

# Eliot Institute

## Worship Coordinator's Handbook

Compiled by Sarah Movius Schurr, summer 2003

### Introduction

Lay lead worship is a rich tradition in Unitarian Universalism. At fellowships without professional ministers, workshops, meetings, conferences, and camps, lay lead worship is the backbone of the spiritual life of the community. Even in churches served by professional ministers, lay lead worship often remains part of the calendar of services.

At Eliot Institute, worship happens every day. Some campers may feel they are in a constant state of worship just from their presence in the community, or their proximity to nature. In addition, more structured community worship activities are offered on a regular basis. Every morning there is an ingathering of the community, before the day's programs begin. Every evening there is a worship service offered for those who desire a casual but structured worship experience toward the end of the day. Other worship activities may arise out of the energy and skills of the camp community, such as group meditation, Tai Chi, or drumming circles.

### The Job of Worship Coordinator

The worship coordinator at Eliot Institute is a volunteer position, nearly always filled by a lay person. The role of the worship coordinator is not to lead all the worship at Eliot. It is to see that the worship happens and that it happens in a way that serves the Eliot community. As Unitarian Universalists, our ranks hold many lay people with skills and experience in leading worship. Generally, the worship coordinator gathers a team of campers and leads the team in offering worship services to the camp.

Below is a brief outline of the tasks of the worship coordinator. [For more information, see the job description available on the Eliot website.](#)

- ☺ The worship coordinator and their team are responsible for the ingathering and evening worship services each day of camp. The coordinator prepares and leads the worship for first evening, since the worship team has not been able to meet prior to camp.
- ☺ The worship coordinator works with the volunteers in the worship team to train them, as needed, in creating meaningful worship. All worship team members can get help and guidance from the worship coordinator.
- ☺ The worship coordinator acts as a resource to the worship team, providing books and other worship materials they have brought with them to camp for the team to use. Resources should include some stories for children as well as adults because Eliot is a multi-generational community. Campers may have brought resources as well.
- ☺ The worship coordinator locates and distributes the materials from the "worship box" kept at camp, which contains some worship materials.
- ☺ The worship coordinator networks with the RE teachers and youth leader to facilitate services lead by children or youth and to coordinate ingathering stories for children.
- ☺ The worship coordinator contacts the theme speaker to see if they have any desire to be involved with any of the worship services, perhaps telling a story at ingathering.

- 👉 The worship coordinator sees that the worship space is esthetically pleasing and properly appointed with a chalice and flowers for worship. This does not mean the worship coordinator necessarily does the esthetics work, but they have the responsibility to see that the worship space is made ready.
- 👉 The worship coordinator networks with the music coordinator to plan music for the worship services.
- 👉 The worship coordinator attends daily staff meetings at camp.
- 👉 Other worship activities that spring forth out of the talents of the campers, such as drumming circles, are not the responsibility of the worship coordinator, but the worship coordinator should help, as requested, to facilitate these worship opportunities.
- 👉 The worship coordinator gets the title or theme of each evening worship service to the newsletter editor for inclusion in that day's newsletter.

### **What Makes Good Worship**

Worship should educate, entertain, and inspire. People want to come away from worship with new ideas. They want their attention to be held by the program and not struggle to stay engaged. They want worship to help them in their life. I also think it is important for each worship service to offer an opportunity for mystical or transcendent experiences.

Not every service will hold that key for everyone, and different things work for different people. But we must keep in mind that our worship services are not parties or political meetings. They are something different from anything else we do in our daily life.

Worship is most effective when it follows a certain flow. Good worship brings you in, gives you an experience of relationship, gives you something to think about, and sends you out into the world. These stages of a worship service are sometimes labeled as Call, Connection, Exploration, and Return. The service starts with the Call, which may include opening words, lighting a chalice, or an opening hymn. The service continues to the level of Connection, which may include joys and concerns, readings, or meditations. The service continues on to the Exploration, which may include a sermon, liturgical dance, or discussion. The service closes with the Return, which may include a closing song, benediction, or affirmation. The model I think of for camp worship is a sandwich. You have some kind of meat or peanut butter in-between two slices of bread to hold it in place and keep it tidy. The bread may be songs, opening or closing words, or a community building activity. The protein of the worship sandwich may be a sermon, a meditation activity, or a ritual. Having a beginning, middle, and an end help people get the most out of worship and keeps services from feeling empty or disjointed.

Camp worship is shorter and more casual than most Sunday services at a church or fellowship. The evening services are generally around 25-40 minutes in length.

### **Two example evening services:**

Opening song  
Light the Chalice  
Reading

Opening song  
Light the Chalice  
Reading

Musical interlude  
Guided meditation  
Song  
Closing words  
Extinguishing the chalice

Brief sermon  
Congregational sharing  
Song  
Closing words  
Extinguish the chalice

Morning ingathering services are very short, no more than 15 minutes in length. They are intergenerational, so need to be kid-friendly. A typical ingathering consists of a quick reading, chalice lighting, song, and a story. The ingathering ends as the children leave for their program and the adults stay for theirs. In thinking of the process of the day, this is the Call for our day at camp.

### **A sample ingathering:**

Gathering song  
Chalice lit by a child  
Opening words  
Story  
Closing song as kids leave

### **The Worship Team**

The worship coordinator gathers a team of volunteers who make worship happen during the week at camp. Some people will volunteer to help with worship when they fill in their registration forms. Others will volunteer once camp begins. It is good to contact those who volunteer ahead before camp begins, perhaps by e-mail, and welcome them to the team. Fill them in on any plans you have already made and ask for ideas. The first or second day of camp, have a meeting of all interested parties. Those who attend make up your worship team. It is with them that you plan and produce the week's worship services. Recruit people from many generations for your team, and include new campers as well as returning campers. This helps keep the services diverse and keeps the worship team from being an "old boys network".

Remember you have some other members of the community who are defacto members of the worship team. They may not come to your team meetings, but you will be communicating with them on a regular basis.

**The music coordinator:** Network with the music staff regularly about music for services.

**Youth and children's staff:** Youth traditionally plan and lead an evening worship. Middle school children traditionally plan and lead an ingathering. Network with them early about scheduling, and be a resource for them in preparing their service.

**The theme speaker:** sometimes likes to be part of the worship life of the camp. Contact them before camp to see if they want to be part of the first worship or ingathering, or perhaps wrap up the week with a special story.

### **How to plan the week of services**

The worship team meets the first day or two of camp, as soon as it can be scheduled. At that point, the camp's worship schedule is outlined. The first evening worship takes place before the first meeting of the worship team, and it needs to set a nice tone for the week. The worship

coordinator plans and leads this first evening service. The first ingathering should also be planned before camp. It might be good to have a tentative plan for the second evening worship, or have contacted an experienced volunteer to have something ready. New volunteers can't toss a service together in a few hours. One model for dividing up the work is that the worship team divides into pairs, with each pair leading a service. Another model is to assign each service to one volunteer, who coordinates that service and recruits other campers to help. You and your team can come up with a model that works for you.

The week's worship services should follow a framework, just like each individual worship service. The beginning of the week is the opening of camp. Service themes at the start of camp should be pleasant and should encourage coming together in community. In mid week, services may encourage deeper reflection, possibly around the camp's study topic. The end of camp services should help us wrap up the week and get ready to go back to the outside world.

### Important Words about Quality vs Opportunity

The job of a camp worship coordinator has two separate but equal parts. One aspect of the job is to see that quality worship experiences are made available to the community on a daily basis. Music should be uplifting, readings should be thoughtful, ritual should offer an opportunity for transcendence, ingatherings should bolster the spirit of the community. But they do not lead all the worship activities! The other aspect of the job is to empower volunteers to lead worship. It is a teaching and facilitating role where, hopefully, you will be helping someone lead community worship who has never done so before. Leading worship can be an enriching and life changing experience for volunteers. Camp is a place to try on a new role that may be expanded when they return to their home congregation.

These two aspects of the worship coordinators job can be a kind of yin and yang, building on each other. They can also work in opposite directions at times. Usually someone's first attempt at leading worship will not result in the polished product that a professional or an experienced volunteer can deliver. But making room for new talent and interest is part of your job and is as important as the quality of the worship.

It is important that as many new people be involved in worship as possible. They can be mentored by more experienced worship volunteers and may take more guidance from the worship coordinator. Sometimes newer volunteers will not take responsibility for an entire service, but for a meditation, or a few readings. This can be a way to help them feel successful at the end of the service and build their experience for next year. Sometimes they feel ready to jump right in and are able to lead an entire service themselves. It is important for the worship coordinator to meet regularly with all the worship volunteers and go over their service plans with them. This helps the volunteers to feel supported and helps avoid disappointing worship services.

It is important to have fun at camp, for you and everyone else. This is not a high stress performance. Camp is always full of surprises, so don't enter the week with too many preconceived expectations. Improvise! Use the team, the weather, and the atmosphere the week brings you. Encourage your worship volunteers to do the same. Inspire people to see what they have available and use it to make worship happen. Flowers can come from weeds at the

roadside. Holy water can be from the lagoon. That kid with the guitar could lead a hymn. The guy with the jokes at your dinner table could be a dynamic reader for your worship service.

## **Best Practices**

I asked experienced campers and past worship coordinators and for their wisdom and best practices for Eliot worship. This is a summary of the feedback I received.



### **People really like:**

- Worship that focuses on the beauty of nature in the camp setting
- Lots of singing
- Participatory worship
- Short and simple services
- Attention to flow and timing in the service
- Worship that incorporates the week's theme
- The song lyrics printed big and clear (4-5 inches) at the front of the room
- Starting and ending on time



### **People dislike:**

- Many readings tossed together with no theme
- Personal sharing with no boundaries
- Preachy worship
- No or poorly used sound equipment so you can't hear



### **Other helpful hints:**

- Don't assume everyone knows what you know. "We all know this song..." "Remember last year when we..." New folks don't know what a MAG is or the usual closing song.
- Watch the flow. Avoid saying, "now we are going to..." before every action. Move smoothly from one part of worship to the other without dead air. It helps if all the participants are seated in the front row and the worship space is set up so you can walk easily from one part of the space to another.
- Learn to use and be comfortable with the sound equipment.
- Stand when reading the kids story so the adults feel included as well. Ask your favorite DRE or primary school teacher about story telling techniques.
- Consider teaching and using silent forms of clapping (rubbing hand together or shaking open hands in the air) in worship. Some folks like this, some don't.

## **Favorite and Traditional Eliot Worship Services**

Cherry communion: Life is just a bowl of cherries! This is a communion service where fresh local cherries and appropriate readings are shared, communion style, with campers. This can be a great opener for the week or can fit into a shorter than usual worship spot on talent show night.

Services of remembrance: An altar is set and campers can come forward and light a candle to share an important life transition, such as the birth of a child, a divorce, a death in the family, or a new career. Longtime campers who are sick or have passed away are also remembered at this service.

Music service: The worship and music staff teams up to present a service of music and poetry.

Closing worship in the woods: The Saturday morning service traditionally takes place outdoors, if weather allows, and is produced by the staff. It is a closing ceremony for camp, just before everyone leaves for home.

Silent communion: Campers feed each other bread and wine in a wordless service that includes times for silent self examination, silent reflection on atonement, and silent thanksgiving.

Nature services: Readings, songs, and personal reflections on the beauty of nature using natural decorations on the altar.

Peace service: An August Eliot tradition! This service is dedicated to peace and includes the finale of floating peace boats in the lagoon.