition on retirement, if not before.) We have, to be sure, within the membership of the AGO both "church organists" per se, concert organists, and organists who are considered both. And no matter which classification we may fall into, we do expect a competitive salary commensurate with our training and experience—or even a salary that is perhaps higher in relation to our training or experience?

Every year we as organists and choir directors negotiate for a new contract. We expect a raise in salary and a more liberal vacation and spending allowance. Many of us are sure that we have earned such financial recognition for our service and dedication. We are, after all, professionals!

Now, for the sake of posing the situation, let's turn to the other side of the issue of the rising professionalism in church music. Not all churches can afford to give their musicians what they perhaps justifiably deserve or what the AGO recommends as a fair salary. There are cases I know of where the

only paid musician in the church is the organist. All other musicians, keyboard and vocalists, offer their services for nothing. What compensation, if any, for their services should these unpaid musicians receive? Remember: some churches cannot afford to pay everyone who performs. Next question: suppose a member of a certain church who is highly talented and trained plays for his or her own church and receives no compensation, but when the same individual goes to a nearby church—perhaps in the same denomination—he/she receives an honorarium. Is this fair?

An argument against offering salaries for organists within the church could perhaps be made. I will not try to make that argument here except to suggest that it is becoming more and more difficult to find musicians within the church community who are willing to offer their services strictly "for the glory of God alone." Which brings us to the critical question: how are our dedication to "God alone" and our financial compensation related? Is there a relationship at all? Is it perhaps solely a matter of the heart and something that cannot be adequately defined? How about musicians who play or sing for services who have no apparent religious belief whatsoever and perhaps are even indifferent to the mission of the church? Should these musicians be welcomed into the music of the church because, after all, they are fully trained, talented, and perhaps can play better than the musicians in the church?

These are difficult questions indeed! I am not trying, I must repeat, to suggest that musicians in the church should not be paid. I am only suggesting that there is a dedication to God involved, as defined by the AGO's crest, that goes far beyond monetary gain or the lack of it. How do we, as church musicians, define the phrase, "For the glory of God alone" for ourselves? Are we willing (sometimes) to forego material gain so that that glory may shine forth alone? And if we are going to seek "involvement"—as President Swann suggests—in the musical community at large, how much of that involvement will mean an ever-increasing professionalism in the church, being paid for all services rendered? An increase, perhaps, to the point where the average small church will no longer be able to afford a "professional musician."

The only answer to these questions that I have been able to formulate—and it is not totally satisfying to me—is that dedication is always a matter of the heart and soul. No one but God can look into the heart of a church musician; and yet, as a national organization, we must be aware that God and Mammon both exist within the church. And as AGO members and church musicians, we must answer for ourselves if we serve for "the glory of God alone" or not.

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