



## **Planning for Attendance Seasons in the Church Year**

**By Lovett H. Weems, Jr.**

We are used to thinking of the seasons of the Christian year such as Advent, Christmastide, Epiphany, Lent. There are also attendance seasons that follow common patterns across congregations. It is important to understand these in order to plan for them and maximize their potential for reaching more persons through worship.

Making special plans to coincide with back-to-school time or with Advent and Lent can reap rich rewards in reaching people for Christ. On the other hand, scaling back worship in the summer because “attendance always drops” can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Each season calls for its own special planning and goals to reach more worshippers over the course of the year.

Taking such seasons of the year seriously as you plan for worship is one way of taking seriously those you are seeking to reach and the cycles and rituals of their lives. It says that the church is always seeking to become a more inviting and welcoming place for all to worship God throughout the year.

### **Big Days**

There are two times when attendance normally surpasses the average considerably: Easter and Christmas Eve. Yearly attendance will often be determined by those who attend on just these two occasions. And yet, some churches do not make plans to be attentive to Easter attendance simply because “we always have a big crowd on Easter.” And while some churches do not conduct Christmas Eve services, others are having attendance on Christmas Eve that matches or surpasses Easter. It is essential to take full advantage of these days to reach current participants and new people *and* to let these services become springboards for building continued attendance and engagement by planning special things in the periods following these important holidays.

### **Prime Seasons**

Prime seasons are the times of the year when people are most likely to attend in higher numbers than any other times except the two “big days.” One prime season comes in January and February. The busyness of the holiday season has passed, and people are getting back to work and school. They are thinking about starting the new year in a constructive way. It’s even possible that taking their spiritual life more seriously was one of their New Year’s resolutions. This is the ideal time to invite your Christmas visitors to become more active and engaged.

Another prime season is Lent. Church members are often open to doing something different during Lent, such as participating in a class or small group, reading a recommended book, or committing to attending church weekly as a Lenten discipline. Some congregations choose a Lenten study book or curriculum — perhaps tied to a sermon series — for use by all small groups in the church, publicizing it widely as a way to involve new participants in small group study.

The fall period between the beginning of school and November is another prime time. With summer vacations completed, this back-to-school period is a time when parents are likely to be seeking out a Sunday School or other types of church activities for their children. It is also a time when people of all ages tend to settle into a more regular pattern of engagement.

Advent is also a prime time. Non-churchgoers are perhaps more open to considering things religious and attending church in the time leading up to Christmas than any other time of year.

The key to reaching more people through worship in each of these seasons is planning, planning, planning, and doing it well in advance.

### **Low Times**

There are seasons in which attendance in most churches tends to be lower than usual. Traditional low times are the post-Easter period and summer. And yet, failing to concentrate on these periods sends the message that they are unimportant and reinforces low attendance. The post-Easter period is a very critical time for engaging those who visit at Easter. And summer is often a time when people will visit churches – particularly as more and more schools and colleges have pushed the beginning of their school year well into August. Churches that maintain a full schedule of worship and programming can be surprised to find that the people they assumed were “on vacation” all summer are in town much more than they had thought.

### **Conclusion**

Staying attentive to the seasons of the year as you plan for worship is yet another way of being attentive to those you are seeking to reach and the patterns of their lives. It does not mean the church is conforming to the patterns of the world. Rather it means that the church is willing to take account of a host of considerations as it becomes a more welcoming place for all to worship God throughout the year.

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### **The Right Question**

*Leaders do not need answers.*

*Leaders must have the right questions.*

Someone involved in intentional interim ministry reports that she learned the “RAA” questions to ask oneself about a situation:

Who is Responsible?

Have they been given the Authority?

To whom are they Accountable?

## Ways to Improve Attendance of Current Members

By Robert Crossman

- At least once or twice each year, perhaps in the New Year's resolution season, teach and preach the importance of faithful worship attendance.
- Invite church members to make a written commitment to grow one step toward faithful attendance.
- Include a commitment to faithful worship attendance as part of a holistic annual stewardship commitment.
- Keep a record of attendance and monitor it.
- Know that it is important to respond to absentees before they drop out of active attendance. Once a regular attender misses six consecutive weeks, it is hard to return to the habit of consistent Sunday worship.
- Form a worship membership care team to review attendance within 24 hours of each service.
- Send a handwritten note (signed by the membership care team, not the pastor) to anyone who has missed three Sundays in a row. Say, "Looking through the attendance slips, we've missed your name! Hope to see you next Sunday." In a smaller church, the wording can be more personal.
- Ask a personal friend (a choir mate, Sunday School class member, or someone who sits in the same pew) to telephone people who have missed four Sundays in a row. "Hi, John. We've noticed that Fred has missed church the last four Sundays. Can you telephone him this evening?"
- Maintain a loving, invitational relationship with those who have been absent for five or more Sundays. Never be judgmental.
- Telephone every household in the church and everyone who has ever visited to invite them to some special event four times a year. Say, "Hi. We are calling everyone related to First Church this week, reminding everyone that this Sunday the choir is singing the Messiah. I hope you will be there."

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When facts are few, opinions loom large.

*Sylvia Lafair*

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