

## Reflections On Congregational Life

# PLANNING<sup>©</sup>

by

Peter Rudowski

January 2012

Reflections On Congregational Life is a service of the Southern Ohio Synod, ELCA

The majority of congregations function on a calendar year. The year begins on January 1 with a new budget, new members joining the governing board, and new committees beginning their responsibilities. Since the new year is right around the corner, I thought it would be interesting to look at a planning model which resembles the six seasons in the liturgical year. The only difference between the planning model below and the liturgical calendar is no predetermined amount of time exists for each season in the planning model. A season may be as short as a week or as long as a year or more.

### Advent

Planning begins with Advent. Advent is a time for dreaming and brainstorming on what can be done to enhance an existing ministry program or to implement a new ministry program to meet needs within or outside the congregation. During Advent, ministry ideas flow freely. Some ideas are replaced with other ideas. And, some rejected ideas are resurrected as the brainstorming continues. There is no restriction on the number of ideas that are possible.

The area of Youth Ministry serves as an example of how this planning model works. In Advent, ministry ideas to be considered are: 1. start a new high school group to attract those not attending existing groups, 2. eliminate an existing ministry program that no longer attracts participants and use the resources of that ministry in other ways, 3. change the meeting time of an existing ministry program to match school schedules, 4. start a 4-6th grade program to serve as a feeder group to confirmation and jr. high groups, and, 5. consider the possibility of a part-time youth leader.

As Advent progresses, one of the ideas in the above list becomes the goal for enhancing an existing program or initiating a new ministry program. Advent ends with a strategy to implement the new ministry idea.

A word of caution needs to be expressed. There is no guarantee that a ministry idea conceived in Advent will actually be given birth. Some planners cannot reduce the number of ideas discussed in Advent to one ministry to be born at Christmas. In this case, the conversation around enhancements or new ministries never stops. It has been estimated that up to 40% of congregations never enter Advent and another 30% never give birth to an enhancement or new ministry.

### Christmas

Christmas is a time to give birth to the ministry idea identified during the Advent season. The event that signals Christmas' arrival is the signing of a contract between a congregation and a new youth director, or volunteers are recruited and trained to begin a new youth group, or an enhancement to an existing program is announced.

Two things happen during the time of Christmas. The first is celebrating the brainstorming of Advent, the hard work of narrowing down ministry program ideas, and the strategy of brainstorming a new ministry program to fruition. This is the time to hear Jesus' words, "Well done my good and faithful servants."

The second thing that happens in the Christmas season is the loss of flexibility. Advent is dependent upon the freedom to change. Christmas is a commitment to enhancing an existing ministry or nurturing a new ministry. All of the resources and energies of this planners in Advent are now focused on the one ministry idea chosen from all the rest in Advent. The other ideas of Advent are no longer a current consideration.

Not all ministry ideas given birth at Christmas mature into effective ministry programs. There are at least four reasons for the death of an idea almost immediately after the birthing process.

1. The time was not right for this very good ministry idea to survive. The enhancement or new ministry was simply before its time. The enhancement or new ministry may have had a very successful life if its birth was three years in the future.

2. The need for the enhancement or new ministry was really the need of those doing the planning and not the need of the targeted audience.

3. Those chosen, as paid staff or volunteers, to lead the ministry did not have the skills or personality to be successful.

4. The anticipated resources needed to support the ministry were insufficient because the planners underestimated the amount of resources needed.

### Epiphany

Epiphany is a time of growth. Infants grow very fast. Ask any grandmother, who has not seen her infant granddaughter for a few months, how much an infant grows. The same is true for newly implemented ministry programs. The addition of a clown ministry

designed to have jr. and sr. high students visit nursing homes four times a year, or the addition of "The Fifth Quarter" at the church after a high school football game, or mission trips that intentionally invite those who do not regularly attend youth meetings can produce growth in the overall youth ministry program.

The upside of the Epiphany season is that the growth of a ministry is an affirmation of Advent dreams and their birth at Christmas. In Epiphany, there is a healthy pride about the growth of a ministry.

There is also a downside to the growth that occurs in the Epiphany season. There is always a temptation to get caught up in the numerical success of a ministry. In this temptation, numbers replace the proclamation of the Gospel as the goal of the ministry. Numerical growth is a validation that a need is being met, but no ministry growth is sustainable if increasing numbers is the primary goal.

A second downside of growth, especially rapid growth, is arrogance. Arrogance is illustrated in the following statement: "If we can grow our youth program, then everyone should be able to duplicate our success. If another congregation's youth program does not grow it is because the membership of that congregation does not want it to grow." There are a variety of reasons why a youth program grows in one congregation and not another. Those in the Epiphany season need to pray as the psalmist prays, "Keep your servant back from presumptuous sins (arrogance); let them not have dominion over me." (Ps.32:13)

## **Lent**

Lent is a time for evaluation. All ministries need to be evaluated but this is especially true of new ministries that have shown growth throughout the Epiphany season. The Lenten evaluation identifies items that were overlooked in the Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany seasons. For example, the youth ministry program overlooked the need for permission slips from parents allowing the use of their child's picture on the youth's web page and Facebook communications. Having a planned time for evaluation corrects overlooked issues.

The evaluation of the Lenten season also allows adjustments for growth in the Epiphany season. For example, the number of chaperones needed for weekly meetings and mission trips grows along with the increased number of youth participating in these ministries. An increase in the number of youth participants in a "Fifth Quarter" gathering increases the amount of space needed to accommodate those presently participating and future growth as well. Increased attendance in programs adds complexity to the communication system.

Without a Lenten evaluation season, glass ceilings emerge stopping future growth. Even worse, without evaluation, a positive ministry can become stale for those originally drawn to it.

## **Easter**

Easter is a time to celebrate what has emerged from

the ministry idea identified in Advent through its Epiphany growth and Lenten evaluation. While it is an overstatement to say that the ministry after Lent is a new creation, it is proper to proclaim that ministry is well positioned to meet the needs of those receiving the ministry.

## **Pentecost**

Pentecost is the longest season in the liturgical calendar. In fact, it is approximately one-half of the church year. In the planning model, Pentecost is when a mature program serves effectively and efficiently the recipients of its ministry. The Pentecost of a program can last for years upon years.

Pentecost is dominated by enhancement of the ministry program rather than major changes to it. The key administration question of Pentecost is, What can we do to make this program even better than it already is?

Of course, Pentecost is not a season without an end. All ministries will come to an end as they are currently delivered. When Pentecost comes to an end, a good funeral needs be planned and held. A good funeral connects past success with the age in which they occurred. For example, the eulogy for one form of a youth ministry program might be, "Our youth program in the 1950s was absolutely top notch with almost every young person in the congregation attending its weekly meeting. Of course, there was no competition on Sunday from youth sporting events and little competition from the entertainment industry. In the 1950s, the church was the social center of society. At this funeral we want to recognize those who gave so much during that period in our history." Such a eulogy allows for new youth ministries to say, "We are building on our congregation's dedication to youth ministry by implementing ministry programs that meet the needs and schedules of 21st century youth. This is a similar approach to youth ministry pioneered by those who went before us."

Planning is an essential part of the life of any congregation. The above planning model describes a process for visioning an enhanced or new ministry, giving birth to that ministry, watching the growth of that ministry, evaluating and adjusting a ministry, and the joy of seeing a mature ministry service the needs of those receiving that ministry.

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*Peter Rudowski served as a parish pastor for 33 years. In this capacity, he developed knowledge and skills in parish administration and organizational systems. He now serves as a consultant to pastors and congregations. He is also the author of CONNECTING THE DOTS: Ministering To Your Congregation Through Its Organizational System published by Xlibris - order via the internet at xlibris.com He can be contacted for a consultation at: phone 513-791-8920 or e-mail address: prudowski@fuse.net*