

“Structure ignites spontaneity.” Author and Violinist Stephen Nachmanovitch

A good piece of music is fluid, changing, living, dynamic. There is a score to follow, but the real “life” of a piece of music comes from the playing, from the act of taking mere notes on a page and making them sing, harmonize, and move the soul.

The Christian church has a variety of structures to guide what it does. While some structures can at times stifle, the best ones ignite spontaneity. The lectionary can be just such a structure – a wondrous tool that, rather than confining congregational life, can spark it to greater and richer depths, capturing the beat of the church year and moving in response to that spiritual music, allowing individuals to be changed by the notes and to help rewrite the score for others.

### What?

From the earliest days of Christianity, some churches have followed a lectionary for their worship. However the revision of the Roman lectionary during Vatican II inspired a renewed interest in lectionary usage by a variety of denominations. The *Common Lectionary*, developed in 1980, was quickly embraced by many churches. This led to the *Revised Common Lectionary* in 1993 which has found its way into worship books, hymnals, and church calendars throughout the English-speaking world. Using four scripture readings per week, this lectionary provided for the reading of a large portion of the Bible over a three-year cycle.

This “rediscovering” of the Bible in worship led to a desire for educational materials that would link with worship, resulting in a number of lectionary-based curricula, such as *The Inviting Word* and *The Whole People of God*. As churches have danced with the rhythm of the church year and lectionary in their worship and education, it seems only logical to go one further step. The new curriculum resource, *Seasons of the Spirit*, achieves this by using the lectionary as a guide for all of congregational life

### Why?

The seasons and turnings of the church year, which guide the readings in the lectionary, engage spirituality in a number of different ways. Because the lectionary is an art form that allows for a patterned and intentional encounter with the Bible, parish life can become more biblically grounded. Rather than simply doing things in certain ways and at certain times because “that’s what we have always done,” the lectionary encourages us to ponder things anew throughout the year.

Instead of getting caught in ruts of our own making, this process of letting the Bible lead and guide us can open new pathways. Old familiar stories blend with new insights and contexts to transform understanding and vision. Within the rhythms of the church year and the “musical score” that is the lectionary, there is ample opportunity for the Spirit to lead in a new and holy dance.

In addition, the lectionary is both ecumenical and international, meaning that churches around the world, of many denominations and traditions, are exploring the same scriptures each week. This allows great opportunities for resources and activities to stretch beyond the walls of an individual congregation.

### How?

Each season of the church year has its own focus, and within each season the scripture readings support and build on that theme. In Advent, for example, the mood of anticipation and hope is enhanced by readings from the Hebrew prophets and gospel readings about what it means now that God has become flesh and lived among us. Church activities focus on preparing ourselves for a new birthing of God within our lives, which we will celebrate in the short season of Christmas. The season after Epiphany celebrates the beginnings of Jesus’ earthly ministry. It provides stories of people being called to ministry and shows how they responded. This in turn gives us a great opportunity to explore our own calls to ministry and to examine how our congregation might better invite and equip people to live out their ministries.

Lenten readings invite us to examine ourselves – to look within our individual and communal hearts to better understand what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Some churches take a break from regular “business” in this season and concentrate on spiritual growth and development through extra worship and learning opportunities.

Easter is a joyous celebration of fifty days – a time to sing and shout that Jesus is risen! In this season, readings from the Hebrew scriptures are replaced with stories from the book of Acts, and so it is a splendid opportunity to explore the life of the early church, and learn from their activities, mistakes, and adventures.

Following the festival of Pentecost we enter a long period of time – usually about half a year – which some churches call “Ordinary Time.” Stories of Jesus’ teaching and healing, set against sweeping sagas of Hebrew history and prophetic readings, remind us how God is with us in the everyday moments of our lives. We might choose to live out the journey of the Hebrew people in Exodus and contrast that with our own ministries of liberation and empowerment. Readings from the prophets might inspire us to explore how to be more prophetic in our own world. Parables of the reign or empire of God challenge us to engage in ministries that help bring that into existence.

Remember that the lectionary is not a rigid, lifeless thing. To use the analogy of a musical score once again, it provides a strong melody. But we may wish to harmonize it, or to veer away from the tune from time to time. Individual churches, local needs, denominational heritage, and current events may call us to move at times from the lectionary’s readings. The most beautiful music has individuality and personality.

Throughout the year the Bible readings suggested by the lectionary provide many opportunities to celebrate, to learn, to grow, to do – to be the body of Christ. The Spirit of God invites us to dance our way through life in whatever form that might take for us. The musical score of the Revised Common Lectionary can open us to new and exciting ways to live out that dance.

### ***The Lectionary and Seasons of the Spirit***

All of the resources in *Seasons of the Spirit* follow the readings of the lectionary. Further, the *Congregational Life* component integrates ministries of worship, education and outreach.

For example, in the season of Easter, when worship focuses on stories of the appearance of the risen Christ and of the early Christian community, church school classes are exploring what it must have been like for the church as it struggled to find its place, and what it meant to be disciples. Outreach resources invite congregations to think about how they can make the presence of the risen Christ apparent in their communities, and learn from the early church how to be disciples in a changing world. People of all ages can feel the relevance of their faith reverberating through their daily lives, as they worship, learn, and reach out, all in response to God’s word.

The lectionary can lead your church in new, integrated, and dynamic ministries – and *Seasons of the Spirit* can help equip you for that task.

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