

Can we put an end to the Christmas Crunch?

July

August

September

October

November

DECEMBER

Planning the Worship Calendar with *Visitors* in Mind

W. Terry Van Hook

We have lost the focus of Christmas, and it's our own fault. Christmas has become a dreaded season for worship planners. Commercialization has taken its heart, and our church administrative calendar has taken its soul.

We all bemoan the fact that the Christmas shopping season starts around Halloween and quits on Christmas Day to be replaced by the "after-Christmas" shopping season. What may not be so obvious is that we ourselves contribute to the spiritual void it encourages.

Most United Methodist churches pack the last two or three months of the year with their yearly stewardship drive, the Annual Charge Conference (with panicked reports,) elections of officers, Christmas time "funding crunch" appeals, and finally, Christmas worship celebrations.

At Culver-Palms United Methodist Church in Culver City, California, we

realized that our celebration of the birth of Christ and the message of God's light in the darkness was being squeezed out by all this administrative busyness. We concluded that the official duties of our church were getting in the way of offering Christ to our surrounding community.

We agreed with the experts who saw that Christmas is the season that is the most "attractive" time for new worshippers. Bill Easum, Tom Bandy, Lyle Shaller and others all point out that new worshippers and marginally connected people are more likely to come to something around Christmas than anything else we might do. We wanted to actively welcome them and not be "distracted by so many things."

In addition, we agreed with Tom Bandy that "worship is about motivating mission, equipping mission, praying for mission and celebrating mission."¹ It was time to make our Sunday celebrations mission oriented. It was time to think of the needs

of the greater community around us rather than our own habits that had become so familiar and so cluttered.

So we moved the beginning of our church administrative year to July 1. This has proved to be a wonderful blessing in reaching out, but it was not without its costs.

Planning for Uninterrupted Ministry

September to June would now be an unbroken, uninterrupted season of ministry and worship with July and August a time to prayerfully plan and prepare.

New officers and new teams would form in July and have time to learn about their responsibilities. Leadership training sessions were scheduled for July and August.

Nominations and elections were held in the warm glow of spring, in the months of May and June. People were more will-

ing to commit to leadership. (An "adjourned Charge Conference" was approved by the District Superintendent and held in late June for the purpose of elections only.)

The stewardship/budget process is now offered in the springtime with "spiritual life and growth" as the message. This is instead of the familiar "National Thanksgiving Day" model that soon gets run over by the Christmas rush. (We usually culminate on or around Pentecost Sunday: a great opportunity to speak of the power of the Holy Spirit and the Church.)

Budgets start July 1 and run through June of the following year.

Special Planning for Christmas

November is now freed to focus on more faithful Christmas preparations. November is "pre-Advent," in which we prepare ourselves as a congregation to meet and greet new people during the whole Christmas season: Thanksgiving through Christmas Day. Materials from the "Igniting Ministry" campaign are used to help us become more welcoming.

Lectionary Changes: Sermon topics are geared to telling the Christmas story in as many ways as possible and as early as possible. For example, instead of waiting until December 24 to read the birth narratives, a series based on "faces around the manger" was used from the First Sunday of Advent on. Isaiah and John the Baptist are great as supporting characters, but most seekers don't have a clue as to who they are. Christmas Eve is too loaded to do any real discussion of the meaning of Christ's birth. All December needs to be full of an honest discussion of "Why Jesus?"

Christmas activities, (concerts, Sunday School events, parties, etc.) all begin to happen on the last Sunday in November in order to compete with the secular Christmas celebrations, and are all planned as opportunities to invite friends,

family, neighbors and co-workers. Our church members now have something fresh, timely and spiritual to talk about as they attend the secular activities.

Some Interesting Benefits

1. There was a new spirit of stewardship that came not only with the spring but was after Tax Day.

We realized that our celebration of the birth of Christ and the message of God's light in the darkness was being squeezed out by all this administrative busyness. We concluded that the official duties of our church were getting in the way of offering Christ to our surrounding community.

2. Our "Christmas Bump" in offerings still came in from those wishing to catch the end of year tax advantage.

3. If there was a crisis in our "year-end" (June), a "Christmas in July" appeal was easy to organize.

4. Being able to speak of stewardship at the end of the "program year" (Sept.-June) rather than at its beginning (Oct.-Nov.), enabled more new worshippers to learn about how the church is funded before the summer vacation season.

Other Implications

1. Easter began to be revitalized as well. It's a time when infrequent church members show up. Special new efforts were begun to address their needs as ones who are giving the church "another chance" to be relevant in their lives. The Easter Concert invited them to "give Christ another try."

2. We offered the Alpha Course three

times a year: September, January and after Easter to help our new worshippers find a home with us.

3. Each month we now try to have an event on our calendar that church participants can easily invite friends and neighbors to. For example, a 4th of July block party, the "SummerFest" Christian Music concert in the Park, Pool Parties at nearby YMCA, and Marriage Covenant Renewal Sundays.

When the Pastor Is Re-appointed

Major problems can occur when a pastoral change is made in July.

The stewardship effort comes in the midst of the "grieving" period that may or may not include some thanksgiving for the change.

Recognition and installation of officers need to be moved to later in July.

The budget is completed in June and so won't be up for significant review until a year later.

But as United Methodist pastors stay longer these days, the prospect of this happening is now

only once in every 6-10 years. This balances the yearly disruption of Christmas that the present calendar creates.

In fact, in our recent appointment change, the stewardship sermons became an occasion to address head on what it means to support a church in the midst of uncertainty and call for a commitment to a God of the future and not just one of the past.

There was Some Flack and Confusion

To be honest, this plan causes a lot of extra work for the Finance Committee and the person who does your books. If you use a computer for church accounting, it may be difficult to reset it for a fiscal year rather than a calendar year. Since the UMC requires calendar end of year reports, you may have to close the books every six months and add the appropriate parts together to get that total. Many

Treasurers and Finance Committees may balk at this extra work. Clearly, this change challenges the needs of those who are already there (the long timers) against the needs of mission to those who are not there.

In addition, some "changeover confusion" occurred when we chose to extend our "pledge year" to 18 months for one year. An alternative would be to have a six-month pledge drive in November and then have a full 12-month "fiscal year" funding drive in the spring.

Mission or Tradition?

The challenge is simple. Can the Finance Committee take on a "missionary mode" and become servant leaders willing to sacrifice for the greater good of the gospel?

Can the Church Council see beyond the extra work to adopt a different way of calendaring? Or will the seven last words of the church ("We've never done it that way before") once again determine the congregation's future?

For us, this step was taken only after much prayer, discussion, study and discernment. We struggled with where God was calling us. We prayed over how we needed to proclaim a "clear and present witness" about the Birth of Christ to a lost and over-stressed world.

Our income has continued to grow, our attendance has grown, and all our people, old and new alike, are getting used to a less stressed out and a more spiritual Christmas.

The mood of celebration has taken hold! Thank God! □

¹ Tom Bandy, "The Un-Common Lectionary," (*Net Results Magazine*, Vol. XXIV, No. 3, p. 21.)



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Culver-Palms UMC was recently listed as one of 300 Excellent Protestant Congregations (Westminster John Knox Press, April 2001.)

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