

Get Smart! Plan Ahead!

by Eunice Benton, Executive Director for the Mid-South District

Small congregations need to be especially smart in their management, because they usually have fewer financial resources and fewer, if any, staff members to oversee their operations.

So, one sound habit for small congregations is to plan ahead as much as possible—especially for worship services.

Sunday mornings are centerpieces for religious communities in our culture, centrally important to what we do for ourselves as congregation members and what we want to offer to newcomers who seek us out. Doing worship well takes some care. It can be a month-by-month, week-by-week struggle to plan Sunday services so that they can be announced ahead of time and design them so that they offer a rich experience. The effort needed to provide continuous quality worship can eat up energy and get a congregation stuck in “survival mode” rather than a full life of meaning and ministry.

A Unitarian Universalist congregation in Georgia went looking for a way to do things better and developed a process for planning for a whole year of Sunday services. Each spring their Sunday Services Team spends some time mapping out the coming year. Holidays are marked, and services that are annual habits for the congregation are ensured places on the calendar. Times for intergenerational, contemporary, and outreach services are reserved. Attention is given to the whole year to see that a mix of topics, points of view, and styles of worship are in the plan. Then, the Team agrees to adapt and make changes should special opportunities present themselves.

The result is a map for Sunday services for the entire year, at least in outline. Planning ahead allows more opportunity for adding rich elements to the services as the year goes along. With the main plan in place, details can be worked out each month and more participants and enhancements can be incorporated into the programs with intention—not desperation. This process can work with

congregations of all sizes. In a larger congregation, the planners would work with the minister, leaders of music and religious education, and worship associates.

It's easy for small congregations to let the needs for Sunday mornings drain their energies. A commitment to do annual planning can go a long way toward freeing everyone to experience congregational life in richer and more meaningful ways.

The Athens, Georgia, congregation that developed this process presented it at the 2008 GA in a GA Planning Committee-sponsored workshop.

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