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The Visionary Retreat
Mapping the Spiritual Journey

This article is especially for “Visionaries” of this process—those who have primary responsibility for the spiritual direction of the congregation in its worship. Honestly, at one point in my creative team processes, I would gather people to brainstorm from a very general starting point, such as “Advent.” Then we would find an anchor image, a main message, together. But this really only works for VERY practiced teams. My advice now is for Visionaries to come to the team for brainstorming with a main focus, a direction, complete with an “anchor image,” series title and description already in mind (in other words, have at least the Inspiration Page complete). I recommend Visionary Retreats for this important work.
We all have different working styles, personalities, energy dynamics and spiritual practices. It is important to plan your retreat with these in mind so that you have the most life-giving, inspirational, productive time possible. Some discernment is in order before you begin to plan:

- **Does solitude help you focus and fill you with creative energy?** If so, your Visionary retreat will be solo.
- **Do you get more focused and creative when you have others around to bounce ideas off of?** If so, you need to have 2 or more with you on your Visioning retreat.
- **Is setting time to be away a new or rare practice?** If so, do some groundwork to create back-ups to the back-ups for ministry support so that interruptions can be at a minimum.
- **Where can you go that will be far enough away to really feel “away” and will satisfy your “goosebump factor” (a place that inspires you... for me it is the mountains... what is it for you? beach? forest? rustic cabin? hotel spa?)**
- **What time frame do you need in order to not feel too much pressure because your time is running out?**
- **What materials do you need to have on-hand (besides the necessity of an internet connection so you can access the Worship Design Studio??)**

Friends, sometimes the hardest thing is to convince yourself and others (your worship team can help with this) that this time is not “vacation”–it is one of the most important aspects of your spiritual leadership and represents accountability to the congregation to be prepared and inspired all year long. This is a priority and that feeling should be shared by the congregation.
The Visionary Retreat, continued

The Spiritual Journey of the Year

The beauty of long-range planning for me is the act of stepping back for a bit and mapping out the spiritual journey in an intentional way. When folks come to the Worship Design Studio Tahoe planning event, we always start with some spiritual, contextual questions:

- **What is your prayer for this congregation in this year?**
- **What has transpired in this community’s recent (or not-so-recent) past that affects how we are with each other and in ministry?**
- **What has transpired in our world that has an affect on person’s spiritual well-being and journey?**
- **What Word is needing to be heard in this congregation? A comforting word? A challenging word? An inspiring word? A radically transforming word? All or some of the above? In what order?**

These questions will set the stage for your discernment and creativity. The scriptures are full of the very same thing—words of comfort, healing, challenge, inspiration, transformation—to communities that needed to hear it, wrestle with it, interpret it and act on it. As the Visionary of the worship design process, it is your role in this moment to offer the “frames” through which the Holy will do its work (because of, and in spite of, us).

It may feel like you want to get right to work on actual themes... but if you engage first in this time of reflection about context, everything you encounter as you search for meaningful and memorable themes will feel more or less appropriate for your congregation. **Let me say it again, I believe no one size fits all and this certainly applies to the journeys you will take this year with this congregation.**
The Visionary Retreat, continued

Getting Started

You may want to come up with Series Visions for the whole year (one retreat) or half the year (two retreats), like a teacher would do in plotting lesson plans that move a class through a journey throughout the year. A terrific practice throughout the year is to have a folder (digital or tangible) where you can throw ideas for possible series when you come across them or when they occur to you. Then take this folder with you on the retreat...you may have a year’s worth of ideas already!

I am a very visual learner so even though I love technology as a tool, for me there is no substitute at this stage in the process for a big piece of newsprint and a set of colored markers to give me a “big picture” vision. I create areas on the paper for each season (with lots of space for several series in Ordinary Time, Summer and Fall) so that as I encounter possible ideas, I can graffiti them on the newsprint with stars for favorites, question marks for “not sure,” etc.

Two resources in the Studio are big helps, then, at this point:

- The Worship Design Studio Series Templates page (go to “Worship Series” in the Main Menu) is a good place to go first. Even if you don’t use any of those series, reading the descriptions and looking at the Inspiration Pages can get you in the mood to start the process of coming up with your own.

- Listen to (and read) the Worship Design Studio Podcast documents as you move through the seasons. Each of these contains many possible thematic ideas brainstormed by my guest experts as they exegete the lectionary but also imagine non-lectionary options. Yep, there are years of possibilities there and the conversation may just land on something perfect for your context. In every podcast introduction, I try to use music and narrative to help get you in the mood for the theological direction of the season.
Thematic Starting-Points

Besides the resources I’ve posted, you’ll want to brainstorm on your own as well. “Starting points” are places to look in order to come up with ideas for thematic series for worship and preaching. Some of these may be based on the lectionary, some may be based on other things. In the following pages I’ve listed some starting points that I’ve used for you to consider. As I’ve often said, anything can be a point of inspiration and an entry point to spiritual matters because God works in and through all things. So flex your imagination and see what ideas come to you.

Starting from the Lectionary

Thematic worship is not antithetical to following the lectionary. The compilers used the liturgical year as their guide so you will find many threads of thought between the readings and across the readings for a liturgical season. Here is how I study the lectionary to come up with themes. It is a two-step process:

1. First I read across the season within one of the four categories of “books.” In other words, I read all the Hebrew Bible texts for the whole season. Then I read all the Psalms, then the Epistle readings and finally, the Gospel readings. As I go I make notes about major words repeated, themes that I see happening across that combination of texts. This helps me consider the connections across the season, rather than starting with one Sunday at a time.
2. When I get some possible theme ideas from that go-round, I “reshuffle” and look at all texts for each Sunday to see if each theme really is showing up in some way each week. If it isn’t working, then that seeming theme really was just a big idea in one of the texts on one of the Sundays but isn’t deep enough to continue for a whole series.
There are lots of ways to study the lectionary for themes, my way is just one way. Lectio divino, commentaries, etc. are all valid ways of spending time considering what God is saying to us through these selected texts. I’m not a purist about using the lectionary—I think it can be a helpful structure but I don’t think you have to use it all the time or none of the time. I do think that finding a theme is helpful when using the lectionary as a way of focusing the community’s spiritual journey.
Non-Lectionary Starting Points

I had a conversation with a preacher (well, a Bishop no less) recently over lunch about planning thematically. He was wondering why this was necessary rather than just being able to preach whatever inspired him that day. I’m glad he asked me that because I’d never put the answer in quite the way I did that day. I told them that, besides making it pretty impossible to work creatively with a team of ritual artists, that method made the whole congregation captive to the particular spiritual journey of one person... the preacher. Yes, the method we are using here depends on the discernment of a Visionary as they shepherd the congregation. But if we design with the context of that congregation in mind, with the spiritual needs and challenges in mind, with an openness to the inspiring Spirit and even the input of others in the community about topics to address, we can be **faithful stewards of a communal journey**.

Even if you use the lectionary quite a lot, there still are times when the spiritual journey of the congregation calls for inspiration from other starting points:

**The Congregation:**

Don’t discount inspiration from the congregation themselves. Just as you’ve got a file for your seeds of ideas throughout the year, perhaps you can set up a system of input from the congregation about topics they are interested in dealing with through worship. Poll youth, young adults, seniors, etc. Ask discipleship groups, bible study groups, mission teams, recreation teams. And don’t forget to ask the people you wish were coming to church... perhaps if the church actually addressed what they cared about, worried about, stayed up at night about, they would come!
Biblical Books:

Example: “Jeremiah: The Cry of the Prophet”  
This series could look at the career of Jeremiah, the prophet. It gives us time to dive into his historical context, the wonderful imagery that he uses to get his messages across and what it means to become prophets who decry injustice in the world. When I did this series, the image of the Potter was very strong ("anchor image") and we had a potter throwing and molding clay in the worship as well as leading workshops on clay and creativity.

Some of your ideas of biblical books that your congregation could spend time with:
1.

Hymns/Songs:

Example: “Take This Moment”  
Hymns and songs have a natural structure that lends to using them as inspiration for a multi-Sunday worship series. One of my favorite songs is called “Take This Moment” (Worship & Song) and each verse leads us to meditate on how we spend our time... taking moments to nurture relationships with each other, to forgive, to heal, to be called by God (anchor=clock)

Some of your ideas of hymns or songs that your congregation could spend time with:
1.

2.

3.
Contemporary Books or Films:

**Examples:** “The Porpoise-Given Life: Diving Into the Reflecting Pool”  
This idea is based on a whimsical yet deep book by my friend Chris Hughes. It uses metaphors related to the life of dolphins to help us live life more freely and fully. Using scripture and story, you could have a series of worship that “dives into the pool” of reflection and use some of the titles of the chapters for the services such as “Hydrate,” “Cooperate,” “Live” and “Delight.”  
[https://www.amazon.com/Porpoise-Given-Life-Inspiration-Cetacean-Nation/dp/1577364139](https://www.amazon.com/Porpoise-Given-Life-Inspiration-Cetacean-Nation/dp/1577364139) (anchor = dolphins)

Some of your ideas of books or film that your congregation could spend time with:
1. 
   2. 
   3.

Context of a Congregation:

**Example:** “Return to Me with All Your Heart” A student of mine once began to serve a church that had suffered a difficult time of conflict and division. A while after she arrived, it was time to acknowledge the grief and move on to new possibility so she created a series of services with this name. Are there circumstances in your community that can provide a point of inspiration for worship that addresses those things in healthy and healing ways? (anchor = heart)

Context/circumstances that warrant attention:
1. 
   2. 
   3.
Thematic Starting-Points, continued

Teaching Need or Spiritual Need of a Congregation:

Example: “For Everyone Born, a Place at the Table” This line is from a song that speaks of the call to invite all to the table of Jesus Christ and tables of justice-making (Worship & Song). Sometimes we need to remind ourselves what we believe about the rituals, stories or doctrine of the church. A series of worship experiences can create unforgettable moments that answer a need to educate and grow in our understanding and experience about something. (anchor = table)

Teaching topics and experiences for our church:
1.

2.

3.

A Visual Metaphor:

Example: “Aligning Our Lives” Someone who is part of the Worship Design Studio came up to me at a conference and showed me what she was carrying around in her pocket for that season. It was a small “plumbline”–a visual metaphor that they were planning their worship around, exploring how and with what they are aligning their lives. (anchor = plumbline)

Visual metaphors that would be meaningful (or new and surprising) to our congregation:
1.

2.

3.
Mission/Commitment of a Congregation:

Example: “You Who Are Thirsty” This title is another song (you can see where I get a lot of inspiration!) that I would use during a series of services that highlighted a focus on clean water resources around the world (for example, visit http://www.water.cc/). Whether your church is involved in Habitat for Humanity, raising money for UMCOR or other relief agency, or a particular mission, why not create worship that will inspire your congregation to action? (anchor = water well)

Our mission focus ideas:
1. 
2. 
3. 

Denominational Focus:

Example: “Three Simple Rules” This title is from a book that has become a United Methodist emphasis: do no harm, do good, stay in love with God. Whether or not you are a United Methodist, there are always denominational themes and foci that you can draw on for worship series ideas. This can draw your congregation closer to a connection with churches within the denomination. (anchor = yardstick, measuring implements)

Our denomination’s themes/foci:
1. 
2. 
3. 
The Visionary Retreat, continued

If you are comfortable with the Design App, you can go ahead and enter information about the Series Visions that you decide on right there during your retreat, creating an Inspiration Page (you may prefer to take your “written work” home and have an assistant help entering it into the App). Depending on your working style, you could also go ahead and write synopses for each week in each series. This is why I prefer going on two retreats per year and planning one half of the year at a time—I like to come back from the retreat with Inspirational Pages and the Frame Synopses pages for each Series. I like to stay on a roll when I’m on a roll! And I’m so grateful I’ve done it when that season rolls around!

You can learn more about doing this in the Design App Manual. I’ve put examples of an Inspiration Page and Frame Synopses Page here to inspire you to “just do it!” Learn how to write synopses HERE.
My God is a Rock

The LORD lives! Bless God, my rock! Let the God of my salvation be lifted high!

We will focus in this series on the promises of God, the steadfast nature of God and how we are called (because we are made in the image of God) to be steadfast in our promises. We'll prepare ourselves for a new start in the Fall with some promises, as a church, to work toward fulfilling our missional goals and being a safe haven where all can know the sure foundation of God!

Solid Rock

8/5/12

The LORD is my solid rock, my fortress, my rescuer. My God is my rock—it I take refuge in him!—he’s my shield, my salvation’s strength, my place of safety. - Psalm 18

We begin our series exploring the steadfast nature of God with the phrase, "God is good... all the time... and all the time... God is good!" Indeed, life is not always good, people are not always good, hard times do come. But God IS always good and gives us the strength and refuge to face anything, anytime. We will focus on the role of our communal worship - especially around the table - as a safe and life-giving place where all are welcome.

Lead me to the Rock

8/12/12

When my heart is weak, I cry out to you from the very ends of the earth. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I am. - Psalm 61

Our spiritual path leads us toward a God that is "higher" than anything of this world. We try to count on our own power and too often realize that this is not enough. We will explore how our spiritual growth program can be expanded to invite people to small groups to gather for support...
around many issues.

**Shelter of the Rock**

8/19/12

_Because he will shelter me in his own dwelling during troubling times; he will hide me in a secret place in his own tent; he will set me up high, safe on a rock._ - Psalm 27

Our focus this week is on our relationship with the homeless in our city. We will consider several ways that we can offer ministry with and through agencies already doing good work.

**My Rock and My Redeemer**

8/26/12

_Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, LORD, my rock and my redeemer._ - Psalm 19

To be "redeemed" is to be set on a right and good path. As this series comes to a close, we engage in a ritual of promises to walk the good path together. We've focused on a mission project, on enhancing our spiritual small group programs and making our worship a life-giving and safe place where all feel welcome. We move into the Fall with excitement and verve!
Thank You!

I’m grateful for every member of the Worship Design Studio. May you be enlivened and supported in your work on behalf of God’s people!