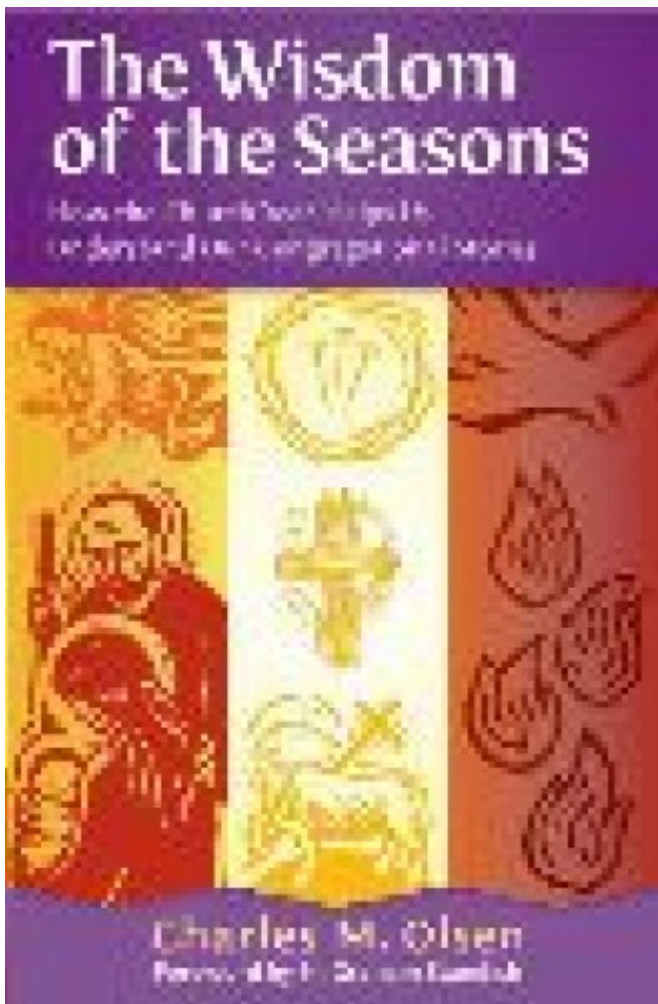


The Wisdom of the Seasons: How the Church Year Helps Us Understand Our Congregational Stories

reviewed by [Barbara Melosh](#) in the [February 23, 2010](#) issue

In Review



The Wisdom of the Seasons: How the Church Year Helps Us Understand Our Congregational Stories

Charles M. Olsen

We live by stories. Through narrative, we make meaning from personal and communal experience. Shared stories are the matrix of community, woven on the warp and weft of memory and hope. And as Christians, we tell time by setting our stories within a much larger story—the narrative of God, spanning creation to end times.

In *The Wisdom of the Seasons*, Charles M. Olsen proposes using the liturgical year to evoke, deepen and enrich congregational stories. Through more intentional nurturing of shared stories, he argues, congregations can better understand who they are and what they are called to become. By placing these stories in the framework of the liturgical year, congregations can learn to use the deep resources of scripture and tradition to interpret their own individual and communal stories.

Olsen offers a brief review of liturgical seasons, emphasizing their trinitarian themes. He advocates a fuller immersion in the communal resources of lectionary and liturgy, but his own central metaphor is not drawn from them. Instead, he offers the “waltz of the gospel”: “three-step triads” of waiting and yearning, naming and celebrating, and proclaiming and sending.”

In three chapters that make up a third of the book, he traces the patterns of story in case studies of seven congregations. Only one of the congregations addressed its challenges through the kind of process Olsen advocates: the Reed Point mission church, a Roman Catholic parish that used lectionary texts through a year of discernment that led to the closing of the mission. Olsen tells the stories of the other congregations and suggests how those stories might be interpreted through themes of the liturgical year. This kind of demonstration would be more effective if it were presented earlier and in condensed form; at this point, the reader is looking for examples of intentional application of the proposed method. The appendix offers some useful starting points for personal and congregational spiritual development.

When Olsen does take readers into small groups attempting to work with his model, the results are ambiguous. He recounts an exercise in which participants tell congregational stories and then assign them to seasons of the church year. Initially confident in their interpretations, the participants became uncertain and confused as they reflect further. Olsen acknowledges that the categories are fluid and shifting. “The very nature of the journey of faith presupposes an untidy sequence,” and the

uncontainable mystery of the Trinity doesn't yield to tightly bounded categories. True enough, but it may also be that Olsen's model is inadequate.

As a pastor in a liturgical tradition (Lutheran), I found myself frequently resisting Olsen's approach even though I share his deep appreciation for the "wisdom of the seasons." He only very briefly considers the role of worship itself as spiritual formation, and his exposition of the liturgical year is superficial, with little reference to liturgical theology. For most of the book, the liturgical year is a tool for strategic planning, taken out of the context of a congregation's shared worship. Instead of connecting Christians to a rich and sometimes strange tradition that might challenge and change us, Olsen seems satisfied with the more time-bound and ultimately self-referential goal of relevance.

Testimonies from users of this method suggest both its strengths and limitations. "I found I could adapt the seasons of the church calendar to my life, which makes it far more meaningful," said one participant. "Learning how we can relate our lives to the seasons of the church is opening an entire new avenue of thought for me," remarked another. Olsen summarizes additional responses, writing, "They attested to how much more personal their faith had become." What does not seem to have occurred to the author or his informants is that worship and Christian faith are not finally about us. The liturgical year helps to connect us to the rhythms of creation and to the worship we share with Christians over the centuries. It helps us not only to see our own stories in the liturgical year, but to learn a new way of seeing, to glimpse our own place in a much larger story of God.

Although Olsen's project seems inadequate to its subject and his prose is too often repetitious and plodding, the author is an astute observer of congregational life. This book might be read as a thoughtful response to the pervasive problem of congregational decline. The lack of a coherent and compelling story, Olsen believes, is one cause of decline; conversely, vital congregations attract people with the vibrant witness of their shared story.

Many of Olsen's examples expose an even more fundamental problem—a deep disconnect between the stories of the Bible and the ways people make sense of their own lives. Many sincere and committed Christians are unable to articulate even basic theological understandings, and even people who are lifelong churchgoers often have little knowledge of the Bible, let alone the history and meaning of Christian liturgy. *The Wisdom of the Seasons* promises more than it delivers for addressing these troubling realities, yet in other ways it may deliver more than it

promises. To the extent that it succeeds in awakening congregations to a lively sense of the liturgical year, this book joins the work of the Holy Spirit in drawing people into the life-changing story of God.