

## Planning One Year of Sermons: How Have Pastors Planned in the Past?

by Karen Booth

Last month I shared how our worship planning team has gone to many workshops and heard that we should be planning worship a year at a time. We just didn't know where or when to begin, but think we have the right tools and timing to try it at a two-day retreat in September.

The Revised Common Lectionary is a strategy that pastors have used in deciding what scripture readings will be read in worship and used in preparing their message each week. It is worth learning a little bit about its history.

The lectionary first appeared in the fourth century as a means of guiding personal scripture reading. It includes four readings for each Sunday and holy day of the year: one each from the Old Testament or Acts, the Psalms, a Gospel, and a New Testament letter or Revelation. Over time, church authorities from several denominations "endorsed" both a common Christian calendar and "common lectionary" where the readings aligned with the church calendar. That means that the readings in the weeks before Christmas (Advent) also lead to Jesus' birth; the readings before Easter (Lent) are about the last days of Jesus' life; and the rest of the year covered other parts of the bible. Over the course of a three year cycle (Years A, B, and C), readers would make it through most of the bible. By the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the Common Lectionary was used to guide scripture readings in worship too, but not the actual preaching until 1960-1980's. It was revised in 1991. You can find out more at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revised\\_Common\\_Lectionary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revised_Common_Lectionary).

**The good news** is that Pastors who use the Lectionary as a strategy for planning worship tend to preach from more of the bible, not just the easy parts they like. It helps their staff coordinate music, Sunday School lessons, etc. to go along with the preaching. There are threads that run through most of the readings from week to week that lend themselves to developing message series. For example, we are currently in Year A of the lectionary. This summer's reading follow Genesis, various Psalms, the Gospel of Matthew, and Paul's Letter to the Romans. Our summer series, "In the Beginning: (God's) Family Drama," draws heavily from the Old Testament readings. Pastor Mary might use the Psalms as inspiration for her prayers or liturgy, but probably not the readings from Matthew and Romans as they follow different stories.

So if pastors already have the Revised Common Lectionary as a strategy for planning worship and there are good reasons for it, why do we think we can do better planning relevant worship by inviting non-pastors into the process?

**The bad news** is the Lectionary's strengths are also its limitations. Many pastors, including Pastor Mary, recognize that and don't follow the lectionary most of the time. In Introducing the Uncommon Lectionary: Opening the Bible to Seekers and Disciples Thomas Bandy (p. 26) explains that "there were good reasons to develop and promote a Common Lectionary" in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. There was a Christian majority in North America who knew something about the bible. The mission frontier was "settled." That was then. This is now. The mission field (culture) has changed.



Do you own a quiet place suitable for two-day retreat for 12-16 people? Please contact the office if you might be willing to host our group in September.

The lectionary still has value, but its strategies aren't working for people who are spiritually yearning, but alienated from the church. Today we need strategies (p. 46) that move from:

- Predictability to adaptability – we want to experience our God who is relevant today.
- Transferability to contextually – local identity matters more than hearing the same message preached in churches across the U.S.
- Uniformity to identity – there are radical differences in the shared values, beliefs, vision, and mission within our denomination.
- Authority to credibility – we are skeptical about nameless “experts” who don't know us but select the scripture our pastor(s) use in worship.
- Orthodoxy to Christology - we want to know who Jesus is and why he matters in our time and place, not just the right things to believe about him.

Carole Koch described this as a very “organic” strategy that can grow and adapt as the mission field changes. We whole heartedly agreed. “Organic” is also an apt descriptor as moving to this strategy will likely feel a little messy as we change course a bit.

You are invited to join worship team members on Sunday, July 30 at 10:15 am for another session of “**Let's Talk.**” Grab a cup of coffee and a cookie, then move to the classroom across from the lounge. The team would love to hear your ideas for upcoming message series, find out if you would like to attend a fall planning retreat, have questions, or just want to listen. If you are not interested in participating, but have an idea to contribute, just jot it on a 3” x 5” card and give it to me or one of the worship team members.

