

# How to Organize a Sacred Harp Convention

By Ginnie Ely

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These instructions are based on the standard traditional Sacred Harp Convention format. They are meant to apply to annual conventions, not to local regular singings. At the bottom I have included an example of the time table that I use for the New England Convention. Keep in mind that it is "Friday night and All Day Saturday". If your convention is a one day or two day convention, then you would need to work in the necessary components differently. I strongly recommend that first-time convention organizers attend an established convention first before doing your own.

## I. One year in advance:

### A. Date Selection (if date formula does not already exist):

1. A formula is needed so that all harpers nation-wide can plan to attend if they so choose and on an annual basis.
2. The dates of other conventions must be taken into consideration so that your date does not conflict with other conventions that would draw the same people you are trying to attract.
3. The date should be announced at least one year in advance so people can plan.
4. If you expect to schedule a nationally known Singing Master, he/she must be booked at least one year in advance.
5. Take into consideration any annual holidays that might fall on your formula dates. These will effect the number of people who will be available to attend and the availability of Motel space, etc.

### B. Site Selection:

1. Site selection is performed by the Locating Committee.
2. Site selection must begin at least one year in advance. Many a hall gets booked at least one year ahead.
3. Hall must be big enough to seat comfortably the number of people you expect to attend, in a hollow square, and meet whatever fire laws your state may have.
4. Hall *must* have hard walls and ceiling and floor (no carpet or acoustic tile).
5. Ceiling must not be too high. The lower the better!! Most parish hall ceilings are OK. But high vaulted cathedral ceilings must be avoided because the sound vanishes upward with the result that the parts cannot hear each other.
6. Hall needs adequate bathrooms, food facilities, handicapped access, parking, child care space (if provided). Access to public transportation is a plus.

## II. A little later:

- A. Hold a preliminary meeting nine or ten months before the convention date, with all the people who will be working on the convention. At that meeting:
  1. The Locating Committee presents a site selection report.
  2. Review all committee work needed, (See Section II-B below).
  3. Review the convention officers and their roles (see Section VI).
  4. Review publicity plan, housing plan, transportation plan, convention schedule.
  5. Set date for flyer reproduction & mailing (see Section II-C below).
- B. The concept of "committee" can be as flexible as it needs to be to get the job done. The crucial point is that someone be clearly in charge and responsible for each of these tasks. This person can then choose to work individually or to delegate or request help as seems appropriate (this often happens informally). In addition, one person can choose to head more than one of these tasks, if desired. Committee heads whose duties require them to be listed on the flyer as a contact point (see Section II-C) must be selected prior to printing of the flyer.

Committees and their duties are:

  1. Locating committee - Site selection (see Section I-B above).
  2. Publicity committee
    - Writes press releases.
    - Draws up list of places to send press releases (newspapers, magazines, radio stations, TV stations, churches, early music groups, folk music groups, etc.).
    - Researches publication deadlines so that a time table can be drawn up for sending out the press releases.
    - Sends out the press releases according to said time table.
    - Does follow-up phone calls to all places receiving press release to reinforce press release information and answer questions.
    - Contacts (when the time comes) person with the master mailing list to arrange to get the addresses printed out on labels (In New England this person is Tom Venman).
    - Plans for mass fold-and-stick party prior to mailing out the flyers using the master mailing list.
    - Mails the flyer to all the Sacred Harp Newsletters prior to their deadlines so that the flyer will be published in issues well ahead of the convention.
    - Thinks up any other bright ideas for getting the word out in a timely manner.
  3. Housing Committee -
    - Has his/her name and phone number on the flyer as contact person for housing (Section II-C).
    - Polls the local group well in advance for available beds and floor space and makes a list.

- Receives the calls and matches up the incoming singers with local singers and lets all concerned know *in advance* who is staying with whom.
  - Coordinates motel operations and provides information on motels.
4. Transportation Committee -
- Draws up map to put into the flyer.
  - Has name and phone number on the flyer for travel questions (see Section II-C).
  - Fields phone calls with travel questions.
5. Food committee -
- Works with Setup Committee for things like refreshments, Coffee and Tea urns, power requirements, etc.
  - Coordinates pot luck for dinner-on-the-grounds.
  - Works with site on kitchen access if applicable.
  - Polls the local singers to see who will cook and bring what.
  - Plans layout of tables for quick flow-through for large numbers of people. (Double-sided, multi-entry works very well.)
6. Setup Committee - may be chaired by Locating Committee Chair or by someone else.
- Recruits people to set up hall and later to take it all down.
  - Contracts for enough chairs.
  - Contracts for enough tables.
  - Other issues:
    - Extension cords (perhaps available from site)?
    - Large Coffee urns (available from site)?
    - How early can the setup crew enter hall to start setup?
    - Is there a site manager with whom all must be coordinated?
7. Child Care - if you are providing child care, someone needs to be in charge to plan activities and coordinate care-givers. This person's name and phone number goes on the flyer for questions/reservations (see Section II-C).
8. Registration Committee
- Design and print registration cards.
  - Provide name tags.
  - Provide pens for the cards registration and felt tips for the name tags.
  - Registration card must request the following data:
    - Name
    - Address
    - Will you lead (yes/no)? If "yes", boxes to check which sessions attending: Fri night, Sat morning, Sat aft.
    - Anything else you want to know.
  - During Convention, registration table should be staffed at all times. Two people are required at the beginning each day and at breaks and lunch.

- Registration table must be *set up and ready* at least one half hour before the beginning of the convention.
- 9. Arranging Committee - Takes the cards from the registration table and sorts them according to how people answered the questions on leading.
  - Need at least two people to work at a time: one to sort cards and one to call out the current leader's name as well as the next leader.
  - For a two day convention, several shifts of two people should be set up so that no one gets the whole load. This is a demanding job.
  - Take some care in arranging the order of leaders. It is your responsibility to keep the pace going. Interleave experienced leaders with beginners or "unknowns". Use your best most energetic leaders in the session right after lunch.
- C. Flier: Start drafting the flyer & soliciting art work right after the initial meeting (Section II-A). Set deadline for the completed flyer at least six months in advance so that flyers can be distributed at other conventions & elsewhere.

The flyer must contain:

1. What (Name of your convention)
2. When (Date of your convention)
3. Where (Address of site)
4. Times (start, end for each day)
5. Food (Dinner on the grounds? explain.)
6. Free, open to the public, donations collected, no experience needed, etc.
7. SH Books available? for sale?
8. Child care? (Provided? Contact phone number for reservations in advance?)
9. Transportation data (map, directions, public transport if available, contact phone number for further transportation information)
10. Contact phone number for advanced housing reservations with singers
11. Contact phone number of reserved motel(s) with prices/people in room,
12. Contact phone number for general information

### **III. Six months in advance:**

- A. Begin carrying the flyer to other conventions or mailing piles of them to major conventions so that someone else can put them out.
- B. Check publicity time schedule. Make sure press release schedule makes sense. Some publications have three to four month lead time. Make sure these are sent out. (e.g., *Yankee Magazine* needs stuff in early May to be seen in Sept.)

### **IV. Three months in advance:**

- A. Plan and hold fold-and-stick party (see "Publicity", Section II-B) to prepare the flyer for mailing using the master mailing list. If you are using a non-profit bulk mailing permit, you need to allow *at least* six weeks for delivery. In addition, people need to receive the flyer at least two to four weeks prior in order to make plans.

- B. Therefore, make sure that the flyer mailing is *at the post office* 2 months in advance of the convention!
- C. Flyers mailed to Canadian addresses must be put into envelopes and will require additional postage.
- D. Contact site and confirm:
  1. That the 350 chairs and 16 tables that you made arrangements for will actually be in the hall for setup on the right day.
  2. Begin talking about food and what to fix. If you have a kitchen, wonderful! If not, then food must be iced by the bringer or of a type that won't spoil at room temperature, or in a crock pot if plugs are available. Discuss (large) quantity.

## V. One Month in Advance

- A. Get the Registration cards printed.
- B. Buy the name tags.
- C. Housing committee should be polling membership to inventory available beds & floor space. Phone calls requesting housing will start to come in as soon as the flyers have gone out.
- D. Around one or two weeks prior, start assigning out-of-town singers to housing and notify both guests and hosts of the arrangements.
- E. Scope out the site and prepare *large* signs so that finding the place is easy. Signs are also needed for Parking and possibly Bathrooms.
- F. Is all the child care stuff and personnel ready?
- G. Plan and discuss the duties of the convention officers with the people who will be filling these roles. Convention officers may be elected or appointed. In New England where we rotate every three years, "elections" are token. The hosting group appoints its people to do the various jobs and may solicit others for various committees as appropriate. A Southerner or Midwesterner may be asked to serve on the Memorial Committee or Resolutions Committee as a gesture of good will without placing too much burden upon the visitor. However, most jobs must be filled in advance so that the committees can meet and map out their strategies.

## VI. Convention Officers:

- Chair: Preside over the convention, keep all the ends together.
- ViceChair: Usually the person (or representative) who will be Chair next year. Assists the Chair as needed.
- Secretary:
  - Record each leader's name and page number of tune called.
  - Two or three people may share this job.
  - Record the Memorial lesson and other committee reports and write up the minutes.
  - Read instructions in the previous year's minute book for information on submission methods and fees. See also <http://fasola.org/minutes/>

- Mail hard copy to:  
Shelbie Sheppard  
617 Ayers Drive  
Anniston, AL 36207
  - Provide a fresh list of names and addresses and telephone numbers for those of your local singers who wish to be included in the directory. Include any names or addresses you know to be inaccurate or should be removed.  
If next year's convention date is going to vary from your usual date formula, include that date in your submission.
  - Treasurer:
    - Oversee collection of donations during the convention.
    - Need three people to help pass the bag/basket, one for each side of the square.
    - Prepare 4 bags/baskets in advance.
    - Collect all receipts in advance of the convention or by the morning of and know how much money has been spent.
    - Add up the collections and decide how many times to pass the bag/basket.
    - Make a final report during the business session on the last day.
  - Chaplain(s): May be elected or appointed. Lead opening and closing prayer and prayer before lunch.
  - Memorial Committee: (May be one person or two)
    - Request names of the those who have died in the past year and those of the sick and shut-ins using signup sheets placed in a conspicuous spot (Registration Table.)
    - Plan for whatever is said at the beginning of the Memorial lesson.
    - Designate two people to lead songs, one for the dead, one for the sick and shut-ins (see discussion Section V).
    - Total time should be at most 10-15 minutes.
  - Resolutions Committee: This committee does all the thanking at the end.
    - Preparing a list of people to thank is helpful.
    - Be sure to heavily thank the Food Committee!
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## **VII. Convention format for New England:**

### **Friday night:**

- Last year's chair (if present) or this year's chair opens with a song and calls for the prayer. (Sit for notes and first verse. Stand for second verse and the prayer.) May lead a second song after the prayer.
- All the officers from last year are called in order and each leads one song if they are present.
- Arranging committee then starts on the registration cards.

- "Elections" are held and the new chair takes over. This is usually done before the first break. The Committee heads are admonished to select their members during the break.
- Chair makes any immediate announcements about bathrooms, parking etc. location of Memorial Lists, time of tomorrow's memorial lesson.

### **Break**

- The Vice Chair ( or someone else) opens up after break with one song,
- The Chair announces the members of the various committees.
- The Treasurer and team pass the bag/basket for the Friday night donations.
- The Arranging Committee continues calling leaders.
- The Chair may lead a final song and calls for the closing prayer.

### **Saturday Morning: 9:30**

- Chair opens with a song and calls for prayer. May lead second song. Does any immediate announcements about where to put food, bathrooms, child care, parking, etc.
- Arranging committee continues to call leaders.
- Remind people of the location of the Memorial lists and memorial lesson.

### **Break: 10:30**

- Someone opens after break.
- Arranging Committee calls more leaders,
- More announcements if necessary. Pass the Bag/basket for donations.

### **Break: 11:15**

- Someone opens after break.
- Arranging Committee calls more leaders.
- Memorial Lesson is held around 11:50 - 12:00. Should take *at most* 10 to 15 minutes.
- More leaders are called.
- Chair may lead a song, make announcements, call for prayer for lunch.

### **Lunch: 12:30 - 1:30**

- Someone opens after lunch.
- Call leaders.
- Treasurer passes the bag/basket again if previous efforts have not been enough.

### **Break: 2:30**

- Someone opens after break.

- More leaders are called

**Break: 3:15**

- Someone opens after break.
- Two or three leaders are called.
- Chair opens business meeting:
  - Calls for state count,
  - Calls for committee reports
    - Secretary announces
      - how many leaders have led
      - how many tunes have been called
      - how many people registered
    - Treasurer announces
      - Convention expenses
      - Money taken in
    - Resolutions committee does their "thank you"s
  - Announce next year's site and host group.
  - Call for announcements of other sings throughout the country.
- If there is time, more songs can be led.
- Chair closes the convention, 4:00 pm
  - May lead one more song,
  - Calls for Parting Hand, (sit for notes, stand for words)
  - Prayer

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