

**Growing a Hymn-Loving Church:  
An Interview with Mable Stewart Boyter**



*Mable Stewart Boyter (1905–2000), church music consultant and specialist in children’s choirs and music education, served as Director of Children’s Choirs at Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta at the time of this interview. Her published teaching aids were used widely in the fields of music education and church music. She was active in leadership positions in national, state, and local church music festivals and workshops.*

(This is a conversation between the Editor of *The Hymn*, Harry Eskew, and Mable Stewart Boyter at her home in Atlanta on January 15, 1983.) Reprinted with permission from *THE HYMN* 34 (July 1984), 141–146.

**The Hymn:** Mrs. Boyter, you're known far and wide for work with children's choirs, but I understand you have a great interest in hymns. Would you tell us something about this?

**Mrs. Boyter:** Hymnology is one of the greatest subjects for adults as well as children, and I feel the great texts we have in some of our hymns are great molding agencies in the lives of children and adults. Unfortunately I find adults very reluctant to learn many new hymns. I find the opposite true of children. They love to sing hymns! The brevity of hymns is number one; they know at the end of the page that's it. The melodies and the forms of hymns also have great appeal. They like law and order though they do not realize or admit it. We study hymns and find a number of them with AABA form. This makes it easy for them to remember a melody. They're always interested in memorizing things, and like little blotters they can read through a hymn several times and almost know it from memory.

Adults sometimes have difficulty retaining new words and melodies while children learn and retain easily. Therefore we should capitalize in this ability and expose them to as many great hymn texts as possible. The hymns most of us sing as adults were learned between the ages of 7 and 12! Hence, for the sake of Christian development of children, our slogan should be—"Hymns Unlimited."

**The Hymn:** Would you comment on the hymn singing of congregations today and ways in which it could be improved?

**Mrs. Boyter:** I think all ministers and ministers of music I know are interested in improving congregational singing. But so many times we go at it in the wrong way. First we feel if we have a song leader beating the air that will make good congregational singing. That's not always effective. Hymn singing had to come from the hearts of people if it's genuine. My husband and I studied this a great deal and wondered how we could go about improving the situation and inspire people to become interested in following what we would like to do, so

we designed a program and called it “GROWING A HYMN-LOVING CHURCH,” on a five-year plan.

On starting, there were several things we knew not to do. We would not start teaching new hymns to the men and women’s Bible classes. That would spell doom to such a project to start with! They are not interested in learning anything new; they’re too tired. The alternative, we decided, would be to start with the children. Teach them the hymns and let them spread the good word to others.

**The Hymn:** Would you describe this five-year program for us?

**Mrs. Boyter:** We first had to get the ministers approval, and he was delighted. Then we published through the church paper and pulpit. Our first project was to have a “Hymn Memorizing Contest” with all children’s choir members—7–12 years old. The question came up, “Did you choose the hymns for the children to learn this first year? “ The purpose of year one was to GET PARTICIPATION on the part of the children, their parents, the Sunday School, everybody. So we insisted they learn as many hymns as possible. It made no difference where they learned them, or from what hymnbook they were chosen.

I saw to it that they learned at least 25 hymns of my choosing, during rehearsal. They were not memorized at this point but could be sung well with the hymn book. After this project was well under way, the next step was introduced. We instituted a hymn-memorizing contest. The rules were:

1. First stanza and melody sung from memory
2. Without accompaniment
3. Sung before a listening committee (composed of choir mothers)

Each child had a “Hymn Sheet” in the workbook for his/her record. We listed:

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Date sung \_\_\_\_\_

Initials of person who listened \_\_\_\_\_

Each listener also had a duplicate sheet for a permanent record, and this was collected and recorded in a special chart by the hymn Chairman.

The listeners were stationed in Sunday School rooms 15 minutes before and after rehearsal, and children were instructed to get in the shortest line and take his/her turn for singing. This slightly extended schedule avoided an extra trip to the church.

My choir of 7 and 8 year-olds learned to sing all 31 hymns of European origin in our choir year. I felt this was a great accomplishment. When they could sing them with the book, we chose 10 of which we memorized the first stanza.

Each year, some 25 hymns were chosen for learning, 15 of which were to have first stanzas memorized. Year by year their repertoire of memorized poetry and melody was expanded. In three months there was so much excitement about it we got excited ourselves. Of course we didn't expect to see very much change in the congregation's singing at this point. We were planting seeds this first year. But as it took root we moved to step two which was to get the parents at home to teach them any hymn they knew and would like the children to learn.

**The Hymn:** IN this step did the parents make the choice of the hymn?

**Mrs. Boyter:** They made the choice of any hymn from any hymn book. It could be taught by any method; participation was the important thing.

**The Hymn:** I understand that in the first year you also had a family hymn sing.

**Mrs. Boyter:** As soon as we had the interest of the family, we felt it was time to pull things together in a group effort. So, the last of April we had a family hymn sing which was publicized beginning in January. We did nothing cold. Everything had preparation. The children were taught a

number of new hymns which we wanted to introduce to the family. We didn't dare do just the new ones, but included as well the old favorites. We offered an award (a certificate) to all the one-hundred percent families. For four months we publicized through the children the ONE HOUR event from 3:30 to 4:30.

Now Sunday afternoon is not a time when fathers like to come to church for a hymn sing. We know that, and said nothing ourselves but let the children carry the message. Parents were to promise their children they would come for that ONE HOUR. I told the children that if we were in the middle of a hymn when the clock said 4:30 we'd go. So fathers who would interrupt their golf game knew it was but for one hour!

We thought perhaps we would have three or four perfect attendance families. We had 17 one-hundred percent families, including a five-week old baby! This little fellow insisted on perfect attendance from the family but that meant bringing the baby. I hadn't thought of that, so, in subsequent "Sings," anyone absent under five did not count against perfect attendance.

Interest was great. In fact, a number of fathers came up to me afterwards and said, "I didn't want to come, but I must confess, I really enjoyed it." And they were introduced to five new hymns that afternoon! But I had seen to it that these new hymns were memorized in rehearsal by the children. The parents were embarrassed not to sing when their children knew the hymns from memory. This was sort of a sneaky way to get in the back door, but it took off with wings from that time. The next year we had two family sings and from that it soared.

**The Hymn:** Did you have a particular way of motivating the children to learn these hymns?

**Mrs. Boyter:** Yes, I did. I made a great mistake the first year saying that the person memorizing the most hymns would receive an award. This was a mistake because it is not fair to compare the memorizing ability of an eleven year old with that

of a seven year old. So the next year I changed this, offering an award to the child for the most hymns learned in each age bracket.

The second year we offered an award for the most hymns played on any instrument. I wanted to utilize private lessons the children were having by channeling them into an outlet in the church. That year the little girl who won the award played 108 hymns on the clarinet! Today this person is grown, with children of her own, and continues to play for Sunday school classes from the same spiral hymnbook she won.

**The Hymn:** What was the award for the winners in the memorizing contest?

**Mrs. Boyter:** A hymnal with the child's name engraved in gold. Many mothers told me that, upon winning that hymnal, the children would even sleep with them. For a long time they wouldn't even sing from the church's hymnbook; they wanted their own book. This was good because I've always tried to teach children that, next to the Bible, the hymnbook is one of the greatest sources of spiritual inspiration.

**The Hymn:** What other projects did you have to expand the growing of a hymn-loving church?

**Mrs. Boyter:** We had a Hymn Festival sponsored by the choirs and Christian education departments. The choirs and Sunday school classes had reserved sections in the church, but the whole congregation was involved. It was a tremendous success.

Following that was a project of learning hymns of European origin. We chose 31 of these which were learned by countries. We went into a bit of history and background on these.

Following that we had a hymn study from a book I've written, *My Favorite Hymns of Praise*, published by Carl Fisher, Inc. We went into a study of the background, text, form, and melody, growing in the knowledge of hymnology as well as singing.

**The Hymn:** How many people attended the first family hymn sing?

**Mrs. Boyter:** We invited anyone who wanted to come, but very few came except family members. We had 300 to 400 in attendance which, we felt, was a great success. We had two hymn sings the next year, then went into the special project I mentioned. The European countries we chose were England, Germany, Ireland, Scotland, Italy, Wales, Poland, Switzerland, Sweden, and Norway. Some of these hymns they already knew because we wanted some old and some new. We knew that when they had an old hymn in their hearts and minds, every time they sang it would be like meeting an old friend. But we wanted to stretch them with some new ones also. From England, one of the favorite new hymns was “God Is Working His Purpose Out.” It can be effectively used as a round. The children love it and are challenged by the “round” treatment.

The question come up, “Why do you memorize only one stanza?” I feel the memory pattern of children is so marvelous that I would rather they know 100 hymn tunes with one stanza in their hearts and minds than 25 with four stanzas. When a new hymn is introduced to the congregation the man in the pew closes his book not because he cannot read the words but because he doesn’t know the tune to fit the words to. As previously stated, the period from 7 to 12 is when we learn most of the hymns we sing the rest of our lives. So my project in children’s choirs is to teach as many tunes as possible, and when a child can read, he can sing as many stanzas as printed.

**The Hymn:** How does this five year program build year by year?

**Mrs. Boyter:** The first year any hymn from any book learned anywhere was acceptable. The second year I began to choose hymns myself, 25, of which 15 were memorized. The next year 35, then 50. Then, “Hymns Unlimited” became our project title. We had the memorizing contest each year but you could not get credit for one previously sung. Playing

hymns on instruments was a big part of the development too, as you recall.

One of the most interesting experiences I had came from an eleven year old. The girl was a brilliant child, the only one from her broken home to come to church. After the third year she was so interested she took off on her own. After singing all the hymns in the denominational hymnal she knew, she went to the church library and got hymnals from other denominations. They had been taught the most important thing about hymns was the text—what it said. The melody came next. She knew just enough piano to pick out one note at a time and went through these books learning hymns. She sang 208 hymns in one year!

Years later, this same girl came up to me after a special service saying, “Mrs. Boyter, you probably don’t remember me,” and told me her name. Of course I remembered her and I was so happy to see her. She said she was a senior in college and related, “I’m still singing the hymns you taught me years ago in choir and I want you to know how much those experiences still mean to me.”

This is what I call *bread* “cast on the waters” coming back to you “battered!” This young lady was a special example of what hymnology can do in the hearts of children if it’s planted in time and nurtured.

**The Hymn:** That’s interesting from a personal standpoint. How about the congregation as a whole?

**Mrs. Boyter:** In five years a transformation had taken place in a way we did not realize. Growth had taken place in all areas of the church music, and had extended into the congregation.

One summer at the end of the fifth year a marvelous thing happened. After an eleven o’clock service a stranger came up to the minister, introduced himself as a visitor from West Virginia and said, “I thoroughly enjoyed your service, but the reason I’m saying that is I am intrigued by something. I have never heard such congregational singing in my life. Where is your organ? I never could find it.”



The minister said it was sunken in the choir loft to which the visitor replied, "It is a gorgeous instrument and I'm fascinated that you had such excellent singing. But where is your song leader? I saw no song leader. How do you account for it?"

Then the minister related what we had done with the project over the five year period, beginning with children's choirs to the family, the family to the church school, church school to the congregation, and then reaching into the community.

This climaxed the five years and my husband and I felt this one man's awareness that something special had been done to achieve that Sunday morning's experience was worth all the effort and nurture we had given to the project.

Today the same congregation is singing many of the hymns they had never heard before the family hymn sings.

There's something I forgot to mention. On Wednesday evenings, my husband, instead of having the short song services most churches have, proposed to the congregation that they learn to read hymns. Within six weeks, he said, they could learn this with fifteen minutes attention per week. He would teach them enough of the fundamentals of music that they could fend for themselves on new hymns. They agreed. Adults will try something for six weeks which they would find difficult to tolerate for six months, so the *timing* was important. After these weeks of simple instruction of basics some men told him they thought even *they* could handle a new hymn! So they experienced the educational aspect in addition to hymnology. It taught music theology, and a love of hymns.

**The Hymn:** What would you say are the main ingredients leading to the success of this program?

**Mrs. Boyter:** First, the minister and minister of music must have a vision and a sense of the need. Secondly, you need to know where you are, where you want to go, and how to get there. Then you should verbalize your plan and put it on paper, realizing that you are working not necessarily with musicians, but with all people. Then after studying, analyzing

your project, begin and stick to it with enthusiasm, patience, perseverance, and prayer. The pay off is worth all the effort when we realize what it does in the minds and hearts of people.