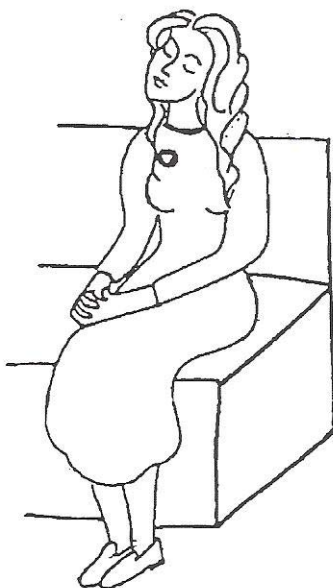


# Building a Worship Associates Program



Thirtieth and Final Printing

**By Rick Koyle**

Illustrations by  
Amy Freedman

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BUILDING A WORSHIP ASSOCIATES PROGRAM  
by Rick Koyle

This book is dedicated to  
Rob Eller-Isaacs and  
Janne Eller-Isaacs,  
co-ministers of the  
First Unitarian Church of Oakland, California (Unitarian Universalist)

May all churches someday worship like yours.

Thanks to . . .

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and the congregation of the First Unitarian Church of Oakland, California (Unitarian Universalist), whose book this really is.

## Author's Note

This is the 30<sup>th</sup> and last printing of the book you hold in your hands. Hallelujah!

It's the 30<sup>th</sup> printing because the demand for a book like this has been greater than anyone expected, including me.

It's the last printing because I've relinquished the copyright, and the book has been placed in the public domain. It's morphed into electronic form. You can download it for free and make whatever use of it you want. (Do give credit, though.) If you made a bootleg copy ten years ago, shame on you, but consider yourself forgiven. As I trust we all will be, in the end.

Here's how this book got written. In spring 1996, Bev Smrha and Robbie Cranch, co-district executives of the Pacific Central District, invited me to present a workshop on Worship Associates at General Assembly, which was in Indianapolis that summer. I thought that Worship Associates might appeal to more people than those who could attend a workshop, so I set out to write this guide, "Building a Worship Associates Program."

For moral support I reassembled a writing group called "Scribble Scribble," and impulsively promised them a fresh chapter each time we met, on alternate Sunday evenings. Apparently, I will do practically anything to avoid being embarrassed in front of friends – even write a chapter on Saturday night, instead of having a good time like a sensible human being. My writing colleagues – among them, Kathy Garrett, Carol Graywing, and Alan Taylor – listened patiently, offering feedback and encouragement. The book has six chapters because the district's invitation came 12 weeks before General Assembly, Scribble Scribble met every two weeks, and 12 over two equals six.

In Indianapolis a couple of surprising things happened. The morning of the workshop, I picked up the fresh copies from a nearby Kinko's and lugged a boxful to the convention center. To my delight, they were still warm. The room was close to full, which was surprise number one. I told the participants that the book was warm off the press, and invited them to come up and take a look during our workshop.

One came up, then another, and soon the first, tiny printing of my very first book began to disappear. As the stack of books shrank, another, different pile began to grow next to it, a pile of paper, checks and bills. That was another surprise – a big one. I kept sneaking looks at this amazing, hypnotic, growing heap, during the workshop. When it was over, all the books were gone. Only the pile of money remained.

I didn't write the book for money. I wrote it out of a desire to see the program that Rob and Janne Eller-Isaacs had nurtured reach the wider audience it deserved, and to share with other lovers of worship, both lay and clergy, this remarkable new way of making Sunday morning come alive.

Around the turn of the millennium, I anticipated that interest in “Building a Worship Associates Program” would wane. I still loved the concept and the book itself, but I was looking forward to having no more printings to print up and schlep around, no more author’s queries, packages to wrap and send out, postage to calculate, checks to cash, and so on.

But this doughty little book refused to give up the ghost! Thirty modest printings later, the orders keep trickling in, one at a time. There were three just the other day. It’s probably fair to say that several hundred Unitarian Universalist churches and fellowships have been exposed to Worship Associates, and many have adopted a Worship Associates program, from cathedral churches to small fellowships.<sup>1</sup>

Technology now enables me to bow out of the distribution process, and put aside what’s become the albatross of charging money. The book was meant to be a gift to the movement. Unfortunately Kinko’s has to charge for printing copies and the postal service for mailing, so in turn I’ve charged enough to cover my costs of printing and mailing. No more! Now everyone can enjoy this program free of costs and hassles – churches, fellowships, clergy, lay worshippers, and your happy author.

Rev. Rick Koyle  
November 2009

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<sup>1</sup> One lay-led fellowship adopted a Worship Associates program because their lay-led worship felt uneven from week to week. They hoped a program might add consistency to the variety of approaches to worship that they already had, without cramping anyone’s style. It worked. Quality control wasn’t an intended use of the program, but sometimes it’s worked out that way.

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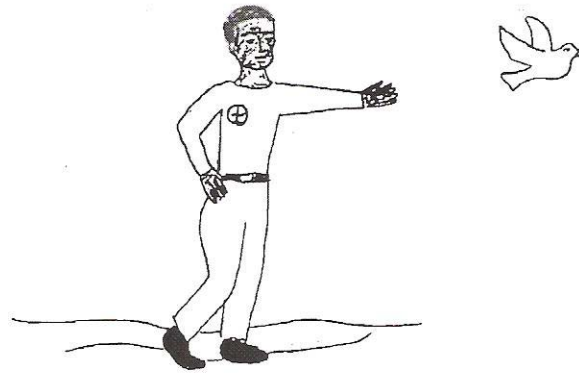
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Part I:  
An Overview of a Worship Associates Program



## **Chapter 1**

### ***Sunday Morning: An Introduction***

My friend and I stepped inside the church, into the vestibule. (Much later I discovered it was called the narthex.) A young woman who was ushering handed us orange programs and showed us to the door to the sanctuary. We were church-shopping.

Inside, the room was about half full. My first impression was of huge expanses of redwood across the ceiling, a wall of organ pipes toward the front, a raised platform or stage that I later learned was called the chancel, a flying pulpit like the prow of a schooner to the side of the chancel, and along one wall half a dozen stained glass windows.

The center aisle was steeply raked toward the front, and covered by a drab green carpet with stains and rips. Instead of pews, there were individual seats, like theater seats. My friend and I took two of them halfway down and to the right, in front of the pulpit. An organist we could not see was playing something the program called "Music for Meditation."

Promptly at 11 a.m. the music ended and three people emerged from the narthex to parade down the center aisle toward the chancel. On the left was a young man in a turtleneck and slacks, to his right a striking woman in her 40's in a black robe, and behind them a young woman with short hair in a print dress. The first two stepped up onto the platform and took seats on opposite sides of the stage. The young woman stepped up to a microphone.

"Good morning," she said, in a husky voice, smiling.

"Good morning," the congregation called back.

She gave her name and said she was a member of the Board of Trustees of the church. She welcomed everyone to the church, especially newcomers, made a couple of announcements, corrected an error in the orange program -- she called it an order of service -- and told us about coffee hour next door after the service. The organist took up another melody, and the young woman stepped up into the chancel and lit a dozen candles, then returned to a seat in the congregation.

This puzzled me. Why were some people, like the young woman, both part of the formal church service and part of the congregation? In the 30-odd years I had intermittently attended church, I had come to believe that worship services belonged to the ordained clergy, the people in the black robes. (But this minister was a lot younger than I had known, and she was a woman as well.) And what was the young man in the turtleneck doing marching down the aisle with the minister and then up onto the stage? He walked as if he belonged there.



When the music ended, the young man got up from his chair in the chancel and came to the lectern. According to the program, he was giving the “call to worship”:

“Have you ever come to church on Sunday morning [he began] . . .

Said hello to your friends . . .

Sung a familiar hymn, perhaps watched the dance choir . . .

Listened to the readings, and reflected on them . . .

Meditated silently, maybe shared a cherished name during the embracing meditation . . .

Heard the sermon and been touched by it . . .

Then stood, as stiff and awkward as a flamingo, through the 20 minutes of social awkwardness we appropriately call coffee hour [people laughed at this], perhaps volunteered to do some service work, like cooking breakfast for the homeless, or the worship associate work I am doing this morning . . .

And then gone home and felt, somehow, something’s missing?

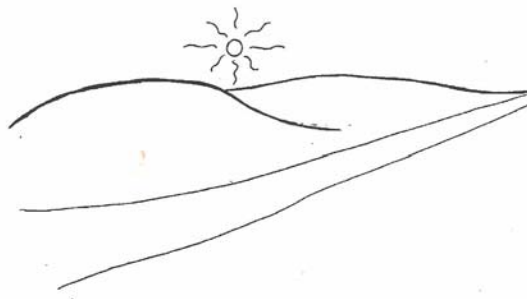
“If you ever have felt that burden, today’s service may have special meaning for you. It is a service about religious longing, and those of us who feel it.”

He stepped down from the lectern and lit a candle in a chalice on a table in front of the congregation. Then he turned to all of us and said, “Come, let us worship, together,” and the organist took up the first hymn.

A few moments later, the young man was back at the lectern, leading the congregation in a silent meditation, which the minister concluded with a prayer. A little later in the service, the young man introduced something called the embracing meditation, where people in the congregation were invited to call out the names of friends and loved ones, celebrating and mourning. About twenty people did.

I sat there in shock. I sneaked a look at the minister. She seemed unconcerned. My friend seemed unperturbed. He’d been attending Unitarian-Universalist churches for years. It was my first exposure.

What were these laypeople doing, I wondered. Didn’t anyone realize that the inmates had taken over the asylum?



This book is about how to build a worship associates program in your church. It is meant for laypeople and ministers alike.

Worship associates are lay members of a church who work with the minister or ministers to plan and put on Sunday morning worship.

In the Oakland, California model of the program, the worship associates program works like this. Once every three months during the church year, the worship associates -- who are twelve in number -- meet with the two co-ministers of the church, in order to plan worship for the coming quarter. This meeting can take as little as two hours, if it is carefully planned and the participants are experienced at doing it. Sometimes it takes as long as three hours.

There is nothing magical about the number of worship associates or ministers. Half a dozen associates and a single minister can make the program work.

When the quarterly planning meeting is done and the assignments are made, each worship service will typically have one minister and one worship associate. The minister speaks from the pulpit, the worship associate from the lectern in the chancel. About three weeks before that Sunday morning, the minister and the associate meet for about an hour to plan the service – elaborating on the theme, suggesting areas for further research as well as hymns and readings, gauging the congregation’s needs and probable reactions to the topic. Often there is a second meeting with a week or ten days to go, to nail down the details of the order of service.

With thirteen weeks in a quarter, and a dozen worship associates, each associate winds up being responsible for about one service per quarter, or a total of three services in the ordinary church year from September to June. In the Oakland model, summer services are a separate, lay-led program. Sometimes worship associates also volunteer to lead summer worship.

Why do all this?

How does it benefit a church to involve lay members in planning and putting on worship?

The whole congregation benefits. When they enter church on Sunday morning and see one of their own in the chancel, it heightens their sense of participation in the service – it creates ownership of the process, week by week. If the lay member is a friend or acquaintance of theirs, someone known to them, so much the better. It makes visible and real the so-called conversation between chancel and pew. Part of the excitement of coming to church on Sunday involves seeing and hearing one of their own in the chancel and not knowing what they will say.

Over time, a more thoughtful congregation, more committed to quality worship, results. Within a few years, depending on the size of the congregation, as many as a quarter or a third of the congregation may have developed experience in planning and putting on

worship. Their expertise means that the minister (and the worship associates) can take more risks in worship, knowing that leaders among the congregation are more likely to understand and appreciate what they are doing.

The effect is also dramatic for newcomers, like my friend and me. This Oakland church actually seemed to us to belong to laypeople. It wasn't just welcoming to them – to us, that is – there was something deeper at work. The laypeople weren't merely showing off their involvement in Sunday morning worship; there wasn't that telltale self-consciousness that impliedly asks, "How'm I doing?"

Laypeople were carrying on the work as if they enjoyed it, as if worship really were "the work of the people." And the minister seemed at ease too. Midway through the service, we turned to each other and said, "This is the church for us."

In fact, my friend went on to become a Unitarian Universalist minister, and I am finishing my second year of seminary.

The ministers of the church can also benefit from a worship associates program, just as the congregation can. When the ministers sit down to plan a quarter's worth of services, they don't do it alone, but surrounded by a dozen helpers. There is seldom a shortage of ideas, or themes, or suggestions. The predictability of a standard church lectionary, with its list of required or recommended readings for each Sunday, is replaced by a "living lectionary" of church members with a special interest and training in worship. They bring their enthusiasm, their passions, and their expertise to topics for Sunday morning worship.

And the minister has company in actually getting ready for each Sunday service. She can ask the associate to research materials for her, to locate appropriate readings, to suggest good hymns or other music, and to work with her in crafting the order of service. If the associate has special gifts -- he sings, writes poetry, or dances, for example -- the minister may invite him to share that gift as part of the worship service.

This pooling of talents and efforts helps to keep each Sunday's liturgy fresh and lively. Here, for example, is a list of worship topics from one recent quarter at the Oakland church:

You're Telling My Story (The 12 Steps of Recovery)  
Crises of Faith  
Hope-Making and Soul-Making  
Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Decides (Mother's Day)  
What Are We Losing with Technology?  
Community: Large Home or Large Hotel?  
Lay Worship (All-Church Retreat)  
Waiting for Our Lives to Start; Being Defined by "What Do You Do for a Living?"  
19th Century Missionaries and 20th Century Outreach

## Elevating Teachers (Teacher Recognition Service)

Over time, the minister can more directly educate her laity on what constitutes good worship, why some things work and others do not. This means a more receptive laity to quality in worship.

A worship associates program also benefits the associates themselves. For some, the chief attraction is getting to work closely with the minister in planning and putting on the service. If the minister is happy in his or her work, this can be a chance to experience the mystery of liturgy joyfully. It also means the development of expertise in the ancient and peculiar art form called worship. And it means a chance, within the confines of the church's orders of service, to step into the chancel and speak one's truth, to say what one believes needs to be said, to articulate what the congregation needs to hear.

What is involved in getting a program started?

Only two ingredients are needed: a willing minister and a willing congregation -- willing enough to provide half a dozen to a dozen interested lay members. The cost is minimal.

The minister's support for the program is critical. If the minister of a church has any reluctance at all to share the chancel on Sunday morning with lay members, that reluctance needs to be honored. (It may need to be discussed with the minister, but that is another matter. For purposes of starting a worship associates program, first it needs to be honored.)

This is because the minister, in agreeing to share leadership in worship with lay members, is giving up a great deal of control over what happens during the service. It takes a minister who is solidly confident of her abilities, as well as generous in her spirit, to trust a layperson with significant duties on Sunday morning. She must have in her bones a commitment to shared ministry.

In most churches, ultimate responsibility for the worship life of the congregation belongs to the minister. The responsibility may comfortably be shared only if the minister freely chooses to share it. And she must want to share it out of a deep conviction that it is right and appropriate to do so, because there will be times in the process when the minister's commitment to the process will be tested -- times when a worship associate turns to be flaky or unreliable, uses the lectern as a soapbox for his political views, can't quite establish a comfortable relationship with the microphone, and so on.

Deference to the minister's leadership on whether to undertake a worship associates program is also vital because it's hard to imagine anything more threatening to the harmonious relationship between a minister and her congregation than an open struggle for dominance on Sunday morning. Make no mistake about it: any fundamental uneasiness on the minister's part about sharing leadership in worship will quickly be apparent to the congregation, as well as the worship associates. It's just not worth the risk. If lay members of the church are determined to learn about worship and the minister

does not want to share the chancel, let the laity work on rituals in their own homes, or at some time during the week other than Sunday morning.

A dedicated laity is the other crucial ingredient in making a worship associates program work. Now why would laity have any interest in learning how to put on worship?

Good worship is remarkable for what it brings together. Consider what is involved. It calls for good words, carefully chosen and fitted together. Good music, that touches the heart and lifts the spirit. Worship that works is beautiful to behold, a gift for the eye as well as the ear. Good worship is deepened by the richness of communal silence.

A lively sense of drama is called for, and so is a willingness to grapple, thoughtfully and soulfully, with the leading social and political and intellectual issues of the day. Finally, the minister and worship associate must bring to the chancel a desire to join hands spiritually with a group of people who, after all, are assembled for no other purpose than worship. All this, in 60 or 75 minutes on Sunday morning. And of course one has the privilege of mounting this brief production fresh, week after week after week.

If you're a musician, it's like putting on a concert every Sunday morning. If words are your delight, it's spoken poetry in the chancel. If you love ideas, it's a cerebral feast. And if you come to church to touch and be touched, move and be moved, sing and rejoice, it's tears and laughter, joy and sorrow, a place to bring every nook and cranny of your heart and soul every Sunday morning.

Who in their right mind wouldn't want to know more about how this mystery comes to pass each week?

All a church needs to begin with, besides a willing minister, are half a dozen to a dozen hardy souls, willing to make a commitment to serve once every few weeks. Who they might be, and how they might be chosen, we'll take up in detail later.

How long does it take to build a successful program?

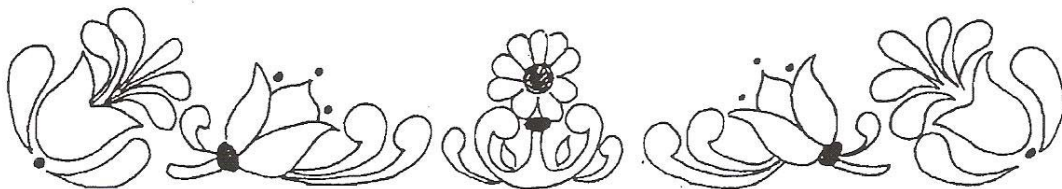
The church on which this model is based took five or six years to get its program fully functioning. Other churches that have followed this model have reported success right off the bat. In general, it seems much easier to get a program started in a brand-new church than in an established church with a settled liturgy. But even then a program can be started in a modest, experimental way.

This is a how-to manual on building a worship associates program. It's based largely, though not exclusively, on the experience of one congregation, the First Unitarian Church of Oakland, California (Unitarian-Universalist), where co-ministers Rob and Janne Eller-Isaacs have developed a worship associates program over the last dozen years. Recently half a dozen other U-U churches in the San Francisco Bay Area have taken up the idea, as well as churches further afield.

A year after I joined the Oakland church, I became a worship associate and served for three years, the last two as coordinator and co-coordinator of the worship associates program. To prepare for leadership in the program, I took a class in the spring of 1993 called "Come Sunday," at Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, taught by Mark Belletini and Rebecca Parker.

I liked that course so much I enrolled at Starr King as a full-time student in 1994. I have made presentations on worship associates programs to most of the Bay Area churches that have adopted the Oakland model of worship associates. This book is being prepared in part for distribution at the 1996 General Assembly in Indianapolis, where I am making another presentation on behalf of the Pacific Central District.

I volunteered to become a worship associate because the prospect of putting on worship terrified me, and I like to do things that terrify me. I was curious too. Of course, once the terror passed -- and one service makes you a veteran -- I found the work a kick in the pants. I stayed with it for three years because doing it called on parts of me that little else in my life called on in that way, qualities of reflection and sincerity and challenge toward depth that pleased me acutely. And after three years I stepped aside because everyone who wants to ought to have a chance at this work. I write this book for the same reason.



## Chapter 2

### *Planning a Quarter's Worth of Services*

In our first chapter we looked at how the work of the worship associates is presented in a Sunday morning service. Now we look at how that work is prepared for.

Preparation begins with the quarterly planning meeting, at which the ministers and the associates select the topics for the next quarter's worship services. This chapter is about that planning process.

Of course, the planning process itself needs to be planned!

For a church year that begins in September, the planning needs to start about March, six months in advance. That is when the date for the first quarterly planning meeting needs to be established. It is possible to set the date as early as May or June, or as late as August, but no matter when the date is set, there are bound to be problems with it. In Oakland, we just learned over time to accept that no date was a perfect date, and that one or two people would always find it hard to attend.

If you plan fall worship in May or June, you are planning three to nine months in advance. This will please the music director and the choir, who may need to find and order music, or to sign up soloists, long in advance. Generally, the longer the lead time the happier the musicians are. This is particularly true if one of the planned services is a "music service" that requires months of rehearsals.

But the longer the lead time, the harder it is to predict what will be on the minds and hearts of the congregation -- what they will want and need to hear about. Current events intrude: a war breaks out in the Middle East, a teachers' strike paralyzes the local public schools, the hometown team goes on a monumental winning streak. So the ministers and the worship associates want a shorter lead time, perhaps six or eight weeks, to keep the worship fresh.

And if the ministers of the church take the summer off, so that a different, lay-led program carries out summer worship, and if worship associates themselves take vacations, it's difficult to meet during the summer. In the Oakland church we met sometimes in June, sometimes in August, and never with a great deal of comfort about the date. One makeshift solution that worked sometimes was to meet in August, but to set-aside the first two or three services in September for preplanned services chosen by the ministers and the coordinator of the worship associates.

#### *Planning the planning meeting*

About two weeks before the meeting, the coordinator sends out a memorandum to the associates, with a copy to the ministers. Here is a checklist of things the memo might contain:

- A reminder of when and where the planning meeting is taking place, and notice that the meeting will start on time
- Directions if necessary
- A reminder about set-aside dates for the coming quarter -- Thanksgiving, for example, or Canvass Sunday, or Fathers' Day
- A reminder to bring one's appointment calendar or datebook
- A rough schedule or outline of the planning meeting, including a target end-time

In addition, if it is the first meeting of the year, it's useful to add some or all of the following:

- A list of the worship topics during the last year or two, in order to encourage intentional linking and to discourage accidental repetition
- An encouragement, especially to new associates, to give some advance thought to developing suggestions for topics, including the helpful suggestion to write the topic down, in a couple of sentences, and then try to develop a name or tag or label for it
- Perhaps a paragraph or two -- perhaps from the ministers -- on what makes a good topic for worship
- An effort to invoke the spirit in which the meeting will occur: that the congregation has entrusted its worship to the ministers, who in turn have chosen to share that responsibility with a representative group of lay congregants. In other words, that the planning of worship is about what "we" need as a congregation, not about what "I" want as a worship leader

Each worship associate is encouraged to come to the meeting with three or four possible topics for worship, preferably written out.

What makes a good topic? This seems like a hard question, and it is, but only at first. Like so much connected with worship, one becomes an "old hand" at it surprisingly soon.

A good topic can be a private passion that connects with others' passions. For example, the Oakland church sometimes likes to devote one service a year to Silly Sunday. One worship associate, who had been a clown with the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus, and who served as a consultant to the Pickle Family Circus, suggested asking members of the Pickles to help put on worship. They did, and the service was enchanting -- mime, acrobatics, magic, wizardry, lots of laughter and a few tears too.



A good topic can be an intellectual, emotional, or spiritual challenge. For a Valentine's Day service, one minister suggested a topic close to his heart, the marriage of Georgia O'Keefe and Alfred Steiglitz. What delighted him also touched the congregation.

Nagging problems or recurring concerns can make a service work. One associate, new to Unitarian-Universalism and troubled by what he saw as an impulse in some church members toward shallowness or trendiness of spirit, suggested "Is There Room for Depth?" as a topic. Many people were moved, and smaller groups sprang up to explore the question further.

Another worship associate, an older woman, sought to explore issues of health care for the elderly, including questions of allocations of resources. On Mother's Day, the associate and her daughter -- co-minister of the church -- asked, "Who Lives? Who Dies? Who Decides?" It was a long service, packed with information and personal testament, and people were deeply affected.

Another worship associate said, "People are always talking about the good old days. But if you're a lesbian, or a person of color, the good old days may not have been so good. Maybe these are the good old days." That too became a powerful service topic.

These are just examples of some topics that have worked, in one church. But for consistently good topics, everything depends on tone, on timing, on mood and spirit, on the nature of the congregation and the church, even on architecture. A clown service that works in a 19th-century Romanesque cathedral, with an arched ceiling of redwood beams, might not work in a small country church or fellowship hall.

One quickly becomes an old hand at suggesting worship topics because in the first meeting some kinds of feedback are almost immediate. Suggest a topic and listen to it sing as others go "mmmm"; suggest another topic and listen to it go clunk. Even though the brainstorming session is supposed to be devoid of criticism, some kinds of involuntary responses happen right now.

It's important to note that some topics that elicit only silence when first suggested may still be effective, because they grow on people. "Deeper" topics, or some that are intellectually challenging, often take a while to digest. It is all too easy to let the topic selection process devolve into an "applause meter" mentality. When this happens, services may turn out to be slick but, as with Chinese meals, an hour later you want something more.

Of course, some aspects of worship do not play out until the service itself takes place, and there the feedback may wind up being deferred several weeks or several months down the road. Even then, putting on worship is so exciting that when it works you remember it for a long time -- just as you do when it doesn't. So the feedback on what makes a good worship topic ends up forming a strong loop even when it takes some time.

### *The Quarterly Planning Meeting*

The worship associates coordinator starts the quarterly planning meeting on time, regardless of who is there. Worship itself is about the worshipful, respectful use of time and timing. Meetings that don't start until "everyone is here" penalize the prompt and reward the tardy, instead of the other way around. If the meeting is scheduled for two o'clock, then the really important people are those who are there at two o'clock.

It's good to begin the meeting with a moment of silence, or a prayer, or a song, as a reminder that the work about to be undertaken is sacred work. Ground for the process of the spirit needs to be prepared.

This silence or prayer or song -- or any other means of marking the occasion and setting the tone -- may be led by the coordinator or by a minister or by one of the associates. If the person chosen is not accustomed to invoking silence or prayer or song, it is a courtesy to let them know beforehand, so they can prepare if they want to.

Welcomes follow. In a large church, at the beginning of the year, some members may be unfamiliar to others, so introductions are appropriate, and perhaps also nametags. Some meetings encourage a brief check-in, as a way of catching up, getting current and present with oneself, as well as letting others know how one's participation may need to be taken: "Work is good, home life is wonderful, but I have a splitting headache this afternoon, so if I bark, you know why." It is good to keep the check-in brief, for there is a lot of work to do. Twenty minutes is plenty for a group of twelve associates and two co-ministers.

After everyone has checked in, the ministers then take five or ten minutes to share their sense of the mood or feeling-tone or temperature of the congregation as a whole. It is good if they have taken some time beforehand to reflect on what they will share, because this is a critical time in the meeting. If several members of the congregation are pregnant, this is the time to note that. Public issues should be mentioned that bear on the congregation. An outbreak of common illness, or industrial downsizing, or family tragedy can be acknowledged. So can widespread enthusiasms, or angers, or anxieties. Whatever most needs attention gets the beginnings of that attention now.

At one recent planning meeting, the leading moods or themes for the Oakland congregation included employment, aging, and isolation.

This is a turning toward the professional ministry for their sense of the larger picture, the development or recognition of patterns. It is also an opportunity to suggest changes in process or emphasis. For instance, not long ago a minister mentioned that the board of trustees had wondered whether linking two or more services in successive weeks might be a way to explore questions in greater depth and with deeper wisdom. The meeting seized on this suggestion and ran with it. Another time, a minister said that complaints had been expressed in the worship committee with which she agreed -- that too many services recently had been excessively personal, not universal enough.

The purpose of this overview is to help shape or frame or give a tone to the discussion that will follow. Occasionally, it will invite a brief give and take between ministers and worship associates, by way of clarification or amplification. Almost always the ministers' suggestions of what is on the mind (and heart and spirit) of the congregation is met with nods and murmurs of agreement from the associates. Often one or more associates will want to take what is said one step further. That's good, but it can turn into full-fledged discussion before the time is ripe. The ministers' time is meant to be suggestive, not definitive.

Next, the ministers and the coordinator of the worship associates review special events in the quarter to come. At one recent planning session, for winter quarter 1994, services were reviewed from New Year's through Easter. These included:

- the church's traditional Tolling of the Bells service, first Sunday of the New Year
- Martin Luther King's Birthday
- Valentine's Day
- Palm Sunday
- Easter

This meant that of the 14 Sundays in winter quarter, four or five (Valentine's Day being considered optional) would call for topics appropriate to that day.

By this time in the planning meeting, it's usually good to take a break. The hardest work - - and the most fun -- is coming next.

### *Brainstorming Worship Topics*

The brainstorming session, heart of the planning process, then takes place. This is when the voice of the whole church, acting through its representatives, the ministers and worship associates, decides what the services for the next quarter will be about.



Materials needed are: big sheets of butcher paper, an easel, magic markers of at least two colors, scotch tape, and walls.

There are two roles, coordinator and recorder. After the break, the coordinator reconvenes the group in a semicircle, and, working around the circle, invites each worship associate and co-minister, one by one, to suggest a topic for a service, briefly explain it in a sentence or two, and give it a title. If someone has more than one topic to suggest, on this first go-round they're encouraged to state the one that moves them the most, that most excites them -- their first choice.

Another method preferred by some is not to work around the semicircle but rather just to invite spontaneous volunteering, popcorn style. This permits people to piggyback onto each others' ideas. In some, this encourages creativity and spontaneity. In others, however, who may be shy about sharing their ideas, it breeds silence, sullenness, or shallowness.

It's the job of the coordinator to make sure that every precinct is fairly heard from. Often the deepest topics come from the quietest associates.

As the topics are given informal titles, the recorder records them on sheets of butcher paper taped to the wall facing the semicircle. If the nominator of a topic has already chosen a title by which the idea can be known, that saves some time.

It's good for the recorder to use at least two contrasting colors of magic markers, and to alternate them line by line, for ease of visibility. Also, it's good to number each topic. The recorder's job requires a certain ego-freedom, since he or she must write the idea down as closely as possible in the nominator's words. This helps to avoid confusion and to keep the idea as it was presented. Ideas are fragile beings, especially in their infancy. They need delicate, respectful handling.

The only positive "rule" for the brainstorming session is that no criticism of ideas is permitted. It's the responsibility of the coordinator to implement this. The reason is that this is strictly a creative session, in which the more ideas, the better.

Even far-out ideas that eventually prove unworkable may still generate other, more usable ideas -- but only if they are allowed to percolate, without being cut off prematurely. There is plenty of time later to winnow and reduce. But questions strictly for clarification are permitted.

A sample dialogue:

Coordinator: Jon, what about you?

Jon: I'm interested in how we demonize diseases -- years ago, polio, then cancer, more recently AIDS. I wonder if there is a better way, a more religious way, to respond to whatever gets stirred up by disease.

Recorder: "Demonizing Diseases"?

Jon: Sure, that'll do.

[Recorder writes "22. Demonizing Diseases" on the butcher paper.]

Coordinator: Susan -- your turn.

Susan: I know several parents who are interested in how their kids relate to the Bible. Or don't relate. Should we be teaching Bible to our kids, or not?

Tom: I don't think we should.

Coordinator: We can debate that later if we need to, Tom. This brainstorming session is just for idea-generating. Will "Kids and the Bible" do, Susan?

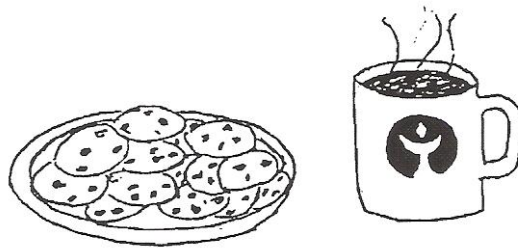
Susan: That sounds all right.

Recorder: "Kids and the Bible" it is. [Writes #23 on butcher paper.]

Nominations for topics continue, moving back and forth around the semicircle until everyone has had a chance to suggest two or three topics. Some may contribute more, others only one, or even none. There is a rule at the Oakland church that if you cannot attend the planning meeting, you do not "get" a service -- unless you have suggested an idea to someone who can bring it to the meeting for you and share it during the brainstorming. This guideline was once just an informal understanding, but recently it has developed into a formal rule, because it's useful. So long as everyone understands it in advance, it works well.

At a recent meeting of 12 associates and two co-ministers, a total of 33 topics were put forward. That's about two and half per person.

This brainstorming process is lively and exciting. It can take 45 minutes to an hour or more. When it is done, it's good to take another break. People will need one!



After the break, the group reconvenes and identifies themes within the topics. This accomplishes several things. It identifies what is on people's minds and needs to be addressed. It's a way of linking or combining possible topics, which both reduces the total number and makes them more inclusive. And it makes possible two or three services in a row that can develop a particular theme in great depth. In a recent winter quarter, four main topics seemed most on people's minds:

- Church Values and Congregational Responsibilities
- Vocation

- Personal Integration
- The Common Good

Later, in the actual planning of services, a fifth, unnamed theme emerged, which eventually unified the Palm Sunday and Easter services. The working topic for the Palm Sunday service became “Dying Young” and for Easter a combination of “Life’s Second Winds” and “Follow Your Dreams.”

When there are two dozen suggested topics and only a dozen services, adapting the topics to the services requires (1) combining some topics with others -- that is, “marrying” two related topics in one service -- and (2) rejecting other suggestions entirely.

At first, this can be an emotionally difficult process. When you suggest four absolutely brilliant topics, and it begins to look as though all four of them will wind up on the cutting room floor, your resilience may be sorely tested. The winnowing provides an opportunity for people to learn, or relearn, how to win some, and lose some, gracefully. The trick is to reduce the total number of suggestions to the total number of services, while letting people know their suggestions have value even when not adopted.

If your suggestions did not catch fire, usually there is something to glean from the process. Were the ideas tried out on others, one at a time, before being hatched publicly? Were they fully thought through -- written out, and boiled down to a couple of sentences, for ease of understanding? Did they have a catchy title so people could remember them?

Although most parts of the brainstorming process have been fairly fully worked out, the winnowing process has never reduced itself to a simple mechanism. It seems to get reinvented at each meeting. Sometimes, for example, service topics are selected by acclamation, as when a suggestion evokes a chorus of “mmmm”s when first volunteered. Or a topic may be mentioned in different forms or guises by four or five nominators, in which case a service seems appropriate. Once in a while, when an impasse is reached, the group is invited to cast votes, with everyone getting three or four votes and going to the butcher paper and writing their initials next to their choices.

Here is where the leadership of the ministers is especially valuable. Their experience tells them that some topics will work well and others will not. As guardians of the institutional memory of the liturgy, they can remind us that a similar topic three years ago was well received. Or they can say, “I’ve preached on that topic three times now, and I’ve said all I have to say.”

Almost always the ministers have veto power over a suggestion that will be divisive, or that they simply feel they cannot do justice to. A recent suggestion of antidepressants as a worship topic -- what it means when significant percentages of a nation are reported to be taking mood-altering drugs -- was rejected because a few members of the congregation were known to a minister to be taking such drugs, and it would be impossible to treat the issue squarely without igniting issues of confidentiality.

If a minister says, I can't do that one, it is dropped.

Well, not always. Once AIDS was raised as an issue, and the co-minister rejected it, saying he had preached three times on the subject, and the well was dry. But the associates pleaded that new developments had made this an issue that really needed to be addressed, and after much soul-searching the minister agreed. Weeks later, his sermon began, "I thought I had said everything I had to say on the subject of AIDS. I was wrong." It was a powerful service.

By the same token, if a minister really wants to preach on a given topic, and his or her topic is so obscure that it does not gather support, nonetheless the group can and sometimes will adopt the topic purely out of trust in or affection for the minister. But the path to this result can be circuitous, as the following tongue-in-cheek account from the Oakland newsletter shows.

"On January 23, Rob Eller-Isaacs will preach on 'Concepts of Time from Francis Bacon to Robinson Jeffers,' a topic which he strongly recommended to the Worship Associates, invoking what he called the 'Co-Minister's Four-Times Rule.'

"Pressed for an explanation of this peculiar-sounding doctrine, he solemnly declared that it was a rule of the Worship Associates that any topic that had been suggested four times at four different planning meetings by one of the co-ministers was compelled to get extra-special consideration as a worship topic.

"Pressed further by skeptical associates, Rob cheerfully admitted that the rule was of recent origin, and had in fact just been made up, by him. Since no one present fully understood the obscure topic he was proposing to preach on, none of the Worship Associates objected to the suggestion that, just this once, it might be all right to let one of the co-ministers actually select his own service topic."

This account provoked an anguished protest from two members of the congregation, who asked what was becoming of the freedom of the pulpit, if a minister had to fight for the right to preach on whatever topic suited him. The protest led to a workshop on freedom of the pulpit at the next worship associate retreat, at which a remarkable sermon on the subject by Earl Holt was distributed and discussed.

The process of winnowing topics involves discerning connections between nominations ("Number 3 hooks up with numbers 17 and 22"), and between nominations and themes the ministers have suggested are current in the lives of the congregation. The group may decide to allocate two or three services to a theme that has provoked powerful nominations. Connections may also appear between set-aside dates, such as Thanksgiving, and suggested topics.

In the give and take of discussion, consensus often emerges on which topics gather the most support. But care is also taken to make sure that so-called stand-alone topics are not overlooked. For example, someone may suggest a topic that does not link up with any

other topic, and that only “sings” for two or three of the group: “Patriotism in the ‘90’s,” for example. But if those two or three really want to see the subject treated, and one of them is a co-minister -- that is, the person who must preach on the topic -- often it is chosen in spite of the seeming lack of broad-based support. Sometimes depth of interest -- how much one or two people care -- is more important than breadth of interest -- how many people care. But purely private fancies seldom make good worship topics.

Sometimes topics are chosen on the basis of the constituency to be served. If a visiting minister is coming to preach, the ministers may suggest a topic that they know will suit her interests. (Visitors are always given the option of choosing their own topic, if the one suggested doesn’t appeal to them.) If the children haven’t gotten their share of attention lately, a service devoted to them will quickly win support. One of the most popular and spirited services in recent memory at Oakland was based on Maurice Sendak’s children’s book, *Where The Wild Things Are*.

#### *Assigning Dates and Bidding for Services*

With the schedule set, everyone gathers their datebooks and the associates bid for services, with preference going to the associate who originally suggested the topic for that service. This part of the process usually takes half an hour.

The co-ministers then take the tentative schedule home with them and negotiate who will take which services -- which depends partly on their interests and partly on their schedules. The music -- choir and guest artist appearances -- are then plugged in.

Finally, the worship associates coordinator sends out a final schedule to the ministers, the associates, the music director, the dance choir director, the director of children’s education, and all others affected by the topics of the services.

Formal titles are not given to the services until the assigned co-minister and the worship associate develop the topic, usually three weeks before the service. Sometimes, as circumstances dictate, topics may be modified, postponed, or -- rarely -- even scrapped.

This may be the best place to mention that the Oakland church has the luxury of co-ministers, who share the worship responsibilities evenly between them. If Janne Eller-Isaacs is free on date such-and-such, and Rob is not, or if Janne feels more comfortable preaching on Topic X, or working with Worship Associate Y than Rob does, they can trade responsibilities and dates between themselves, and no one’s feelings need be hurt.

A solo minister does not have that luxury.

So it would seem that if a church has only one minister, who does all the preaching for that congregation, probably that minister needs to have as much leeway in declining topics as he or she does in rejecting worship associates.



### Chapter 3

#### *Preparing the Service*

Following the worship planning meeting, there may be weeks or even months of fallow time before the individual service takes place. A service planned in June may not be scheduled to happen till October. The summer and fall, then, will be the time of reflection, background reading, article clipping, informal conversation, noodling. Neither the worship associate nor the minister is actively working on the service during this fallow period.

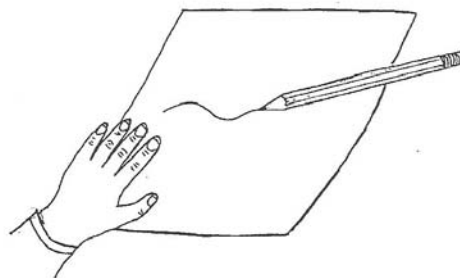
And yet, somehow, mysteriously, the work is being done.

The worship associate, if he or she is new, is beginning to see worship services with fresh eyes. Was the call to worship this past Sunday too long? Too personal? Should the associate have practiced at the microphone a few more minutes? Did the minister's call to a hospital emergency room late Saturday night cause her to miss her morning spiritual exercises, and was that why her prayers seemed ragged? Is the church as a whole still struggling with how to end its Sunday services, how to move the faithful out the door gracefully?

The associate may also be quietly assembling possible readings for the planned service, identifying hymns that the congregation seems to enjoy singing, noting when parts of sermons evoke the deep silence that implies profound learning going on, asking whether perhaps a different tone to the introduction to the embracing meditation might cut down on the number of political speeches that people are tempted to make.

The minister may be noting how each associate is doing his or her job as the services for the quarter unfold. He thinks of suggestions for improvement that might be appropriate, and passes them along to the coordinator. He also notes the compliments and complaints in the worship comment book in the sanctuary. And in the back of his mind, the minister is thinking about the service, about the congregation, what needs to be said, what needs to be heard, what will work, what will not.

Nothing is happening, really, and yet . . . the work of worship, the work of the people, the creating of worth, is quietly going forward.



The first blip on the radar screen, the earliest warning, occurs three or four weeks before the actual service date. At least three weeks out from the service, it is the responsibility of the worship associate to contact the minister and schedule a time to talk about the service. This conversation can be as short as fifteen minutes or as long as an hour or more.

The purpose of this “three-weeks-out” meeting is to remind both associate and minister of what is coming up, to sharpen their focus on the subject of this service, to share any evolutions of thought and sentiment and ideas since the planning meeting, and to set up a schedule down to D-Day.

Here are some of the things that can happen at this first one-on-one planning meeting:

“I’ve been thinking about the idea we agreed on and I think it will work better if we emphasize this part of it . . .

“New facts since we planned this topic have a big impact on it. Here’s what we need to think about.”

(Those facts might be local, like births and deaths in the congregation, a big layoff at the local plant, an election campaign underway. They might be national or global. But if they bear on the topic planned long ago, now is the time to acknowledge that fact, and make the necessary adjustments.)

“I’ve run into a great book since I proposed this idea. If you want, I can summarize it, or recommend chapters that specially affect our topic, or select some quotes that fairly recapitulate its theses.”

“So and so had a wonderful idea for a hymn.”

This is also the time to work up the final, formal title for the service. The working title from the planning meeting may or may not survive this re-imagining. The final title can be catchy, straightforward, provocative, amusing -- whatever suits the mood and style of the church and those who put on worship. Two heads are often better than one.

This is also the time to put together the blurb for the newsletter that describes the service. Blurb-making is useful, and can be revelatory, if the expectations for it aren’t too high. Sometimes the topic remains clearly in focus from the time it was first suggested, and then the blurb will usually be clear and crisp: the service three weeks from now “will explore how a close examination of 19th century Universalist evangelism can help us define our religious identity today.”

But sometimes the three-weeks-out meeting clarifies only that much remains to be done. Long after the fallow period is over, the thinking is still fuzzy. The passion has turned into something else. New horizons beckon. Or the germ has sprouted but needs further watering. Then the blurb may be wonderfully vague and poetic: “When we unearth the

dirt of ages, we cannot know what we will find, nor what lessons lurk amid the shards of time, etc., etc.” This is a sign to those who know that minister and worship associate are still refining their focus, and Sunday morning may be more of a surprise than usual.

Perhaps this is the place to mention that one cannot work with a worship preparation process without developing a keen flexibility and even a sense of the absurd. Some topics that seem just wonderful at the first planning session fade out over time. Some are made less fashionable or even obsolete by new events. And some seem boring later on.

I once preached on “God-Shyness.” As a relative newcomer to Unitarian-Universalism, I asked the question, “How come nobody wants to talk about God around here?” A couple of years later, I was asked to reprise the sermon at another church. I discovered that people still didn’t want to talk about God -- and neither did I. I didn’t care as much as I once did. A topic that had fired me up once upon a time now left me flat.

Each topic, and each service, soon acquires a life of its own. This life has its own imperatives. Most people who work on preparing services eventually have the experience of asking themselves whatever possessed them to think that anyone would want to hear about this particular topic.

At times like that, it’s important to remember that the topic was agreed on by a representative committee of the church, with the minister or ministers in attendance -- and they all wanted to hear about it, or at least were willing to hear about it. And depending on the shape of one’s faith, it is also possible to believe that when Sunday morning rolls around, and the minister and worship associate enter the chancel, the spirit may be walking with them, and any deficiencies in enthusiasm on their part may be taken care of by forces not within their control.

The three-out meeting may end with an assignment or two for the worship associate -- select three hymns for us to pick one from; find a couple of readings in this book; give some thought to whether the introduction to the joys and concerns should be specially shaped in light of our topic; and so on -- plus a scheduled time for the next meeting.

This “one-out” meeting should take place a week or ten days before the service. Its exact scheduling may depend on printing schedules for the order of service, among other things.

At this meeting the final order of service is fixed. A sample from the Oakland church appears as Appendix B. To this meeting, the associate will bring whatever the two have agreed will be his or her share: suggestions for hymns, suggestions for readings, drafts of calls to worship or the introductions to the meditations, ideas for the sermon, whatever.

This crafting of the order of service is a prime teaching opportunity for the minister, if he or she wants to take advantage of it. Most worship associates do not have experience crafting worship, at least at first, and they appreciate being shown why this goes here and that goes there. In the Oakland church, for example, Rob Eller-Isaacs holds that in

weaving words and music and silence, words should never follow words, music should never follow music, and silence follows silence only after death.

Whether the minister should review the associate's work in advance of the service is between the two of them. Some ministers feel that the freedom of the pulpit that they share with associates means that no pre-publication censorship is appropriate or necessary. Some also feel that they would rather be surprised by what the associate says, in keeping with the hoped-for freshness and spontaneity of worship. Those who feel this way nevertheless find ways after the service to communicate to associates their sentiments, both positive and negative.

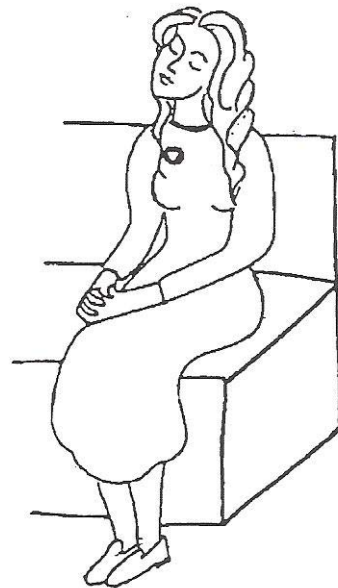
Other ministers have no reluctance to ask to see what is to be spoken and to offer help and guidance in shaping it.

For many worship associates, these meetings with the minister are the most fun part of the whole process. It's a chance to see how worship is put together from the inside out. It gives a sense of the values and the skills and the machinery that makes the magic of Sunday morning happen.

For ministers, too, these meetings can be particularly stimulating. They are a chance to bring the minister's expertise in shaping worship together with a talented, interested member of the congregation on a subject that has piqued that member's curiosity or fired their passion, a subject moreover that has been pre-approved by a thoughtful, representative group of the congregation.

It's hard to imagine a combination more likely to guarantee success on Sunday morning.

Part II:  
Getting a Worship Associates Program Started



## **Chapter 4**

### ***Choosing Worship Associates***

So -- you've decided that a worship associates program might work for your church. How do you get one started?

Like almost everything in church life, a worship associates program starts with the people. First you have to choose them, and then you have to train them. This chapter is about choosing them.

#### *Whom to Choose?*

You might think that a logical first question is: who does the choosing? For the overall success of the program, that's an important question. In one sense, it does come first. But getting a program started can get bogged down in preliminaries like choosing the choosers. So let's just note that the choosers can be anyone on a spectrum from the minister himself or herself, to a small committee, to the whole congregation.

Because it's an important question, we'll take it up later. But for the moment let's focus on the more immediate question of who ought to serve as a worship associate.

This breaks down into two sub-questions: which individuals would be good at the work, and what kind of group as a whole would be good at the work? Let's first take a look at a couple of principles that can guide us toward what the complete group might look like.

#### 1. As to the Group -- First Principle: Balance the Ticket

Taken as a whole, the Worship Associates ought to reflect the entire congregation. When we who worship enter the sanctuary, and see laity in the chancel who are involved in the service, we need to see ourselves reflected in that laity, our spiritual brothers and sisters.

If your congregation has many youthful members, but you choose no worship associates under 35, eventually you're going to have a problem -- not right away, maybe, but eventually. People will begin to murmur about how stuffy the Worship Associates program seems, or how come we're just not attracting enough young people around here?

Balancing the ticket, as any politician knows, is a delicate process.

Every congregation or fellowship has at least a couple of identities -- one as it actually is, and one as it would like to be. The real reality walks hand in hand with the ideal reality. Even those of us in our 50's, with grey hair and a paunch, may see ourselves, in our mind's eye, in our heart of hearts, as lean and mean young hipsters.

If among the worship associates in our church's congregation there is no one with even a trace of hipness, no one lean and mean with even a hint of cool, we'll be disappointed.

We may be reluctant to say why -- we may not even know why -- but we'll be disappointed.

Democracy -- diversity by a more ancient name -- is the watchword. The worship associates group should be as diverse as the congregation is, and as diverse as it would like to be. This means that the worship associate selection process must be both hard-nosed and dreamy at the same time.<sup>2</sup>

The Oakland church, for example, is located in an inner-city neighborhood. Despite great efforts, it has attracted only a few congregants of color. Since it hopes to have more, it makes a point of trying to attract and recruit Worship Associates of color. A church that has three Filipino members out of a congregation of 100, but hopes to have more, might invite one of its Filipino members to apply to serve as a Worship Associate.

What makes for democracy? Some diversity factors could include:

- race
- sex
- sexual preference
- body type
- physical ability
- age
- esthetic preferences<sup>3</sup>
- worship style (atheist / theist / humanist / Christian / etc.)
- new member / old member

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<sup>2</sup> This spring I was giving a ride to a Yam Ha Shoah service to two Holocaust survivors, women in their seventies who had emigrated from the Ukraine to San Francisco four or five years ago. I asked them what struck them most about the United States. "In this country, you think deeply about people," one said. As a bus pulled up next to us, I asked her what she meant. She gestured toward the bus. "Bus," she said, "for wheelchairs. Up -- down," she added, pointing to the lift at the bus's front door. "Amazing," she said, shaking her head. "Only in America."

I don't know if she was right about buses with wheelchair access being available only in America. But I do know, and am proud, that we try to think about people in America. Democracy in a worship associates program means not thinking shallowly about categories of people, but rather thinking deeply about who they are in their inmost selves, who they would like to be, and how they can contribute most profoundly to the worship life of the church.

<sup>3</sup> Norman Mailer once separated American writers into the cleans and the dirtys. This might or might not work in a church setting.

- ethnic background
- class (rich / poor; blue collar / white collar)
- personal style (formal / casual; serious / funny)
- skills (A dances, B sings, C writes good poetry, D arranges flowers beautifully)

More factors tend to emerge as the selection process unfolds. Some of them may be remarkably subtle. The usefulness of all of the factors, blended together, depends on each congregation's unique makeup and its hopes for itself and its people.

Diversity issues can become critical about halfway through the selection process. As you put together your ticket, ask: Is any significant group within the congregation unrepresented or under-represented? Who would help to balance the ticket?

Bear in mind that it's possible, in the hyperfocus of selecting candidates, to overdo the effort at diversity. A perfectly balanced ticket is impossible; all that can happen is a thoughtful effort in that direction. Congregations can sometimes be more grown-up about this than selection committees. If week by week the members of the congregation experience a likeable variety of lay individuals and styles in the chancel, they will appreciate the effort to balance the ticket, and remain untroubled by *the unexplained absence, for the umpteenth straight year, of a single worship associate born in Tierra Del Fuego*. The more rigid or doctrinaire among us may be shocked at this omission; the congregation will probably just yawn.

## 2. As to the Group -- Second Principle: Pick the Gracious

One other important factor that can be overlooked in the selection process -- but shouldn't be -- is how easy the person is to work with. Are they a "team player"? Will other worship associates get along with them? Perhaps more important, will the minister or ministers work well with them? Particularly in a new program, being a team player is an important factor.

This is because the worship associates as a group need to have the confidence of the congregation, need to be able to speak *for* the congregation and *to* it, as well as to the ministers. Much more of the work is collaborative than appears at first. In the sanctuary, only the minister and the associate are visible. But much of the work that has gone into the final product is collegial and relational. A good esprit de corps among worship associates is vital.

Choosing those individuals who are popular or respected in the church is a big help in making the team work. And it is to selecting those individuals that we now turn.



3. As to Individuals -- First Principle: Especially When a Group Is New,  
Choose The Respected

Being a Worship Associate is meant to be an honor. All else being equal (which it isn't), worship associate status ought to go to those whom the congregation will acknowledge have "earned it," in light of long or meritorious service to the congregation.

If people in church every Sunday morning see the Worship Associate in the chancel and say "Who he?" you're going to have a problem -- unless that person is a newcomer whom you have reason to believe is gifted at the work.

For new programs, just getting started, if the first people chosen as Worship Associates are highly thought of in the church, that will go a long way toward establishing the program. "Who is she? That's Susie Jones, we worked on a committee together, you'll like what she has to say."

At the same time, it is a mistake to consider work as a Worship Associate a mere reward for longtime membership and service that is "earned" independent of whether one has a gift for it. It is common for pressure to be brought to bear upon the choosers by those who have been generous to the church with their time or their money. How the church responds to this pressure reveals a lot about its spiritual maturity.

A long-time, generous member of one church applied to be a Worship Associate, in spite of not having the talent for it. He had done some summer worship at another, nearby church which was poorly received. Bitterly disappointed when he was turned down, he asked around, and discovered people had been avoiding saying how they felt about his worship contributions. He (and his generosity in time and money) left the church a few months later.

Once the program is established, you can take a gamble on someone who is not known to the congregation. One candidate at Oakland was strongly supported one year despite the fact that no one knew him. It took only one service for the congregation to "get to know" him and decide he was a fine choice after all.

4. As to Individuals -- Second Principle: When the Group Is Established,  
Choose The Gifted (or at least The Trainable)

Most people who meet the public regularly have to be good at public speaking -- teachers, salespeople, politicians, lawyers, actors, and the like. Others aren't so comfortable. The fear of speaking in public is common.<sup>4</sup>

Some people with little experience are nonetheless trainable, through microphone training, feedback forms, retreat sessions, and the like, which we'll discuss in the next chapter. Most become good at public worship by their second or third service as Worship

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<sup>4</sup> In the 1930's, a young professor at Yale Law School confessed to Dean William O. Douglas that after several years of teaching, he was still nervous whenever he stepped into a classroom. "If you're not nervous," Douglas said helpfully, "you're no damn good." W. O. Douglas, *Go East, Young Man*.

Associates. Everyone's first experience usually has its share of mistakes. If respected, deserving people are chosen, the congregation will cut them some slack.

On balance, those with gifts at public speaking are to be preferred to those without. But don't overlook the quiet backbencher who speaks seldom but then with real moral authority.

5. As to Individuals -- Third Principle: Choose Those Who Will Take It Seriously

Unitarian Universalism has its share of enthusiasts, and enthusiasm in worship is engaging, but flakiness in doing the work of worship is destructive. The best indicator of serious intent is one's track record on other church projects. The second-best indicator is the care taken in preparing the application.

Here is a copy of a recent application form the Oakland church has used. The minimal space between the questions is designed to encourage thoughtfulness and brevity. An applicant who needs many lines to explain their interest in worship will probably also insist on many minutes at the lectern. As a law school admissions officer once said, the thicker the file, the thicker the applicant.

Comments on what the questions are meant to discover appear in brackets.

APPLICATION for WORSHIP ASSOCIATE

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Nickname, if any \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Day Phone: ( )

Evening Phone: ( )

Email:

1. How long have you been associated with the First Unitarian Church of Oakland?

*[The message is: Experience counts]*

2. How long have you been associated with Unitarian Universalism?

*[Experience in other churches counts too]*

3. Are you familiar with the history and traditions of Unitarian Universalism and this congregation, or are you actively studying these subjects?

*[Familiarity counts, or willingness to get it]*

4. Please tell us a little about your involvement with this church (classes taken, committees served on, choir, etc.)

*[Service counts too, and so does a high profile]*

5. Have you any previous religious affiliations? If so, please list them.

*[Experience in other faith traditions counts]*

6. Do you have experience in public speaking? If so, please explain.

*[Public speaking or dramatic ability counts]*

7. Why would you like to serve as a Worship Associate or Summer Worship Leader?

*[Desire, and clarity about desire, also count]*

8. What skills, talents, or special knowledge can you offer the worshipping community?

*[Confidence and gameness count, and special gifts]*

9. What would you hope to learn from your involvement?

*[Depth -- the ability to reflect -- counts]*

10. Are there community needs or concerns that you'd like to address?

*[A reminder that worship is more than an ego trip]*

11. What's important to you about worship?

*[A chance to demonstrate a feel for worship]*

12. Are there topics or themes you have interest in for future worship services? If so, please discuss briefly.

*[How fruitful are your suggestions likely to be?]*

13. Can you come to the Worship Retreat on [specific dates]?

*[How committed are you? Will you sacrifice?]*

14. Anything else you'd like us to know about you?

*[A chance to share special needs, hopes, desires]*

Thanks for taking the time to apply and fill this out.

Please return this form to the Worship Table in Wendte Hall.

*[Your interest in this process is appreciated]*

The application form, taken as a whole, invites carefulness, thoughtfulness, clarity and brevity in prose, esthetic sensitivity, courtesy, and honesty. It says to applicants, "These

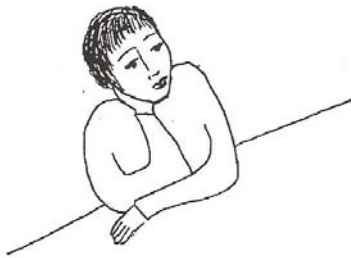
are some of our values. If you share these values we would probably enjoy working with you, and you with us.”

The application form is important. It's the first time the program asks something of an applicant. Some members have said they decided to apply only after reading the application form, because it seemed thought-provoking and respectful of their time. The application form itself begins the teaching process, and is the first of a series of teaching tools, meant to teach applicants about what the program values and what it will expect of them.

#### 6. As to Individuals -- Fourth Principle: Pick the Interesting (not just the Interested)

If you are choosing, it is perfectly all right to pick people you'd like to work with and get to know better. Service as a worship associate offers a chance to share something of oneself with the congregation, a few of one's passions or curiosities, or simply a portion of the story of the journey of one's life. Chances are, someone whose personal story interests the choosers will interest the congregation as well.

This brings us to the important question we sidestepped earlier: who does the choosing?



#### *Who Should Choose the Worship Associates?*

Especially at the outset of a program, Who Chooses is an important question, because it will help determine whether the program has legitimacy in the eyes of the congregation.

The minister or ministers can do the choosing, and that has the virtue of being efficient. In the beginning of a program, a certain amount of ministerial direction and guidance is perfectly appropriate.

But dangers exist if the minister does all the choosing, dangers so serious that the practice is not recommended. Those picked are likely to be thought of, and think of themselves, as “the minister's choices,” as opposed to spokespeople for the congregation. They are less likely to feel responsible to and for the congregation. And the conversation between chancel and pew may turn out to be the minister just talking to herself.

Incidentally, since Worship Associates work closely with ministers, anyone whom the minister can't work with should not be picked. That is, regardless of who chooses, the minister should have veto power over all choices. It probably shouldn't be used often, but it ought to exist, and it ought to be used every once in a while just to keep the principle in force.

If a minister wants to keep some degree of control over the process but doesn't want to take full responsibility for doing the choosing, he or she can convene a small committee of advisors to assist in the choosing. How many advisors, and how to choose them, will

depend on such things as the degree of the laity's involvement in worship up to that time, the minister's experience with a worship associates program, the minister's length of service with that congregation, and so on.

Ideally, the Worship Associates are chosen in a democratic fashion by a committee that fairly represents the whole church. The democracy is important not only as it embodies the principles of our movement, but also because an associate speaks for the whole church when he or she is in the chancel. The power of this speech, and the responsibility that goes with it, runs in two directions.

Most worship associates, at one time or another, and often before their first effort, find themselves anxiously asking whatever persuaded them they had something valuable to say to the assembly on Sunday Morning. In those knock-kneed moments, the whole congregation is a critical source of authority for the associate. It makes a huge difference if he or she feels they have been chosen by the entire church, rather than just hand-picked by a friendly minister or worship committee chair.

In the Oakland church the Worship Associates are picked by the Worship Committee, who are an entirely separate bunch. The Worship Committee consists of about eight people, each of whom has a portfolio of special responsibility on the Worship Committee: earth-based worship, special celebrations (e.g., passover seders) , flowers, sanctuary esthetics, music, the worship associates program (the coordinator of the worship associates sits on the Worship Committee), and so on.<sup>5</sup>

In general, the committee tries to represent every aspect of the worship life of the whole church, in and out of the sanctuary, on Sunday morning and during the rest of the week. The Worship Committee also includes the co-ministers, each of whom has a vote in the selection process, along with everyone else.

The Worship Committee chair is chosen by the Board of Trustees, and he or she in turn selects the members of the Worship Committee. Fears of nepotism are somewhat abated by the portfolio-driven nature of the seats on the committee. One of the most important functions of the Worship Committee, perhaps its primary function, is to recruit and select the Worship Associates.

#### *When and How Are the Worship Associate Choices Made?*

When the church's year begins in September, the choices should be made early enough in that year so that the incoming Worship Associates have a chance to study how worship in the church actually goes. This means February or March is a good time to choose. Choosing in February or March leaves regular services in April and May before the ministers depart on their summer break in June, when the summer worship lay team takes

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<sup>5</sup> From time to time, responsibilities shift. Music, for example, recently became its own committee.

over summer worship.<sup>6</sup> Also, if a Worship Associate is not well known to the congregation when chosen in February or March, there is time for them to become more well known before they take up their duties.

When the choices are made in February or March, old and new members can mingle for a couple of months. Overnight retreats are possible, which can combine a planning session for spring or fall worship and training for the new and returning associates.

Four to six weeks before the choices are to be made, applications can start to be solicited. Current associates can recommend others who might be encouraged to apply. The goal of diversity can begin to be served by recruiting a broad cross-section of applicants. Of course, it is important to make clear to applicants that merely encouraging someone to apply is no guarantee that they will be selected. In a democratic process, there are bound to be surprises. If there are no surprises, the process isn't democratic.

The applications are collected over a period of several weeks by one person. A table with a colorful sign at coffee hour after the Sunday service, and announcements in the monthly bulletin and the order of service (or during the service) are all helpful in generating publicity.

People may need to be gently pushed at this stage: some of the best worship associates may be reluctant to step forward. Those who are exceedingly eager to become worship associates -- because they just have soooooo much to say!!!!!!!!!! -- may not always make the best candidates.

There is no ideal number of applicants, but for a developed, mature program, twelve seems to work well as a total number of associates.

Why twelve? Where a church plans its worship on a quarterly basis, twelve or thirteen weeks form a quarter, and each associate then gets about one service per quarter. The commitment is for one year, and that means applicants are asked only to commit to about three services during the course of the year. A church that asks for more time, from people who have never done this sort of work before, may find it is asking more than people feel they can give.

Fewer than twelve might also work, with each associate doing one-plus or two services per quarter. A smaller number than twelve might be appropriate for a small congregation, or one that was just starting up a Worship Associates program. But some larger congregations enjoy seeing fresh faces and hearing fresh voices in the chancel each week for a quarter, and variety in worship is, after all, part of the reason for having associates. The best long-range goal seems to be about a dozen associates.

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<sup>6</sup> There is some overlap between Worship Associates and summer worship leaders, but not much. The ministers have almost nothing to do with summer worship. Now and then, Worship Associates serve as summer worship leaders. The two programs are generally separate in the Oakland church, though occasionally worship retreats are scheduled together, in order to facilitate training.

If there are twelve associates, 20 to 30 applicants is about right -- if you can get them. Fewer than 20 and you may not have enough latitude to weed out those who are not suited for the work, so as to pick those most gifted. More than 30 and you will have a lot of rejected people.

How to handle rejecting people? This is a sensitive process. When it comes to rejection, Unitarian Universalists are delicately perched. Here are a handful of suggestions.

- First, make clear in publicity that you hope to receive enough applications to represent a real cross-section of the church. Stress that applying doesn't guarantee acceptance. Keep expectations modest.
- Second, make clear that the job is gift-based, not reward-based; that ten years of hard labor on the pigeon control committee -- though deeply appreciated -- doesn't automatically translate to worship associate.
- Third, make the choices promptly and notify people promptly, with a courteous letter from the chair of the worship or selection committee.
- Fourth, personalize the process. Remember that you are dealing with the church's most precious possessions -- its people. If the volume of applications requires a form letter rejection, stick a personal, handwritten note on each one. Some people may require a phone call, from committee members known for their tact and empathy. Occasionally a call from the minister may be appropriate. "Consolation prizes" of summer worship, or other opportunities for service, may also be appropriate.
- Fifth, make sure that committee members understand that handling rejections is part of the selection process. That is, any followups -- how to explain rejection to X, what opportunities to offer Y -- should be done right when the selections are made. Selection committee members should volunteer to take assignments to assist in the notifying (the chair should always send the letters, but calls from others are helpful)
- Finally, consider the selection process another chance for everyone to learn how to win some and how to lose some, gracefully. Worship is about we, not me.

Some people who are new to the church may be encouraged to apply again next year. The same is true if too many of a given group have applied, though care should be taken to make clear that associates are selected first on qualifications and only second on their ability to help balance a ticket. Someone who is told that the only reason they were rejected was that "By the time we got to your name, we had already chosen three lesbians" may (mis)understand that they were being considered, and rejected, only because of their sexual orientation, with no consideration being given to whether they were qualified to do the work. Most people, though not all, are pretty grown-up about being rejected if they feel they were treated fairly and decently in the process.

Incidentally, it is good to require current Worship Associates to re-apply. Otherwise, every one-time selection would become permanent, at the whim of the chosen associate, and newcomers would be frozen out. Each year at Oakland, about two-thirds of the Worship Associates are brand-new. The institutional framework is strong enough to absorb such a high percentage of newcomers without a dropoff in quality.

Once the applications are collected, they need to be read by the selectors. If the church can afford it, copies of the applications can be circulated in advance of the selection meeting. That makes for a more thoughtful process.

If advance reading isn't possible, simultaneous, group reading will do. That can take an hour or more if there are, say, 30 applications. One way to do it is to place the selectors in a room and pass the applications around the table. An extra copy or two of each application facilitates the process.

When the reading is done, or at least well under way, one way to do the choosing is to get a quick visual fix on how each application is faring.

Begin by making a grid on the chalkboard or pad of butcher paper. Write the names of the applicants down the left-hand side, drawing horizontal lines across the board next to each name.

Across the top of the board, write:

NAME	YES	MAYBE	NO
------	-----	-------	----

When each selector finishes reading an application, he or she goes to the board and writes their initials next to that applicant's name, somewhere along the continuum from Yes to Maybe to No. This produces an immediate visual impression of how the applicant is rated. For example:

<u>NAME</u>	<u>YES</u>	<u>MAYBE</u>	<u>NO</u>
Joe	GV BR CC	BZ	CL BG IH
Susan	CC IH BG GV BZ	BR	CL
Tom	CL	BG GV IH BZ	CC BR
Katrina	IH CL BR GV CC	BG	BZ



Here, Katrina and Susan appear to be strong candidates, though someone might ask CL why the strong No vote on Susan. Tom and Joe do not have as much support, although care should be taken to inquire why three people voted a strong yes on Joe and one on Tom.

It is good to examine and respect how strong the opinions are. Sometimes a person not known to many people will get a lot of Nos or Maybes, but a few strong Yeses from those who know them.

In the first year of a program, such a relative unknown might be a choice to shy away from. But in a mature program, if the strong Yeses came from those whose opinions were respected, the group might decide to take a flyer on the “long shot.”

Here is an extreme example of how weighing the strength of opinions can pay off. One applicant at the Oakland church got one Yes, two Maybe-to-Nos, and three Nos (including both ministers), chiefly because hardly anyone knew him. But one person who had heard him preach -- he was a seminary student -- said *we must have this person.*

Mr. Unknown was eventually selected, and soon became more active in the church. After his first service he was widely known and liked, and eventually he became one of the best and most-loved worship associates.

Once all the selectors have read and tentatively voted on the applications, it's easy to look at the chalkboard and catch the drift on each application. If you are extraordinarily lucky, the top dozen in the straw voting will also embody all the values as a group that you want represented in your congregation, and you can knock off and go home early.

Most selection committees are not so lucky.

This is the time to try to see the overall picture. If just the leaders in the yeses and maybes were chosen, would that meet the hopes of the selectors for a balanced ticket? How far from producing a balanced ticket are these first straws in the wind? Some of the factors that might make for a balanced ticket are mentioned above at page 31. They might be worth reconsidering.

This is also the time for second looks at individuals. Is someone getting a lot of Yeses because “no one wants him but we just have to take him”? (Do we really have to take him? What consequences if we don't?) Or is someone getting Nos because she just joined six months ago -- but one or two people who sing in the choir with her are keen on her application?

This is also the time to re-examine the selection criteria. Are they working? If church membership has been suggested as a requirement, and Ms. A. is a generous pledging friend but not yet a member, is this a time to bend the rules? Are the selection criteria producing the kind of candidates, and the votes on the candidates, that the selectors hoped?

At this point the selection process can take any of several directions:

- Horsetrading: “My opposition to J is pretty mild; I’ll drop it if you’ll drop your opposition to K.”
- Categories: “We have too many men, not enough women. Too many people over 50, not a single teenager.”
- Deference: “A is our minister and we ought to pay more attention to who she thinks would be good for our church.”
- Individual benefit: “Both Q and R would be good, but Q lost his wife to cancer last year and the work would probably mean more to him just now.”
- Rereading: “Sam voted for L but I said no. I really respect Sam’s judgment, so I better reread that application.”
- Reading applications out loud: “Here’s what W has to say about topics they’d like to do -- how’s this sound to you?”
- Matching pairs: “B and C both want to do a lot of earth-based worship, but we already have D, who’s really good at it, and the church as a whole probably doesn’t want more than two associates emphasizing earth-based worship -- so how does B stack up against C?”

In these imaginary conversations, like most that occur in smoke-filled rooms, the tone and the positions taken are hardly exemplary, or even necessarily worthy. But the process moves forward, associates being chosen one or two or three at a time, until a full roster is completed.

Then the vote may be made unanimous, the pledge of confidentiality renewed, and the assignments for notification given. And then everyone gets to go home.

## Chapter 5

### *Training*

You have picked your worship associates. Now how do you train them?

There is informal training and formal training.

In a sense, you have been informally training worship associates all along, even before they were chosen. If your church has a program in place, past worship associates have been training the current crop simply by their example.

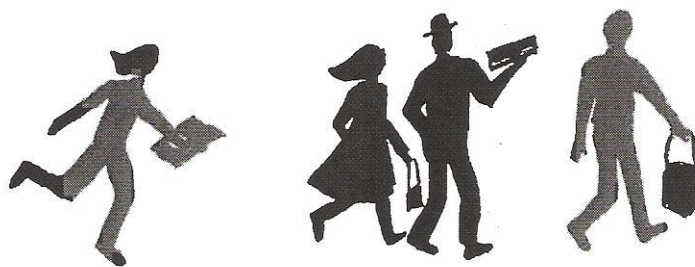
Every Sunday morning, a little more training takes place, and once the next bunch of Worship Associates is chosen, they pay even closer attention to (and therefore learn from) the work of each week's associate. But even if the program is new, you have been training new associates by how you have handled the recruitment process.

Consider this. Each call for applicants, in the announcements during the service, or in the order of service, or in the weekly bulletin helps to shape people's understanding of what is expected of them. The application form itself is a training tool. So is the feedback form (Appendix C), which is seldom used at the Oakland church but nonetheless tells people the standards by which their work will be evaluated.

Who is encouraged to apply, and who is selected, also sends a message to worship associates, as well as the church, on what is valued in worship. Who does the choosing (minister? committee?), and how it is conducted (open? or "the fix is in'?) is also noticed, and can and will be learned from.

Once you have the Dirty Dozen in place, the formal learning begins.

It is well to seize the enthusiasm of the newly selected and capitalize on it. People are never again quite so open to learning as they are immediately upon discovering that they have been picked to do a job.



*First Task: Build a Team by Having a Retreat*

Say your people have been selected in March, to begin the following September. The first thing to do is schedule a retreat for some time in April or May. Remember, your application form asked if people would be available for this retreat.

The retreat ought to be at least a full day, because a lot needs to be done together. An overnight is even better. The site ought to be some physical distance from the church, on neutral turf if possible, free from distractions and in an atmosphere conducive to reflection and learning.

Here are some of the tasks that can be divided up among the associates:

- Transportation (1 or 2 people to coordinate; 3 or 4 or more to drive)
- Site liaison (1)
- Gather and bring hymnbooks and songbooks (1)
- Food and drink (2-3-4, depending on number of meals)
- Planning meeting
  - Coordinator (1)
  - Redactor (Note-Taker) (1)
  - Supplies Person (Butcher paper, scotch tape, magic markers) (1)
- Host/hostess (1-2)
- Workshop leaders (2-3-4, depending on number of workshops)
- Clean-up crew (1 or 2)
- Worship or ritual leaders (2-3-4, depending on number of services)
- Hot tub scheduler (1; only in California)

There are plenty of jobs to go around. Everybody ought to have one or two. And each job can be further subdivided. If someone lacks a job, and you can't seem to find the right thing for them, go back to their application and check out their hobbies and interests, and think about where you are going and what you'll be doing. If the retreat is in a rural setting, and your un-jobbed associate is a birdwatcher, consider asking them to make a short presentation on "Five birds we are likely to see and how to recognize them."

A word on worship, or ritual. Associates who are new to the program may never have put on worship before, and may be scared. To build newcomers' confidence, you can do several things:

- have two-person worship, and pair a veteran with a newcomer;
- find opportunities for worship in even the most ordinary activities (grace before meals, for example, is a form of worship) ;
- encourage them to begin to develop the habit of locating resources (the hymnal is a fine place to start for such things as welcoming words)

Someone who is terrified of Putting On Worship may not be so terrified of leafing through the hymnal and finding a short passage to read at the outset of the retreat, to help set a tone.

Nervousness is reduced by working with another, by being told well in advance what is expected, by being given resources to work with and learn from, and just generally by encouragement. The point of a retreat is so that all may come together in order to learn together.

A written notice to all who are coming should go out a week to ten days before the retreat. A sample appears as Appendix D.

Team building also occurs when you arrange for mentors. Usually in Oakland, a returning associate is paired with two new associates.

### *Second Task: Schedule Workshops That Address Critical Questions Facing the Worship Associates*

A retreat is a fine time to have workshops that are not site-dependent. (Site-dependent workshops, which are generally those that must occur in the sanctuary, are discussed below.)

The workshops should address whatever is "up" for this crew of worship associates. The agenda will vary with the needs of the group and the church they serve. If the program is brand-new, for instance, or is a continuing program with a high proportion of newcomers, a useful topic for a workshop is Authority, as in: What Is the Source of Your Authority When You Step into the Chancel?

Janne Eller-Isaacs, co-minister of the Oakland church, led a memorable discussion on this topic at one worship retreat. She suggested three possibilities for sources of authority -- holy scripture, personal revelation, and the church community -- and invited each of us to

select the one source of authority (or some fourth possibility) that most called to us, and to reflect on why it called to us, and what that source meant to us as worship leaders.

One new and somewhat literal-minded Worship Associate, who shall remain nameless, objected that none of the choices seemed to answer the question. The Bible had never done it for him, he said. Most of his revelations had been drug-induced and were therefore suspect. And he wasn't sure how he fit into this "church family" business anyway.

Janne patiently asked if he had any source of authority at all for worship associate work. He said the closest thing he could think of was a letter of congratulations from the chair of the worship committee, telling him he had been chosen as a worship associate.

"Ah," Janne Eller-Isaacs said. "Your source of authority is community!"

"Humph," said the Worship Associate. "I suppose so." A good discussion followed.

Another excellent basis for a workshop is a discussion of the church's liturgy. Usually this will be led by the minister. A detailed walk through all the parts of a standard service can be a real eye-opener, with explanations by the minister on why we do this here, and that there, what purpose is served by this part of the service, and so on. Rob Eller-Isaacs gave such a workshop at one worship retreat.

History is also a valuable subject for workshops. One could cover the history of one's own church's liturgy over the last 20 or 50 years, complete with copies of old orders of service. Or going back to the first quarter of the nineteenth century, to typical orders of service in Unitarian and Universalist churches. Or to early Christian liturgies, and the relationship (or lack thereof) to current liturgy. We suffer as a movement from ahistoricism, a tendency to forget or ignore our roots, and workshops are a good place to rebalance that equilibrium.

Other topics can be found in issues current in the worship life of the church. One Oakland topic, for example, was freedom of the pulpit, which provoked a lively discussion among worship associates on whether, or the extent to which, the congregation had entrusted the worship life of the church to its co-ministers when it called them. It would have been useful to have the minister's letter agreement with the church, setting forth the responsibilities and divisions of labor between church and minister.

Not to be overlooked are more practical, hands-on workshop topics like Crafting Calls to Worship and Introductions to the Meditations [or whatever roles the Worship Associates are likely to play in your church].

One interesting worship retreat experiment involved organizing groups of three or four people and giving them 20 minutes to create a ten minute worship experience, with one person focusing on words, another on music, another on shaping silence, and (where there was a fourth person) another on movement.

These experimental worship “services” were shared with the group as a whole, and informal critiquing followed. Several who were convinced at the outset that such worship was impossible -- or at least impossible for them -- found their minds changed within the hour.

This was an empowering experience. The quality of this instant worship was only fair; much of it was ragged, and needed reworking and polish. But the sincerity of each person’s effort to create the best “brisk worship” possible in the circumstances was apparent. The underlying messages came across loud and clear:

In worship, if you do it in the spirit, with the right attitude,  
everything will work out just fine.

You know more than you think you do,  
and you are capable of more than you think you are.

Your friends are rooting for you.

When time is short, you go with what you’ve got.

Later on, when we associates sat down to craft our own work, to be shared with the church as a whole, we found that the path to this place of sincerity in making worship had become a known path, and the thing to be done was known to us as a thing that could be done.

There was power in this knowledge, power not to be underestimated. The memory of shared awkwardness and self-consciousness prior to putting on improvised worship became a source of amusement and confidence as the more formal worship of Sunday morning slowly took form.

On-site training is the most practical and useful of all. The Oakland church has two kinds: voicework and blocking.

#### Voicework

The formal voicework has consisted of a training session with Ellen Robinson, nightclub performer, singing teacher, and voice coach.

Twice she has spent an hour or two after a Sunday service in the fall, walking new (and old) associates through the intricacies of the sound system. Oakland has microphones in the pulpit, one at each lectern and one on a boom in the nave, for announcements. The worship associate coordinator also takes each associate through the mysteries of the sound controls for the system.

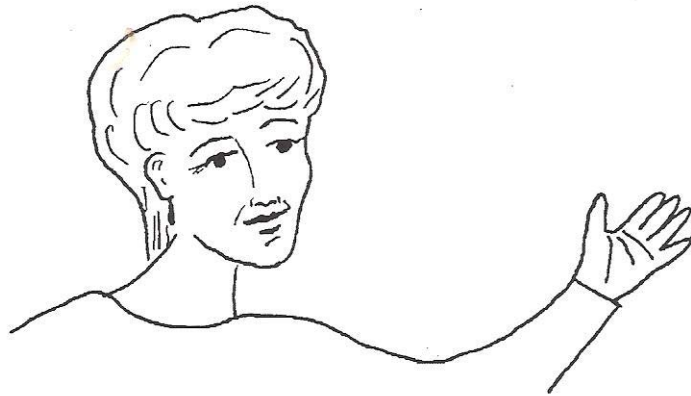
This voicework training is extremely important, and it’s risky to leave it to well-intentioned amateurs. If you have someone in your congregation who knows sound, and who knows how to teach people to speak into microphones, they can try to do it.

Otherwise it is worth the cost of hiring someone to come work with the associates, if the church's budget can afford it.

Voicework is also easy to overlook. All the careful preparation in the world is wasted if there are glitches in an individual's delivery or in the sound system itself. Anti-technology scourges may be secretly pleased when a marvel of modern science goes awry. But most people simply tune out what they can't comfortably hear. If you have a good sound system, learn how to use it.

To make sure that Sunday morning goes as well as the preparation, it is a good idea for the worship associate to turn up 45 minutes early for the service, and do a last-minute microphone check with someone standing at the back of the sanctuary to advise them on how their voice is coming across. The old home remedy of tea with plenty of honey and lemon really does work for scratchy voices and speakers who tend to swallow their words.

If the associate has any qualms about whether her voice will carry after the sanctuary fills up, she can always post a friend against the back wall to give hand signals during her first spoken role. A hand cupped behind the ear means, "Louder." Both hands over the ears means, "Pipe down." Two thumbs up means everything is fine: Siskel and Ebert really liked the service.



### Blocking

The other area of on-site training is blocking, or choreography. Who stands where, and who goes where, and when.

In some churches, blocking may not seem to be much of a problem. The congregation's tradition of informality may be so strong that anything that smacks of ceremony will be experienced as overdone.



There is something spiritual to be said for this viewpoint too. Worship leaders who are too self-conscious about who moves where, and when, can give the impression either of performing a show, rather than putting on worship, or of being so concerned about “looking good” that the presence of the spirit is neglected.

If the congregation is small, and the new worship associates have been a part of it for years, there may be an easiness about who goes where that makes blocking training unnecessary.

But often it happens that someone has gone to church for many years without ever really noticing how the different parts of the service come together, and who goes where during those different parts. One of the biggest sources of last-minute panic by worship associates takes the form of: “Wait a minute! During the whatchamacallit, am I supposed to stand up, or sit down, or what? And where do I do it?”

Two things in particular can reduce the chances of this panic. First is a detailed, step-by-step, written record of the worship service. Here is an excerpt from one prepared at Oakland:

**Opening Hymn** When the minister stands up and moves to the center of the chancel, that’s your cue to join him or her. Bear in mind that at the conclusion of this hymn, you will be returning to your lectern to introduce the silent meditation, for which you will need your written materials.

You don’t need to take the materials to the chancel center. But you do need to avoid looking lost when the hymn ends. Halfway through the last verse of a hymn is generally my own biggest panic-time, preventable only with thorough preparation.

The full text of this blocking memorandum appears as Appendix E.

It may seem like a lot of work to write up the blocking of an entire service, but it’s actually fun. Nothing will familiarize you with your own liturgy like the effort to spell out what happens and when, and where people go when it does.

Several times I have had the experience of giving this blocking memorandum to new Worship Associates, and watching them receive it with a polite groan, as they imagine another multi-page document to read. They ask, How can simply getting around the sanctuary on Sunday morning possibly be that difficult?

But some associates have checked in after their first service and confessed that, Saturday night before the service, as they mentally rehearsed their roles, they found themselves digging frantically through the desk or files, trying to find that damned blocking memorandum, in order to recall, for example, where they are supposed to stand while the plates are being passed and the collection taken. (The answer, in Oakland, is wherever you please.)

In addition to a blocking memorandum, also helpful is a walk-through, that is, an actual blocking rehearsal. A veteran worship associate, or the coordinator, can take the role of the minister.

It is better to do this on Thursday or Friday or Saturday before the Sunday service; in the minutes before the service, little is retained. The experience of actually walking into the sanctuary, down the aisle, into the chancel, and so on, surfaces uncertainties promptly and eventually boosts confidence like nothing else can.

In voicework and blocking, as in so much else, there is no substitute for practice.

The last form of training is the most fun. It consists of exchanging war stories. At the first worship retreat, or the first time all the associates are gathered together, invite those associates with some experience in the work to share with the newcomers two incidents -- one in which everything in the service worked perfectly, and one in which it didn't. Here are two.

In the first service I did as a worship associate, I gave the introduction to the call to worship, but forgot to light the chalice and say, "Come, let us worship together." After a long silence -- I kept wondering why time seemed to drag so much, and why the congregation seemed so restless -- the organist began the opening hymn.

During it, as we stood side by side in the chancel, the co-minister whispered to me that I'd forgotten to light the chalice, and told me reassuringly where, later on in the service, we could comfortably work it in.

I did just that, and people smiled forgivingly. Afterwards a long-time member of the church came up to me and said, with a twinkle in his eye, "Nice job. I especially liked the bold way you changed the order of service. It's good to have a little variety now and then."

One service at Oakland was called, *Is There Room for Depth?* It began with the call to worship with which this book begins:

"Have you ever come to church on Sunday morning . . .

Said hello to your friends . . .

Sung a familiar hymn, perhaps watched the dance choir . . .

Listened to the readings, and reflected on them . . .

Meditated silently, maybe shared a cherished name during the embracing meditation . . .

Heard the sermon and been touched by it . . .

Then stood, as stiff and awkward as a flamingo, through the 20 minutes of social discomfort we appropriately call coffee hour, perhaps volunteered to do some service work, like cooking breakfast for the homeless, or the worship associate work I am doing this morning . . .

And then gone home and felt, somehow, something's missing?  
If you ever have felt that burden, today's service may have special meaning for you. It is a service about religious longing, and those of us who feel it."

That call to worship succeeded in setting a tone for a service that marked a turning point in the life of the church that year. In a church not used to talkbacks, twenty-five people showed up for a post-service discussion on the subject of religious depth. Meditation and prayer groups were formed, and one of the co-ministers soon began offering spiritual direction.

Once in a while in worship, you are lucky enough to hit paydirt. But even when you stumble over your own two feet, so long as your heart is in the right place, and you have made a place for the spirit to be with you, everything turns out all right.

## **Chapter 6**

### ***Why This Work Matters***

Most of this book has been devoted to how the work of worship associates gets done: it's a how-to book.

This chapter reaches for the deeper meaning of the work. Why does it matter that this work be done?

A Worship Associates program is a special kind of shared ministry, in which the principal players -- the minister and the associates -- challenge each other to put on the richest, most diverse, most thoughtful and inspired worship they are capable of.

Although Worship Associates are rightly seen as constituting a radical change in the way in which most churches put on worship, nonetheless they stand directly in the tradition from which Unitarian Universalism springs.

When the congregation invites its own members to join with the minister(s) in creating worship, it is confirming the inherent dignity and worth of every person. It is saying that the spirit that creates worship is alive in all of us.

Consider the impression made upon a newcomer who walks into the Oakland church, as I did six years ago, and sees all this: a lay member of the board of trustees offering the words of welcome and the announcements and lighting the candles in the chancel, followed by another lay member (the Worship Associate) calling the faithful to worship, lighting the chalice and inviting us all to worship, and creating the atmosphere in which a silent meditation can take place -- all of this, mind you, before so much as a peep is heard from the minister.

The church advertises that "All are worthy, all are welcome." The tone-setting opening of the liturgy, raised up week after week by different laypeople, makes good on that promise. The variety of styles and stances, all within a framework of deep respect for the work and tender care in the doing of it, says that differences in worship manner are accepted in this congregation, more than accepted -- are treasured in this congregation. That variety substantiates the people's commitment to growth in the spirit.

And when I discovered that the topics for worship were selected democratically, in an open process carried out by representatives of the entire congregation, my sense of the spiritual genuineness of this work deepened.

In the work of this church, there is freedom in the pulpit, and a corresponding freedom in the pew. The Worship Associate carries on a call-and-response dialogue with the minister in the chancel, the associate calling, the minister responding. Within the framework of the minister's training and expertise in the shaping of worship, each service

is crafted jointly by the worship associate group, the minister, and the individual associate. It is the priesthood of all believers in action. All are worthy; all are welcome.

Each week finds a fresh voice at the associate's lectern, often speaking out of personal experience, often invoking a personal expertise or passion for a special topic. The free and responsible search for truth and meaning runs as broad as the concerns of the whole congregation.

A Worship Associates program takes the one thing the entire congregation does all together -- worship every Sunday morning -- and it does that thing all together, with group and individual working with the minister to make a liturgy that really is the work of the people, the creating of worth together. The integration of lay work and minister's work is both symbolic and real. We really do do it all together.

If a Worship Associates program demands that a minister be or become confident in his or her ability to create and teach worship, it also offers abundant rewards to the minister and congregation willing to risk trying it. Their shared ministry means a richer worship life, richer both in the excitement of the communal preparation and in the public celebration on Sunday.

A trained laity provides a living lectionary, filled with original, contemporary, often urgent ideas for worship topics. A shortage of inspiration for worship topics and the ministerial burnout that can come with such a shortage are simply not a problem with a Worship Associates program.

But the risks are real too. The minister must be prepared to take some of the mystery out of the liturgy, to explain to, and train, the Worship Associates in the niches and nooks of the church's worship practice. And the minister must be prepared to deal with a more educated laity, who understand what is going on in worship, and expect to be touched by the spirit every Sunday. A Worship Associates program raises the ante all around.

But if we mean what we say when we pride ourselves on the variety of sources from which we draw our traditions, we can do no better than to draw directly on the most fertile source of all for our worship life: the people who make up our congregations.

“Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision.”



## Appendix A

### Twenty-Six Suggested Do's and Don'ts in Crafting and Leading Worship

Assembled by Rick Koyle,  
from many sources including:

*Mark Belletini; Janne Eller-Isaacs; Rob Eller-Isaacs; Judith Hunt;  
Heather MacLeod; Rebecca Parker; Maud Steyaert;  
the class in Worship at Starr-King, Spring '93; and  
Worship Associates and Summer Worship Participants  
past and present*

Prepared for distribution at the Worship Retreat,  
First Unitarian Church of Oakland (Unitarian—Universalist),  
June 10—11, 1994

DON'T begin: "As I was pondering what to say . . ." Just say it. Exception: where the pondering is an integral part of your story.

DON'T run to the dictionary for a definition. It's become a cliché. Etymologies are fine. But "Webster's tells us . . ." is a bore.

DON'T apologize. You're a child of God, or the universe. There is nothing to apologize for.

DO take care of your congregation. They are really yours; they have placed themselves in your care for an hour. Some are hurting. Some are angry. Some need sympathy, others to be challenged, others just to laugh, or cry. Try to make worship a safe place for them all.

DO run your creations by others, a few days in advance. Listen. Probe (softly) for reactions. Accept. With joy in your heart, steal!

DO over-practice.

DON'T try to wing it until you've been doing this every week for, say, ten years. Maybe not even then.

DON'T draw attention to yourself. The message counts, not the messenger.

DO, however, share something of yourself in worship. If you can, try to say something that costs you something to say.

DO take risks, provided you can do so worshipfully. Dare. Have faith that things will work out. If you don't have faith during worship, why are you up there?

DO be brief. Each time you open your mouth to speak, 100 or 200 others must keep theirs shut. (They are not, however, required to listen.) Leave them asking for more, not wishing for less.

DO pray or meditate beforehand, if that is your inclination. You need all the help you can get.

DO remember what you are there for, and what you are doing in the chancel. The call to worship, for example, first and foremost calls the faithful to worship. For a reality check on the brevity, clarity, and eloquence of your call to worship, compare it with that of the bell in the belfry.

DON'T feel it's necessary to reinvent the wheel. Originality in worship is no special virtue. Familiar language, like an old shoe, soothes and reassures.

DON'T assume everyone knows what you're talking about. Practice the art of tactful introductions: "Some of you may know . . ." Invite the whole congregation under the tent.

DON'T put anybody down, including yourself. The God, if there is a God, who loves you, if He loves you, if He is a he, might be offended.

DO respond to whatever truly unusual happens during worship. If a person in a wheelchair enters through the side entrance in mid-service, there is no need to pay special attention. If the goat with that person wanders into the chancel and starts eating the flowers, you have no choice but to pay attention. Appropriately acknowledge the intrusion, and move on. (DON'T try to improvise a ritual sacrifice. It might be OK to make a joke about the goat. Just don't ignore it. Worship is not about pretending the world is other than the way it is. Good worship faces facts.)

DO relate all past and future, all anecdotes and tales and schemes and visions, to the present, right here, right now. Let worship make a practical difference among your congregants: let it influence some choice they make, some real part of their lives. Otherwise, why bother?

DON'T over-explain or reflect on the service: avoid excessive "What we'll do now is . . ." Worship is creation, not commentary, it's action rather than criticism. Just do it!

DON'T re-introduce that which the order of service has already fully introduced. The order of service is carefully put together, and exists for a reason. Let it do its job.

DO know why you are doing each thing in the service that you're doing.

DO NOT, however, always yield to the urge to explain why you are doing it, unless explaining strengthens the point. And DO NOT yield to the temptation to explain why

you chose to do it this way rather than some other way. The world doesn't care about the birth pains, all it wants to see is the baby.

DO accept that in most worship services many small things are bound to go wrong, and yet at the same time, mysteriously, nothing whatsoever will go wrong. Whatever you do with a worshipful attitude will work out fine.

DO invite, encourage, suggest ways in which the congregation can participate in worship. Example: suggesting a particular way to sing a hymn. "Suppose we try the first verse softly and the last verse with gusto." A useful word: "Let's."

DON'T, however, compel or require one exclusive way of participating. Respect the tenderness and privacy of each congregant's individual way of worshipping. Gently coach, but try not to cheerlead.

DO consider multiple invitations. The center can be approached from the North, East, South, and West, not to mention outer space and the core of the earth. For example: "This hymn is new for us and may be hard. If you like, just savor the words to yourself, or listen along for a verse or two before you join in with us." Second example: following the embracing meditation, "For the names which have been spoken, and for those that remain in the silent sanctuary of our hearts . . . ." Third example: the Water Communion service where some are fishes in the stream of life, some are frogs, others reeds, still others currents -- "and if you don't care to stand up, feel free to be a rock [relieved laughter]." All may be worthy, but all still need to be made to feel welcome. In the service, as you worship, gather your flock.

DO take pains. Attention to details equals love.



## Appendix B

### WORSHIP ASSOCIATE FEEDBACK FORM

Name of Worship Associate \_\_\_\_\_  
Associate Giving Feedback \_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Service \_\_\_\_\_  
Topic of Service \_\_\_\_\_

#### THINGS THE WORSHIP ASSOCIATE DID WELL:

Voice  
Posture  
Dress  
Preparation  
Call to Worship  
Silent Meditation  
Embracing Meditation  
Readings  
Other

#### THINGS THAT COULD BE IMPROVED:

#### OTHER COMMENTS:

## Appendix C

### Order of Service for July 3, 1994

Music for Meditation	Skye Atman & Rebecca Parker
Words of Welcome	Mark Evens
Prelude	SA & RP
Call to Worship	Sheri Prud'homme
Hymn (first three verses)	"This Land Is Your Land"
Silent Meditation	SP
Prayer	Rick Koyle
Hymn	"There Are Numerous Strings," # 197
Homily	"Changing Harmonies," SP
Musical Interlude	SA & RP
Sharing of Responsibility	ME
Prayer	RK
Musical Response	"We Come From the Mountain" led by RP *
Embracing Meditation	RK
Prayer	SP
Hymn	"O Beautiful for Spacious Skies"
Homily	"Why Diversity?" RK
Hymn	"This Is My Song," # 159
Benediction	RK
Postlude	SA & RP

\* words are:

We come from the mountain (forest, prairie, city),  
Living in the mountain, -  
Go back to the mountain,  
Turn the world around!

## Appendix D

### Memorandum

To: The 1994-1995 Worship Associates  
From: Rick Koyle, Co-Coordinator  
Re: Planning Meeting for Fall Worship (and Barbecue)  
Date: July 12, 1994

The Worship Retreat was a great success. Judith and I were glad that so many of you and us were able to make it there. We have a wonderful crew of Worship Associates and lay worship next year is in good hands.

Our fall planning session is set for Monday evening, August 22. I hope that date is convenient for all of you or most all of you. Finding a date that fits with the schedules of all 13 of us, plus Rob and Janne and Skye, is extraordinarily difficult, even if we plan long in advance. At this August 22 meeting, we will try to schedule the remaining planning sessions for the year, so as to minimize schedule conflicts.

We'll plan to meet for a barbecue dinner as soon after five o'clock as people can make it. We'll plan to eat around six, and start our planning session at seven sharp. If we start at seven, with luck we should be done by ten, and maybe earlier.

For the barbecue: please bring something to toss on the barbecue and something to drink. We'll supply the corn, the salad, and the dessert. The address is 260 Euclid Avenue in Oakland (directions attached). Feel free to use the driveway to the right of the house (as you face it), but pull up to the top of the driveway so others can follow you. We mostly use the back door for an entrance. The phone is (123) 456-7891.

For the planning session: bring your datebooks for future scheduling. Also bring 1-2-3-4 or more ideas for services. Be prepared to explain the idea in a sentence or two (drafting it beforehand helps hone the idea). If you can't make the meeting, please pass your idea(s) along to Janne, Judith, Rob, or me. Our tradition is that if you neither come to the planning session nor submit an idea, you don't get a service.

For a preliminary agenda of the planning session, in the past year our first hour has been devoted to a short period of worship; brief checking in; housekeeping chores; Rob and Janne discussing what's on the minds and hearts of the congregation; and noting set-aside or committed dates, such as the Water Communion. The second hour is our customary brainstorming of ideas. The third is matching chosen topics with associates. A more detailed agenda will be available at the meeting. Feel free to call if you have questions. Have a great rest of the summer and we'll see you on the 22nd!

## Appendix E

Memorandum

To: Worship Associates

From: Rick Koyle, Co-Coordinator

Re: Blocking Suggestions

Date: September 10, 1994

These are some suggestions for Worship Associates, especially new ones, on where you might want to go during the service. If some of this sounds too detailed, I would rather err on the side of putting in too much than too little.

### *For a service starting at 11:00 a.m.:*

*10:00 — 10:15* Arrive at church; Dennis will have opened up.

(1) Make sure orders of service have been transported from church office to narthex; (2) grab three orders for yourself, one for the chair, one for the lectern, one to take with you wherever you go; (3) check order of service for changes, or the odd errata requiring correction or announcement, etc.; (4) make sure flowers are in place, including single stem for pulpit (steal one from chancel if necessary); (5) make sure hymn numbers are posted by the organ; (6) leave matches by the chalice and have a spare set by your chair; (7) check in with preacher, musicians, special guests, anyone who needs to know you're there and available to help; (8) use the bathroom, check your fly, slip, teeth, hair, whatever. Bear in mind that (4) and (5) are not your job, so if you act, act tactfully.

*Between 10:15 and 10:45* Arrange your own stuff at your chair in the chancel: glass of water (another at lectern if needed); hymnal; three orders of service; matches for chalice lighting; your call to worship / introduction to silent meditation / introduction to embracing meditation / reading(s). Some prefer to put all their written materials on one sheet, so as not to have a wad of papers at the lectern. Some prefer to leave their written materials at the lectern, others to bring it to the lectern with them each time. Do what works best for you.

Also during this time, do your mike check. Have someone stand at the back of the sanctuary and listen to you. You should be standing up straight and speaking as you would expect to speak during the service. Bear in mind that the presence of 200 people in the sanctuary has two effects, for most of us: their presence absorbs much of our sound, and out of nervousness we sometimes swallow our own words. So make sure you speak loudly enough during the mike check to be heard. Also know that as of last year we now have two kinds of goosenecks, long and short; you can attach the one that works

the best for you. There will be more on this at the mike training session next Sunday, the 25th, at 12:30 in the sanctuary.

This is also a good time to do whatever spiritual preparation suits you best, whether it is prayer, meditation, physical exercise, massive sugar intake, whatever.

*Around 10:50*, as the Music for Meditation begins: Join the minister(s) outside the narthex to greet people as they come into the church. The sight of a couple dozen or more friendly faces, delighted to see you and rooting for you, does a lot to calm the nerves. There's a lot of support and love in this church, and this is a good place to get your share of it.

*11:00* Process with the minister(s) down the aisle, on their left, and take your seat in the chancel as the Board member shares the Words of Welcome.

***What follows is not linked to time but to typical elements of the service. Obviously, if the service you and the minister(s) have crafted differs from this typical order, adjust accordingly.***

*Prelude* The Board member will light the candles in the chancel as Stephen or Skye plays the Prelude. Make sure the Board member leaves you some matches to light the chalice with, in addition to the matches you left at the chalice. Better too many matches than not enough.

*Call to Worship* When the Prelude is done, go to the lectern and give the call. It is generally a good idea to pause long enough at the lectern to make eye contact with as many in the congregation as you can. This will help gather the congregation's attention, and also prevent your rushing through the call, out of nervousness.

Then step down to the chalice and light it. Expect to have trouble with the matches and the wick, and try not to swear too loudly when you do. A couple of tricks that have worked: straighten up and/or light the wick half an hour before the service, so it's ready to take a flame; and use one match to light a second in the opposite hand, then join both hands and matches to light the wick. The only downside to lighting the chalice early (and then blowing it out) is that it leaves a pungent smell that may not go away.

After lighting the chalice, turn to the congregation, gather their attention, take a breath, and say, loud and clear, "Come, let us worship, together."

Return to your chair, sit down, and grab your hymnal.

*Opening Hymn* When the minister stands up and moves to the center of the chancel, that's your cue to join him or her. Bear in mind that at the conclusion of this hymn, you

will be returning to your lectern to introduce the silent meditation, for which you will need your written materials.

You don't need to take the materials to the chancel center. But you do need to avoid looking lost when the hymn ends. Halfway through the last verse of a hymn is generally my own biggest panic-time, preventable only with thorough preparation.

*Silent Meditation* You introduce it, then return to your chair.

*Prayer* The minister gives it. You sit tight.

(The next part of the service is flexible, and usually involves music and/or readings. If it is a hymn, take your cue from the minister and join him or her at the center of the chancel. Again, it's a very good idea to know in advance where you are going when the hymn ends. If it is one or more readings, go to your lectern and read as you have prepared with the minister.)

*Sharing of Responsibility* Walk down into the sanctuary with the minister and stand to one side as the Board member asks for contributions, the ushers come forward to take and pass the plates, and the minister receives the offering. You are welcome if you like to follow the ministers' custom of mingling in the congregation as the plates are being passed. (This can be a good time to find out that your voice hasn't been carrying and you need to speak up -- or perhaps the opposite.) You are also welcome just to stand to the side and watch. There is no fixed choreography to your role in this part of the service -- whatever feels most comfortable. Cartwheels are discouraged, however.

Then join in the congregational response, and if you can help lead it, by all means do so.

*Embracing Meditation* Return to your lectern and introduce the meditation, then sit down. The congregation has gotten used to hearing language like, "In a moment a bell will ring. We are invited to . . . ." But you are free to use whatever language suits you.

When you are done introducing the Embracing Meditation, your work for the morning is essentially done, and you can sit back and enjoy the rest of the service.

*Prayer* The minister will close the meditation with a prayer. You sit tight.

*Hymn of Affirmation* Join the minister at the center of the chancel. Do not be surprised when he or she leaves you three-quarters of the way through the hymn to enter the pulpit. It's nothing personal.

*Sermon, Closing Hymn, Benediction:* By now you are a veteran of the process and will know instinctively what to do.

*Postlude:* Well, almost! This part of our liturgy is still in an experimental stage, and you will not know what to do, but no one else does either, so you won't be alone.

The easiest course is probably to follow the minister's lead. If he or she stays in the chancel, or heads for Wendte Hall to form a receiving line, stick with them. You are entitled to be part of the line, and some of the congregants may want to speak with you, say thanks, revoke their pledges, whatever. For some people this kind of closure is important, and as a courtesy to them you should try to make yourself available.

Then go home and enjoy yourself for the rest of the day -- you've earned it!

If you have any questions, feel free to ask Janne, Rob, Judith, or me. We are happy to help.