Hymn Dispute

John is in his fourth year of ministry and six months into his second call to a small church just outside the Bronx. The congregation is an interesting mix of older, long-time residents of this largely working class Italian Roman Catholic town and younger newcomers who commute into New York City for work. Having been advised in seminary not to make any significant changes until he had been in a church for at least six months, John kept the worship order that he had inherited from his predecessor. In general, he was comfortable with it, except for the weekly conclusion to a traditional doxology called in the bulletin the "Hymn of Dedication." Each week it was this verse from "My Country Tis of Thee":

   Our father's God to thee, author of liberty  
   To thee we sing.  
   Long may our land be bright with freedom's holy light  
   Protect us by thy might, great God our King.

John had problems with this hymn on several levels. He couldn't understand how it was a hymn of "dedication." It contained exclusive language for both people and God. And finally, he wasn't sure that a patriotic song belonged in worship every week, even if it did mention God. So at the end of that first six months, one Sunday morning the congregation arrived in worship to find this hymn eliminated from the bulletin. The service just went on after the doxology to Prayers and a Closing Hymn. Following worship, several older members confronted John with strong words about why the hymn was missing and insisted it be put back right away. They wondered who had given him permission to tamper with the worship service this way.

One of the church's deacons overheard this conversation, and asked John if he could put together a meeting to discuss this. John wanted to run the meeting, but Verlie, someone with long experience in dealing with churches, gently advised against it. John trusted Verlie and so, after some discussion of how this meeting would be structured, agreed to her plan. Verlie asked the worship committee if they would call a meeting that she would lead, and they agreed. An announcement was made the following Sunday that anyone who wanted to discuss this was invited to a special meeting.

On the night of the meeting, Verlie began by asking the older members to explain why this hymn was in the service. They told her a story about World War II, when almost every male member of the church was serving in the military. As a way to lift these soldiers, sailors and airmen up in prayer every Sunday, the then pastor decided to have this hymn sung as a hymn of dedication to those serving in the military. It became an important piece of worship each week, especially when several men were killed during the war. After the war, the hymn stayed in the service, dedicated to their memory.

Verlie then asked other people to comment on their experience of singing this every week. One very active British couple said they were really distracted from worship by the tune, which was the same as "God Save the Queen." Some younger members of the church said it reminded them of elementary school music programs and couldn't figure out why it was in the service each week. They really didn't think it had anything to do with church at all.

As John and Verlie listened to the varying opinions and the deep emotions this hymn engendered, they wondered how they could possible satisfy everyone concerning this hymn.

actual case, used with permission