



Ten Laws of Hymnal Committees

Treasure No 62: Ten Laws of Hymnal Committees by Christopher Idle: An article from Bulletin 208

Books of hymns are called hymnals. Books about hymns may be historical companions or devotional compilations. Then there are books about hymn-writers, from the popularly glossy to the academically scholarly. There are even books about hymnals which we know as surveys, guides or dictionaries. But what is in print about hymnal committees?

There is material here for massive research and a multi-volume series. Here is simply a taster of the delights lying ahead for the keen student.

Compared with some veterans of this society, my experience is scanty. I was on one such committee for ten years which seemed like a hundred; that was a major hymnal. I have chaired or have shared in some minor ones for supplements and such, sat in briefly on the proceedings of others, and (more important) listened carefully to the tales of those involved in a wide range of other books. It was partly a long train journey in the company of your editor which suggested that there could be material here for something really big. For example, are there any laws which operate in the manner of Boyle, Murphy, Parkinson and co., Regardless of the scope or the type of hymnal or its committee? I believe there are; all I shall do here is to point briefly to the ten most obvious.

Law One:

Whatever the size of the editorial committee, the main work is done by three people. This is true whether the main group consists of five, ten or fifty. If you think fifty is an exaggeration, you should visit America. The only place where this law does not apply is where the committee consists of fewer than three.

Law Two:

Between one meeting and the next, every committee is liable to change its mind, or its membership, or both. Just when the new member is starting to get the hang of the thing (and has copies of all the relevant texts, tunes, letters and memos) you find he has resigned. He? See Law Three. Or the Chairman will announce under Matters Arising (for those that keep minutes) that he has persuaded Professor So-and-So to join the group, and what an asset he will be. That is the cue for you to whisper to your neighbour, loudly enough for everyone to hear, 'Who?' The change of mind is simpler; that is when a key policy for the new book, hammered out in full committee over the past fifteen months, is reversed next time because the secretary announces that he has discovered it won't work.

Law Three:

Women sing hymns and occasionally write them; men choose them. Every committee has two meetings where it says to itself ‘We really need another woman on our group’, or possibly, ‘We really need a woman on our group’.

A noted Canadian hymn-writer (correction: *the* noted Canadian hymn-writer) once surveyed the roomful of assembled men and formally asked the chairman ‘How many women are on this committee?’ A quick check revealed that she was the only one. A momentary clearing of throats, and the work started. The reason for this trend, of course, is that most Christian women have better things to do than produce more hymn-books. They know, and the men don’t, that there are too many around as it is. Who needs people like that on a committee? Equally, no committee is likely to ask ‘Do we really need another *man* on our group?’

The work, as I said, started. What exactly is the work?

Law Four:

You may think that the committees meet to choose hymns, possibly to put them in a different order from the last lot. What they are really doing is *changing* them. Choosing is the easy part: arranging them needs a bit more skill—so we usually leave that to just one person. The big question is: Do we accept the changes made by previous hymnals A. B. or C (which are all different)? The answer is always: No, we’ll make our own, thanks.

Law Five:

The nearer the deadline gets, the more panic sets in. The group of three actual workers gets down to two, then one, and the really big decisions are made on the way to the printers five minutes before they close for the night on the last possible date, usually Christmas Eve. Most groups put the deadline back a couple of years or so; that makes no difference.

Law Six:

First find your publishers, then change them. If you don’t change them, they think you have gone stale and are a soft touch—like church architects and solicitors. If you don’t have one to start with, you become like the committee I knew that tried every one in the book and ended with a complete and brilliant hymnal that no-one would print. (The Minutes reveal an increasing faith in the God of music, then the God of guidance, then the God of hope and over-ruling, then the God of the impossible. Finally, the God of comfort who still moves in a mysterious way.)

Law Seven:

Every meeting is a battle between the words people and the music people. The only thing wrong with the words people is that they don’t understand the first thing about music. That is also the main difficulty with the music people—according to the words people. I don’t know what the music people say about the words people, and I am not sure I want to. The way to avoid conflict is to separate them into two committees from Day One; then you end up with a book where the words people don’t know, or like, a lot of the tunes. But then, nor do most of the music people, so that’s fair. At the Grand Launching, you can go up to a complete stranger and find that his name is next to yours in the credits because he was on the same committee.

Law Eight:

The day divides into three: morning, afternoon and evening. This may seem obvious; and I am not here speaking of committees that reckon it is worthwhile to gather for a mere hour or so. One such, it is said, spent the entire 55 minutes that followed the opening prayer and preceded The Grace in

fixing the date of the following meeting. The time thus spent is reduced where the committee consists of one person.

No, the serious committee meets for days at a time, normally in some luxurious and stately home containing a piano and a good cook. See Law Nine. The morning is then businesslike and efficient, the evening relaxed and creative. The crux is the afternoon. Members will either regret most of their hasty decisions of the morning session and decide on a gentler approach such as changing two more hymns by tea-time rather than twenty; or the reverse: 'We spent so much time this morning talking about the title that we really must get a move on. We are way behind our target for this stage...' and so on.

Then they either pass twelve items straight through on the nod, or they get tough and start throwing out perfectly good texts and tunes that would have sailed through at any other time. One member who doubled as an author used to see which way the afternoon wind was blowing; if it was a tough one and a text of his own came up, he would announce with furrowed and apologetic brow, 'I want to withdraw that for some further work.' Back it would come, just the same, when we were in kinder mood.

The afternoon has other problems too. In one American committee (very solemn, with members round four sides of a large table, computer in the corner) one valued contribution was made by the member who formally moved: 'Mr Chairman, I would like to propose that you wake up the two people on your left.' It was carried on a narrow vote.

Law Nine:

Expenses. Just how mean can your sponsoring group get? (This probably does not apply in the States.) The rule is that the members' life-style while in committee depends on the origin and quantity of its financial resources. When it was being paid from an apparently bottomless purse, one committee known to me would troop round the corner after a hard morning's talk and place their orders at the local Turkish restaurant with its attractive wine-list. When they changed publishers (I wonder why?) and this facility was withdrawn, it was down to Coke, crisps and the odd apple in the brief-case.

Law Ten:

The Title. You have chosen your title? Someone else thought of it first. If that was in 1814, this may not matter. If it was last year, you have a problem.

So there you are. The true art of the hymnal committee lies in knowing what church people will want to sing about five years down the line. Or, better, what clergy, organists and church treasurers will think they should be singing in five years' time. 'Is this one going to last?' we ask nervously about an older text showing signs of aging, or about today's big hit that everybody is singing... but, next week? The best answer to this question came from another hymnal committee member: 'Mr Chairman, if we could predict the future, we would be in higher demand than needing to spend our time here.'

Amen. Amen.

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