

Weekly Worship Service

Without a doubt the most important event in the life of the church is the weekly worship service. Some churches have several services while others only have one service a week. Most people come because they want to meet God, have fellowship with friends, hear God's Word explained and to worship - not necessarily however in that order.

A clear philosophical understanding for the reason of the service is important if there is to be any lasting impact. Churches which hold to the traditional view believe that the most important event in the service is the exposition of Scripture. All things in their services are directed toward the climax of the preaching of the Word. For other churches though, the most important event is the worship, offered to God in spirit and in truth, while others see the primary reason for the service is that of reaching the lost.

Whatever your philosophical understanding is of the service, one thing is certain, the service must be planned well, prayed through thoroughly and flexible enough to allow the unexpected prompting of the Spirit.

The first seven minutes of a service are crucial for newcomers as this is the length of time in which they make the decision as to whether they like this church and intend to return.

The following matters need to be looked at in approaching the weekly service:

Preparation

Prepare your heart the whole week. This includes the worship team along with the pastor. We need to be wise in the way we spend Saturday night. I normally stay home on Saturday night and sometimes watch a short, harmless T.V. programme and spend the rest of the time in prayer and going over the Sunday message.

On the Sunday morning it is useful for all those taking part in the service to have a worthwhile time of checking arrangements and praying together beforehand.

Friendliness

Where possible it is good to have a meeting place where the entrance is open and inviting. Visitors who are uncertain of where to go can be put off attending. This becomes a psychological barrier deterring them from feeling at ease. Public buildings normally overcome these barriers as they are built on neutral ground, but that can also have some disadvantages. For example, it means setting up the layout for the Sunday service which we have had to do for years.

The building in which the service is held needs not only to be easily accessible to visitors but also conducive to good fellowship. In our city we moved into the Town Hall. The congregation faced the stage which created more of a formal atmosphere, restricting fellowship. However, when we placed another stage along the side wall, and lowered it, the whole atmosphere changed. The layout of seating can make a world of difference as to the friendliness of the people.

It is important that newcomers make at least five good friends within the first six months of attending as this will also help to determine whether they will commit themselves to the church or not. Therefore, the first people they meet at the door must be warm and friendly - folk who feel confident. The bigger the church, the harder it is for people to become integrated.

A greeting time in the service helps to loosen things up, but make sure your folk speak to the visitors, otherwise the visitors will feel embarrassed. Teach your people how to take an interest in visitors. Suggest to them to try starting sentences with 'who, what, where, why or how' and the rest of a question can usually follow easily e.g. who do you know here?

It is useful to give out a visitor's pack, provided it is given out sensitively and it is of a reasonable quality. Professional looking packs can be produced cheaply with the aid of a computer and photocopier, but if they look cheap it can produce a poor image of the church.

Style of dress

You speak by more than your words, as your clothes also convey a message. Those taking part in the service need to dress neatly and appropriately. Too sloppy an approach will make the service too casual. On the other hand, do not go to the other extreme, where the image you portray is out of keeping with the type of people and area you minister to. Showing too much naked skin, such as uncovered midriff is normal in India but distracting in Western churches.

Starting on time

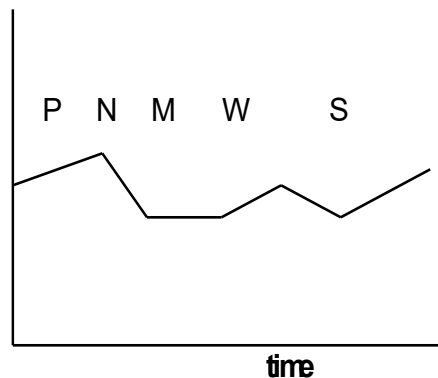
In our society time is considered precious. A late or half-hearted start can give a poor impression. Remember that first seven minutes principle. Starting on time shows that you are in control and that you know where you are going in the service. It portrays confidence and helps the congregation to feel at ease.

Mood of the service

People arrive on a Sunday in various states of mind, but a certain degree of interest had to motivate them to come. The least we can aim for is that they will leave greatly encouraged (not as shown in the graph). The graph shows how people often respond over a given period,

throughout the service. Obviously, the length of whatever happens will vary from church to church and from service to service.

response



Mood of the Service

P - Praise time.

N - Notices. Where there is a loss of interest, creative thinking is needed.

M - Missionary spot (not all churches have this).

W - Meditative singing

S - Sermon (obviously the response may vary).

By the time we come to the end of the service people should be built up to face a new week with renewed faith and confidence. Therefore, keep the service moving bearing in mind that people have a shorter attention span compared to what they used to have. An enthusiasm within the people and for the service keeps people coming and inviting their pre-Christian friends.

Music

We often divide the worship up into different segments, as for example we start with praise and then go on to worship. The truth is that the whole service should be one of worship. However, do not tire your people out through prolonged singing. If the church congregation becomes fragmented during the service, sometimes a good hearty hymn or song can bring them back together again. If it is largely a seeker service, then be careful with free singing in the Spirit. Free singing is where people make up their tune and words and sing it as an act of worship to the Lord. A visitor may not understand what this is all about, so if you have free singing, explain what you are doing to settle their fears and do not prolong the singing.

The worship leader is a key person along with the Pastor.

Plan for songs that are relevant, have good content and that build a theme. The worship leader must not interject after each song with a mini sermon; they must be prepared to change the songs chosen if that is the way the Spirit leads.

The worship team or choir, need to be filled with the Spirit and generally to look happy. Often, with the type of songs sung today, there needs to be a high turnover of songs for the worship to remain fresh.

Message

The whole of a pastor's life is preparation for a good penetrating message. Finney, D.L. Moody and all spiritual giants would spend hours in prayer to receive the anointing of God in their lives. Although we may have personality and good content, only the Spirit gives lasting life found in prayer, obedience and meditation on God's Word.

Present your message so that it is well received even though it may be challenging. Make sure you include plenty of Scripture. Some groups prefer a loud dynamic approach, while others prefer a low-key, thought-provoking message. Some of this preference is temperament based along with their experience of God. One or two great Christian leaders are polarising the church today, not because of theological differences, but because of the style of their presentation. One thing I have noticed though is that each sincere Christian believes that the style they feel comfortable with, is probably the 'right' one. Therefore, do not antagonise people because of a wrong approach. Use modern translations of the Bible, read well and never compromise the Christian message.

The three-point sermon is useful, but the good preacher today is the good storyteller, like Jesus. This change of emphasis means that the seeker finds these illustrations helpful in understanding the Christian message.

Public prayer

Of vital importance is the *cleansing power of public prayer*. People coming to church need to experience the opportunity of confession, thanksgiving and adoration. Words and a sense of inadequacy often pervade their thoughts and emotions. Therefore, carefully thought-out prayers directed from the front give a new sense of forgiveness and hope.

These prayers must be constructed in a language that people are familiar with. They must come from the concrete world that people live in. Never treat God as your buddy or as One so transcendent that people cannot expect their prayers to be heard.

For prayer to remain fresh and creative and to avoid constant monotony it is helpful to draw upon many of the aids available today. Most of all, pray from the heart. Not just from a ritualistic prayer book no matter how useful they may be. Use them to inspire prayer.

Appeal

Handle the appeal wisely and sensitively. There certainly is a place for this as often it is in the service that one senses a real anointing of God but be careful that one is not simply appealing to a person's emotions. Furthermore, do not give the impression that a quick prayer is all that

is needed to resolve some deep-seated emotional problem. In these cases, it is as a gateway allowing follow up at a further stage. Make the call clear and without giving wrong impressions of what will happen.

Every Sunday service needs to be a good one. The people need to be constantly challenged and it is helpful to remind them of the direction the church is going in. However, do not be filled with condemnation when things appear not to go well, as occasionally the worst services turn out to be the most used of God. Thank the Lord!

'Whoever offers me praise glorifies me' Psalm 50:23 (NKJV)