

EDITORIAL

Although the Church of Scotland Kirk Session has no automatic right to discuss the minister's choice of praise, he will on occasion consider it prudent to permit a certain degree of trespassing into his own area of responsibility.

Our Editor recalls one such occasion a few years after the appearance of the Third Edition of the Church Hymnary - 'CH3'. A considerable amount of heat was generated by certain elders bitterly complaining that the congregation were having inflicted upon them far too many hymns with unknown tunes. A careful survey of all the praise used in morning and evening services over the two previous years subsequently revealed that 90% of all the hymns sung over that period were set to tunes which were familiar to the congregation long before the new hymnary was even dreamt of. Of the remaining 10%, 9% were either taught to the congregation in a hymn practice and subsequently well used in worship, or were too simple to require to be taught.

But there was obviously a problem in the minds of some folk, even though clearly they were unable to diagnose just what it was. After much reflection it was concluded that the problem was unfamiliar combinations of tunes and words. Even if a tune is well known, many people find it difficult to sing it to a different set of words from that with which they have traditionally associated it.

The assumption is widespread that the great majority of difficulties which congregations encounter in hymn-singing centre around the mastering of new tunes. Of course a new tune is something which requires to be learnt before it can be effectively employed in worship, but often it is the impact of new words which can be the more disturbing factor, and the problem is compounded by the fact that while musical incompetence is something of which many take a chauvinistic delight in boasting, it is really people's general standard of literacy which is suspect.

Can we claim that even ministers are immune from this problem? Perhaps many of us are familiar with the situation where suddenly 'the penny drops' as we sing a hymn familiar to us from our childhood days and the precise meaning of a line or poetic image comes home for the very first time. Up to that moment we have been as clueless as the Ethiopian in his chariot!

Along with the great need for Bible-study in the Church today, there is a parallel need for 'hymn-study' . Perhaps a house group could with great profit systematically explore a selection of familiar and rich hymns, one per meeting, teasing out its poetic imagery, exploring its doctrinal content, relating it to the Scriptures, identifying its practical implications, and then concluding with corporate prayer and worship prompted by the group's shared insights.

It should be realised that if an average of 5 hymns is sung each Sunday morning, this will allow an approximate maximum of 250 per year. Many of the richest or most popular hymns deserve to be sung more often than once per year, but to sing any hymn less frequently than once per year is to run the risk that it will become insufficiently familiar to the congregation. In practice the selection of weekly praise might well be confined to a repertoire of not more than 200. Some of these 200 could eventually be dropped to make room for others, but the end result would be that the congregation would acquire a much closer acquaintance with the content of its praise, and thus experience a deepening of its worship. The singing of too many hymns at too infrequent intervals is a practice which cannot be commended.

In his own 'personal column' our President has outlined the plans for our Autumn Conference. The above editorial was composed before it was known that part of the Conference time would be devoted to the use of CH3 along similar lines! It is also interesting to note that the Conference will also be undertaking a 'where-do-we-go-from-here?' exercise. It was soon after a similar previous exercise that our editorial chair became occupied by its present incumbent. Our previous publication had incurred massive losses (losses graciously written-off by our publishers) and it was supposed at the time that the Society would have to resort to a much more low-key production, both in terms of format and content. Despite the relatively modest format, the very high quality of contributions (for which the Editor claims absolutely no credit) has been maintained. This fact is, paradoxically, a source of embarrassment to the present Editor, because he only took the job on on the understanding that his task would be primarily that of collation and circulation of whatever was sent to him by our members. But as someone with neither specialist knowledge of, nor an overwhelming enthusiasm for, liturgics, he finds himself increasingly out of his depths confronted with material which he feels ill-equipped to evaluate.

The Editor has, therefore, after much heart searching, come to the conclusion that for this, and for other intensely practical reasons, the time has come for him to hand over to a successor. He is willing to see the Society through the remainder of this year, and if that would be of help to work alongside a 'colleague and successor' in 1986. The Council will be considering this matter when it meets, and will be hoping that a suitable Editor will be found from among our number.

Perhaps this is also the time to find a new title for our publication. 'The Record' was selected because it sounded suitably modest for the kind of publication which we feared to be inevitable in the wake of 'Liturgical Review' . Quite apart from the desirability of dissociating ourselves from a certain popular daily rag, there is a need for a title which is both attractive and informative. We are a Society whose primary concern is worship, and this is a fact which must, as it were, be emblazoned upon the bows of our flagship. An appeal is, therefore, made for suggestions. We are looking for a new Editor and a new name. It is hoped that both will be found speedily.

CAP THIS

When I went up to Cambridge in 1931 the Wesleyan ministry there included an eccentric doctor of divinity. It was presumably because of his eccentricity that this learned man was relegated to the charge of some village chapels and was rarely planned to preach at Wesley Church in the town. Dr. K was also remarkable (in those days) for driving a car; perhaps he had a little private money. The story was told that on one of the few occasions when he was appointed to preach at Wesley he was smitten with doubt, during the first hymn, whether he had switched off his car engine, He said nothing, but when the hymn was ended, set the congregation to silent prayer. As soon as they had covered their eyes, he quietly went out by the side door. Sure enough, the car was ticking over. The reverend doctor slipped into the seat, at once forgot that his service was still in progress and drove home to his village. What the congregation did eventually is not recorded.

Submitted by a Council Member