



**WISCONSIN  
CONFERENCE**  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

## **A Worship Planning Strategy**

*by Rev. Rob MacDougall*

One of the most meaningful aspects of the annual meeting of our Wisconsin Conference for me is the chance to connect with so many church members and clergy. It is like an old home weekend, getting caught up on the joys and struggles of people's lives and churches. I got to hold two babies at the meeting this year; they were both within a couple months of my new granddaughter's birthday. Thanks to Erin and McKenzie for sharing your kids with me and the whole gathering.

One of our newer clergy to the Wisconsin Conference regaled me with his tales of trying to coordinate Sunday worship services. Choosing scripture, getting readers, choosing music, working with keyboard folk, choirs, special musicians, special services, liturgical season plans, liturgies, etc.; it made me tired just listening. His struggle is one that other ministers have described to me, and it is something that kept me hopping most of my thirty years serving local churches.

I was fortunate in my most recent church to have some incredibly talented lay leaders and musicians that were as committed as I was to creating meaningful, faithful, inspiring and coherent worship for each Sunday. It was very satisfying after worship when somebody would comment that the coordinated readings, music, liturgy, preaching and prayers echoed and deepened worship for them. The musicians and worship leaders at my church were always pushing me to plan worship further ahead so we could be more creative and have time to gather people and resources. I started out planning a month in advance; they said that I needed to plan further out. I started planning six weeks in advance; they said I needed to plan further out. Finally I started planning twice a year, once for September through the first couple weeks of January, and once for mid-January through mid-June.

I took three-day planning retreats in June or July and another in early January. I packed up crates of books, Bibles, hymnals, worship supplies, Sunday school curriculum, periodicals, computer, coffee pot, etc., and went off to a place where I could be on my own to spread out and plan. I imagine most pastors today just look things up on their computer, but I liked digging through resources and having them spread out around me. I put together some planning sheets with dates on one side and columns for scripture, themes, hymns, special music, liturgical days, special offerings, who would need to be involved (kids, theater folk, guest ministers, etc.) along the top. It was great creative fun

to look at liturgical seasons, two or three week worship themes, to consider what spiritual themes might need attention, and how various parts of our church community might be involved. It was freeing to think large and plan specifically.

For a long time I resisted doing this kind of longer term planning. I didn't think my schedule would permit it. I worried that we would get too locked into what I had put together that we couldn't be responsive to important things going on in our church and world. I also wondered if planning by myself would cut off the greater spirit and gifts that others had to contribute. Scheduling ended up not being a problem; in fact people just about pushed me out the door, telling me to get to it. Those involved with worship leadership, music and planning agreed that the planning I did would need to be flexible, if something important came up that required our focus we would set aside what was on my sheets and open ourselves to the spirit. And finally, when I returned from my planning retreat with my sheets covered with themes, scripture, music, readings, etc., everything was open to additions, subtractions and revisions. Faith Formation folk would weigh in, music folk would suggest other hymns that were more singable, the choir director would ask, "You really want us to sing a Beatles song?" There were suggestions for dialogues, props, silence and more. What I realized was that my doing the beginning planning provided others with a good starting place that could be expanded and re-worked. I have found that much of good ministry is about providing a good starting point from which the spirit and gifts of people can soar.

I write this column with the knowledge that we are in the midst of the Easter season and then on to many other end of the school year activities. But I also know that most clergy are already considering the seasons yet to come and what preparations need to be made. I would suggest scheduling a summer worship planning retreat, which have been great gifts to my ministry over the years.

*Editor's note: Both of the Wisconsin Conference camp locations (Moon Beach and Pilgrim Center) welcome clergy to utilize their facilities for personal, self-directed retreats or sabbatical time. Neither site charges for this service but asks that clergy make a donation to offset the costs. If you are interested in scheduling a retreat, talk with Glenn Svetnicka (glenn@ucci.org).*