Dear Sisters and Brothers,

This issue of Chimes focuses on our communal worship. (Another time we will talk about personal devotional life and practice). One third of my time is devoted to preparing and leading worship. And it is perhaps the deepest joy and privilege of my life. The main article explores how Helen Hofmeister and I work together in the planning process. We call it ‘Making Sense out of Time,’ because among the collateral blessings of worship, the ordering of time is one of the most formative. Sunday is given priority and importance. It is set aside as a particularly holy time to turn away from ourselves and turn toward God.

The Revised Common Lectionary is a three-year cycle of Bible readings compiled by an ecumenical committee for use in Christian churches. Four readings are offered for each Sunday and “high holy day” of the year: ordinarily, two Old Testament readings (always one psalm) and two New Testament readings (always one from the gospels). The intention of the lectionary is two-fold. One is to provide some continuity in the experience of those who worship in Christian churches, so that no matter where one attends to worship, one will find the same lessons on the same Sunday. Two is to offer an opportunity to reflect on the major themes of Christian theology over the three-year span. The years are designated A, B, and C. Year A began with Advent 1 on November 27, 2016.

I hope that this issue will add to your understanding of worship and allow for even greater collateral blessings in our turning to God.

Grace and peace,

Rev. Chandler Stokes,
Senior Pastor and Head of Staff

— from the 2016-2017 Presbyterian Planning Calendar

As my friend Michael Lindvall teaches, through the insights of Kierkegaard, we suffer from a certain role confusion in worship. We imagine that the preacher and choir are the performers, the congregation is the audience, and God is present as a prompter. The truth is that in worship God is the audience, the congregation are the performers, and the choir and preacher are the prompters. Thus in worship, we turn away from ourselves and toward God, and we use ancient traditions and contemporary insights to forge authentic, time-tested worship that bears both dignity and honesty in the presence of God.

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Grace and peace,
Worship is in part a matter of making sense out of time. Augustine once said, “Time never takes time off.” If we think about time at all, time is fully a mystery. My brother the physicist says that all there seems to be is “before” and “after,” yet we’re all in only this razor’s edge present moment that never stops moving. There’s something real there, but our evenly measured increments of seconds, hours, and days are just a convention. They have no physical existence. Days are related to the turning of the earth and years by our circuit around the sun, but they are mere conventions.

Seconds, hours, minutes, days, weeks, and years are an attempt to give shape and order to time. These measures are intentionally the same size. But this even, consistent ordering of ever-flowing time leaves time with no particular shape, color, or substance. And that relentless motion into the future can seem like a trackless wilderness: one second, one minute, or one day not really differently defined than the previous one.

The liturgical calendar is a way for us, as people of faith, to mark time with sacred categories and infuse it with meaning.

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Making Sense Out of Time

As worship makes sense out of the hours and days of our lives, a great collateral blessing we become formed for God’s purposes.

PHOTO: LEE CARLSON/WPC

Rev. Chandler Stokes, Senior Pastor and Head of Staff

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As Shakespeare said, “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day.” So, let’s call that imposition of days and weeks a “secular sense of time.” There is no particular value or meaning associated with these regular measures; they are simply a way to agree on what time it is!

By contrast, the liturgical calendar is a way for us, as people of faith, to mark time with sacred categories and infuse it with meaning. The secular calendar names the months with the Latin names for the calendar imposed by the Roman emperors and named mostly for Roman gods and emperors; the Christian year is marked by the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Each season situates us in a particular place in the narrative of Christ’s life and God’s people. It is a first step toward making sense of time in a holy way. Months may have no particular color, but the liturgical seasons do: Advent and Lent—purple, Christmas, Epiphany, and Easter—white, Pentecost—red. We also use the appellation “Ordinary Time” (which indicates ordered time, as opposed to run-of-the-mill time), which uses the verdant color of green.

And with the timing of our worship services, we mark our lives with specifically holy days and seasons. Sunday is the Lord’s Day—the first day of the week and the eighth day of creation. If in creation God made the earth in six days and rested on the seventh, then the day that Christ rose from the dead is the eighth day—the day of the new creation. That is why our communal worship service is on Sunday!

By these sacred markers, the First Sunday in Advent, the Lord’s Day, and the hour of Divine Worship, we turn time from a trackless wilderness with no shape, color, or substance into an expanse of holy possibility, marked with colorful signposts and oases of meaning.

A Worship Committee Conversation

Ruth Stubbs, the current chair of our worship committee, and Kelley Barr, who has served on the committee with Ruth for the past couple of years commented on their work:

“It’s a joy to work with all the people on the committee and on the session. There are various points of view around the table. In our conversations, we steward the rich tradition of worship and bring new insights to worship.

“The largest part of the committee’s work is shared in specific tasks, including coordinating acolytes, ushers, flowers, the chapel, and communion servers. It’s people taking care of the finer points, so that they are really taken care of. It’s a joyful responsibility.”

“People are so positive and affirming of whatever you do here at Westminster, it makes it a joy and a privilege to serve on the worship committee. People offer such acceptance and affirmation that you feel free and empowered to serve. That’s how the Westminster Welcome plays out in leadership.”

Without giving you the entire history of the Book of Common Worship, the ecumenical movement, and Reformed values in worship, let me simply say that there are elements of our worship that are ancient and elements that are quite contemporary. Helen and I blend these elements, bearing in mind the congregation’s “vocabulary” and heart, drawing on our experience and understanding of music, liturgy, and pastoral awareness, all the while keeping practical considerations in view.

Here’s a glimpse of that process.

For a long time my practice has been to spend two long periods each year preparing for the year in worship—in January, right after the Moveable Feast meets, and during the summer. Ideally, I have sketched things out three to six months in advance. When I return from those preparation periods, I will

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In our sacramental moments, every time we return, we are found, we are named—“Children of God” Xaiden Heinonen, Jen Porter, Rob Weaver—and us all.

The Westminster Winds are an expression of a wide range of musical possibilities that illuminate the service.
**Stories of Worship**

**“What Does Worship Mean To You?”**

Molly Born talked to her Dad, Tim, about what worship means to her:

“She likes the baptisms (Izzy was baptized on Sunday). She especially likes the baby baptisms.

She likes it when we sing songs that she knows.

A few weeks ago we sang ‘Go Tell it on the Mountain’ and she really enjoyed being able to participate in the service that way.

She thinks these parts are better than the rest of the service (although she claims to hear every word).”

Worshiping in church means that we are in a place without judgment. When I’m at church, I can block out what is going on in the world and connect with God. The charge at the end of worship helps me reflect on the service and gives me confidence going into the week ahead.

—Nolan Sherwood

I like church because we not only connect with God but also learn more about God. We learn to see God in different ways/perspectives. Also connecting with the people at church helps to see different perspectives in the world.

—Riley Fuller

Go into the world in peace. Hold on to all that is good. Return no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak, help the suffering. Honor all people. Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the holy spirit.

Once the anthems, Scripture, sermon themes, and hymns are in place, then the rest of the liturgy, which is changing from week to week, is written: Call to Worship, Prayer of Confession, or Prayer of Dedication. The liturgy is formative. It’s helpful when some of it becomes unconscious, as it were: regular elements get memorized and deepen within us. And we shift some of the regular elements so that they don’t become so stale as to become completely rote and unconscious. Remember that we, the congregation, are the performers. Being able to sing or speak with confidence is part of good performance.

As worship makes sense out of the hours and days of our lives, as a great collateral blessing, we become formed for God’s purposes. I think it works something like this. At one time in my life I didn’t know any hymns. I didn’t know ‘Be Thou My Vision’ or ‘Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee.’ And now they are my life blood. The jazz pianist Bill Evans once said that art... ‘should teach spirituality by showing a person a portion of themselves that they would not discover otherwise. A part of yourself you never knew existed.’ It should exorcize your soul. That’s what the hymns of the church have become for me:

art that has helped me discover parts of myself I never knew existed. And when I am in deep need, worship so often reminds me, ‘...right, this is who I am. This is what is true (some way or another)...’ In whatever way the world is shattered or frayed, worship mends me.

I have found that the worship service is older and wiser and stronger than I am. And I have learned to trust it. I have learned to let it sustain me. Worship provides that strength in myriad ways. You know those gifts. They are among the great collateral blessings of worshiping God.

have many months of possible Scripture readings, sermon ideas, and themes in hand.

The focus for a given Sunday will then emerge in conversation with Helen. To these Scripture and sermon ideas, Helen usually brings a wide range of musical possibilities: pieces that the choir is already preparing, or those that Helen would like to hear them sing, as well as other music.

If Helen initiates the discussion with a musical piece, she’ll ask, “Do you have a Sunday where you think this might fit well?” If I initiate the discussion with a text or theme, I’ll ask, “What do you have that might illuminate part of this?” Now, that really over-simplifies the process. During the summer, we meet with the music staff and sketch out when each of the children’s and youth choirs, bells, Westminster Winds, and other ensembles will be providing music. So, these themes can be affected by the particular gifts that we’ll have available for that Sunday.

The selection of the hymns is also a key part of worship planning. Sometimes a hymn is selected very early on, and it becomes the key element around which the rest of the service moves—usually the concluding hymn. The hope is that we have put the right words in the mouth and the right music in the heart of the congregation when worship culminates in our final praise to God.

Usually, we also make minor adjustments to the service music and liturgical elements seasonally. There is a fine balance between regular, expected elements and a lively variety that we attempt to strike. We will keep a particular Ryrie for a season or two, or a particular Doxology or response to the Assurance of God’s Grace. And we will do the same with the words of the Assurance or Statement of the Law or Call to Worship.

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Stories of Worship

“Making Sense Out Of Time”, continued from page 6

Chimes | Westminster Presbyterian Church
WPC Music by the Numbers

- **305**: Helen’s opinion of Chandler’s favorite hymn: “Come Sing, O Church, In Joy!” (not to be confused with Chandler’s opinion!)
- **2**: Number of months newest members have graced all six singing choirs
- **300**: People in WPC music programs, including special guests
- **26,000**: Hours of Sanctuary Choir Rehearsal From September Through December
- **50**: Kids Crosses to keep track of
- **19**: High School boys in Kirk Singers!!!
- **150**: Number of months Phil Hertel has sung in the Sanctuary Choir
- **8**: Helen’s favorite traditional hymn: “For All The Saints”
- **326**: Number of years Phil Hertel has sung in the Sanctuary Choir
- **536**: Chandler’s favorite hymn: “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”

The Raw Materials of Worship

The planners and leaders of worship use many resources—“raw materials” as it were—to shape the service. For sermons: Hebrew and Greek texts…and commentaries and articles and examples and stories and advice and questions. Multicolored choir robes are nothing without the choristers, but they become “age-differentiated” identifiers for the congregation. Anthems, instruments, and voices lead the congregation who respond with hymns that become ever more familiar. Everything led by the acolytes’ light—leading us in and, with the charge, out again into the rest of our reality.
This fall, the youth, their parents and leaders, and the Racial Justice Action Group shared dinner and a conversation following a racially charged incident at a GRPS football game; the intergenerational group considered the effects of intention v. perception. The Rynders hosted a three-week discussion on the Mayor’s Book of the Year, *A City within a City*, about the recent history of African Americans in Grand Rapids.

The Justice and Peace Committee and the Racial Justice Action Group each meet regularly to explore opportunities for our congregation (as a whole and as individuals) to advocate for racial equity. 

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