

How to Start a New Worship Service

Lyle Schaller, widely respected church consultant and diagnostician, has said: “Half of all the churches in America should begin a new worship service. And 80% of them will experience new growth as a result.”ⁱ

How does a church successfully begin a new service? Doing it right the first time is important because if the process is unsuccessful (for whatever reason) you won’t get permission to try again for another four to five years—longer than the tenure of most pastors in one church.

For a number of years I have researched how churches successfully add a new service. There seem to be certain ingredients that are essential in doing so. (For a more comprehensive guide see *How to Start a New Service*.ⁱⁱ)

#1: Identify Your Target Audience

To successfully add a new style service, begin with a clear definition of who you are trying to reach with the new service. And, it should be a target group that is *different* from your present constituency in either age, ethnic/cultural identity, or spiritual maturity. (Don’t begin a new service by prematurely selecting a day, time, or worship style for the new service; that comes later.)

The more specifically you define the unique characteristics of the target audience for the new service, the more likely your new service will be successful.

#2. Define the Goal of Your New Service

A goal or purpose statement for the new service should include: 1) a statement of the unique need or reason for the service, 2) a concise description of the target audience, and 3) the intended outcome or change in behavior that will occur among those in attendance. This exercise will help your leaders and present congregation understand why the church is taking this high-visibility “leap of faith.”

Another important reason for writing a clear purpose statement for the new service is that when you begin designing the service, *everything* that is part of the service should contribute to achieving that purpose. If a song, announcement, sermon, or other activity can’t be justified on the basis of its contribution to that purpose, it is extraneous and should be omitted.

3. Identify Appropriate Themes

Once you have defined your target audience and established a specific goal for the new service, the next step is to learn as much as you can about the “typical” person in that group. Some churches go so far as to describe and name a personification of their target audience (“Beaverton Bill & Cindy,” “Glendora Greg,” etc.).

One of the most effective means of gathering relevant information on your target audience is through “focus groups.” This is fact-finding research where you bring 8 - 12 people from your target group together for an hour of conversation on their opinions and perspectives. (Remember, if your target group is unchurched people, be sure it is unchurched people who are in your focus group.) The goal of this research is to produce a 1-2 page document summarizing the key characteristics of your target audience and the specific implications of your research for your new service. Refer to this research summary regularly in the next step...

4. Design the Service

Before you begin planning your new service, visit several other churches that are successfully reaching people in the same target group. Denomination or theology of the church you visit is irrelevant, since your target audience will not attend your new service because of your denomination or theology. They will be looking for why the benefit of attending is worth the price. Your new service should be able to answer that question.

After you have visited some model services, meet with their worship coordinator. Find out what the church has learned about effective outreach and ministry to this target group. How do they plan their services? What would they do differently? You will gain immeasurable insights through visiting three or four such churches before beginning your own planning.

One of the refreshing things about planning a new service is that you need not be bound by “old wineskins.” Identify themes that speak directly to the concerns of your target group (which you learned in your focus groups). And then be creative about how to best communicate your message. Remember, the message is not the sermon. The message is the service.

5. Select a Time and Place to Meet

One of the questions in your focus group research (#3 above) should be: “If everything else were equal, when and where would be the most convenient time for you to attend a service?” If you hear a predominant answer, that is when and where the service should meet. Be willing to take God to the people...don’t make the people come to God (i.e., the church building).

Many new churches begin meeting in schools, hotels, or restaurants. This may also be a good place for your new service. One benefit of a location away from the church building is that it will be less threatening to people who have not recently been to church. Many of today’s church buildings and sanctuaries are outdated. Does the message of your building complement or contradict the message you wish to communicate through your new service? For example, a sanctuary with fixed pews is not appropriate for a contemporary service. Just because you have a building and sanctuary is not a sufficient reason to use it for your new service.

All things being equal, the best time to begin a new service is sometime between 9:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m. Sunday morning. This is good news and bad news. The good news is that you probably already have a service then. The bad news is that you probably already have a service then. In other words, starting a new service may force your people to face the question: “Do we use prime time for ‘our’ service, or ‘their’ service?”

More and more churches are solving this dilemma by offering two *simultaneous* services in two different locations. This vertical approach breaks the limitations of traditionally linear planning.

6. Communicate with Your Target Audience

The best research and planning will be useless if the people you are trying to reach don’t know about your service. Follow these communication guidelines and you’ll find good attendance at your new service:

Rule #1: *The more personal the invitation, the higher the response rate.* By far the most successful communication campaign you can devise will be one based around the social and relational networks of your present members. One of every three unchurched people say they would attend church if asked by a friend.ⁱⁱⁱ And the average church member knows six to eight friends/relatives who do not attend church.^{iv} Start there. Print a nice descriptive flyer on the new

service and give ten copies to each of your members for them to distribute to friends and relatives.

Rule #2: The more often you communicate the more likely you will be heard. Try to have your target audience hear about your new service at least five different times and ways. Good direct mail flyers will bring a ½ - 1% response rate. The same percentage generally holds for a telemarketing campaign. If you are in a community where merchants can display flyers in their store windows, saturate the business district with notices. One of the most widely read sections of the paper are the “Personals” in the classified ads. Put a creative ad there about your new service.

Finally, establish a budget early so you don't run short of money at this critical point.

7. Follow-Up Visitors and Prospects

A successful new service will dramatically increase your visitor flow. The North Anderson (IN) Church of God began a Saturday night “seeker service” and found they surpassed their previous year's visitor numbers in less than six months at the new service. That's good news and bad news. The good news is that you will have more visitors than you've had in recent years. The bad news is that you will have more visitors than you've had in recent years.

Here are two simple, but important rules for effective visitor follow up:

Rule #1: Initiate a follow up contact with all newcomers within 48 hours. Return rates begin to drop off measurably after the first two days. (Note that “contact” does not necessarily mean “visit.” Often times a phone call is more appropriate.)

Rule #2: The goal of your contact should be to see the visitor return the following week. The average “affiliation rate” in American churches is 10 - 12% for first-time visitors. That is, churches retain approximately 1 in 10 of their first time visitors. The affiliation rate for second time-visitors, however, jumps to 25 - 28%. And third-time visitors join at a rate of 40 - 45%. Seeing newcomers back the following week doubles the likelihood that you will still be seeing them a year later.

8. Evaluate the Service

What was the goal of your service (#2)? Did you achieve it?

Immediately after your first service (and after each service during the first two months) gather your worship team for a de-briefing. Identify the good, the bad, and the ugly. You will begin to see patterns of what “works” and what doesn't. Don't be satisfied with a second-rate service; your newcomers won't be.

Get a video camera and tape the first 4 - 6 services. Take them home and study them as a football coach would the previous night's game. Enclose a “service evaluation” form in the bulletin and ask attendees for their honest opinions and suggestions, just as good restaurant managers do of their patrons. Invite a friend to come to a service especially to take notes and give you suggestions on what it's like being a newcomer.

In conclusion, there are strong indications that within the next 5 - 10 years we will see churches on the American landscape falling into one of three categories. We are already seeing the groupings take form:

1. Congregations (of every denomination) that believe their traditional style of “doing church” should not and will not change, even at the cost of their own existence.
2. Congregations (of every denomination) that desire to reach out, but for various reasons are either unwilling or unable to broaden their ministry, and will thus be limited to the addition of new members primarily through inter-church transfer.
3. Congregations (of every denomination) that realize America is different in 2010 than it was in 1950, and are successfully adapting their ministry to reach out to their community in new ways.

Consciously deciding on one of these three paths into the future will be a decision every church must make in coming years. And *not* to decide is to decide—on #1 or #2.

As we look to the future and the changing American landscape, church leaders should find inspiration in the words of the Apostle Paul: “... I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.”^v The great apostle was willing to do *anything* if it led to the ultimate objective of bringing people to a life-changing faith and relationship with Jesus Christ. Let that also be our philosophy of ministry as we are called to reach this generation for Christ and His Church. For those churches that are willing to do so, these are the best of times!

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ⁱ Charles Arn. *How to Start a New Service*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997, p. 36.

ⁱⁱ Arn. *op.cit.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Growth Report* #43, in *Ministry Advantage* September/October, 1993, p. 5

^{iv} Win & Charles Arn, *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples*, Monrovia: Church Growth Press, 1997, p. 73.

^v I Cor. 9:22