

## **A Reflection on Worship Times and Ministry**

Why did worship time shift this year?

Worship Committee

Recently we have heard the pain of some who miss the old worship schedule. It is important for us to hear this grief and to walk with them in their pain. At the same time we are hearing the voices of those who have found this shift to be helpful. There are some that advocate for a return to the old because of the discomfort they feel over the pain of some among us. There are others who are encouraging us to keep up the efforts to reach those who are missing from among us. This reflection tries to better communicate the hopes and dreams of what we are trying to accomplish in the shift of worship times.

The goal of the shift is this: To become more schedule friendly for those who are family-aged, in order to make it more likely that those not currently worshipping with us will find the schedule more conducive to their lifestyles. At the same time, it is hoped that by adding numbers to our second service visitors will recognize the vitality present among us.

For many years we have been aware that fewer families are worshipping within our faith community. Many of our younger members are less engaged in the primary activity of the Christian faith. As a result, the congregation has aged; fewer young members are present on Sunday morning.

When trying to get a clearer picture of this shift among us, we examined the ages of those likely to be in worship, based on communion attendance records, giving records and observations of those in worship. Behind this exploration was the assumption that a church equally effective among all ages typically reflects the age spread of the area within which it is set. We learned that the median age of those likely to worship with us on a typical Sunday morning is 69 years old. In contrast, the median age of Vernon County is 36. Based on Sunday morning attendance we can clearly see that Good Shepherd has become an aging congregation that is not attracting, holding, and engaging younger people at the same rate as we do with older people. We do not reflect the community around us. This trend is not sustainable. In ten to fifteen years, we will struggle to survive if we do not begin working toward revitalization. The very call of Jesus to be a community that is making disciples of all people, calls us to faithfully attend to the needs of those who are not active.

We are not alone in the problems we face. Many mainline congregations are experiencing the same decline we are. However, in the midst of these mainline congregations are communities of faith that buck the trend. Though society is increasingly anti-Christian, anti-religious, and seeking authentic expressions of spirituality outside of established churches, many congregations have navigated toward new life. We can do the same. We can envision and enact a future that is different than the one we fear might come. We can trust that God calls us into new ventures and reclaim the missionary stance of the Church. Churches that dare engage in conversations and actions guided by mission are much more likely to return to growth and vitality than those who keep doing the same thing that they've always done. This missional way of being the church challenges us to be attentive to those who are missing from the community and to those who are outsiders, many of whom are members of the congregation.

For more than a year the worship committee has been struggling with how to return a sense of vitality to the second service. A vibrant late service is critical to our efforts of growing in ministry. If we are to build a community that welcomes both our younger members and those who visit the congregation, it is important that we attend to what we do, how we do it and when we do what we do.

In our congregation we were hearing (anecdotally) what other congregations have learned: In general, family aged people are more likely to attend worship if it is in the middle part of the morning. Many wish to leave worship with time to spare to get to noon events, family gatherings, family activities, etc. A service that starts too late in the morning cuts participation among family aged people, because it pushes the day's schedule back too far. Likewise, a household with younger people is not motivated by an early service that begins prior to 9:00.

Knowing that shifting worship time would be difficult for some in our community, the worship committee believes that it is important to experiment with this change. Never is a change made that all are pleased with. Change always requires us to be adaptive and sometimes we have to sacrifice something for the larger good. Sometimes we feel the loss personally in the midst of change.

Shifting of our worship schedule is not change for the sake of change. It is a shift for the sake of a hoped for future. We are trying this because we believe that this small step toward hospitality for the sake of people we miss having in our community is a necessary beginning. It alone is not a magical move that will fix the trends among us.

It is God who will bring new life among us. The more we are engaged in the faith and shaped by the passions, hopes and dreams of Jesus Christ, the more we will experience God's hoped for future among us. God wants our congregation to be a discipling community for all ages, a vital presence in the community for the future.

Toward this end, we are trying to better align our schedule with the patterns of those who are missing. We hope that this first step can help us move toward a future marked by greater participation of those who are currently missing and those who are yet to come.

Reversing the trends of our congregation will not happen without a willingness to adapt. We can have a strong future marked with new life and energy. God calls us to this sort of future. New life and growth will come when we extend freedom to one another to experiment for the sake of ministry. Central to this task is looking not to our own needs, but to the needs of our neighbors and the call of Christ to be actively engaged for the sake of those who are not now with us. When we disagree, let us do so in the ways of Christ: loving and supporting those who feel grief while seeking to do as Christ calls us to do. It's not easy but is, hopefully, faithful.

In this reflection, we have tried to lay out our hopes and dreams for the shift we are making. If you have questions about it or would like to engage us in conversation, we want to hear from you.

Thank You,  
The Worship Committee