

The Salvation Army Leadership Letter



Issue 29:

Sundays 101

A Beginner's guide to Sunday mornings

Winning on Sunday mornings is the third key to growing a NZ church or corps.

Leadership is the first key. Vision is the second. And Sunday mornings is the third because if you don't win then you won't win at all.

In general churches or corps, you win or lose on Sunday mornings!

Sunday mornings – a journey of discovery

Nearly 25 years ago, I set out on a journey that took me to every part of NZ and into every movement of the NZ Church.

I had some extraordinary experiences along the way.

Like the day in 1987 when my boss asked me to handle the World Vision side of the combined World Vision/Bill Subritzky Luncheon and Crusade meetings – but just for a week till the Marketing Manager was well again. I did, but for five years rather than a week.

Day after day during those hectic years, I ran luncheons for Bill to promote child sponsorship and I shared in his evening crusade meetings in the same town or city with thousands of children being sponsored.

But something else happened at those meetings. Night after night I saw what I reluctantly came to accept was the finest singing I saw anywhere in NZ because Bill was very strict on song choice and the placement of songs in the extended singing at the beginning of his evening meetings.

Travelling with Bill also brought me national exposure as the Charismatic Renewal was peaking, and as I worked with him I began to speak on Sundays for the pastors I met, on **How to Grow a NZ Church**. Then the inevitable happened.

After five years, other staff took over the work with Bill and I developed my own sponsorship-linked product. Now speaking up to five times a Sunday, I went all over NZ and into every part of the NZ Church preaching for the pastors and ministers and corps officers I'd met, and many others, and I did my best for all of them. Sometimes I preached at Anglican 8 o'clock when no music was played, sometimes in the liveliest churches in town, and often in churches in between. But one question weighed increasingly on my mind: why do some churches win on Sundays, and grow, when most don't win and inevitably decline?

I set out to find some answers.

Sunday mornings – the first discoveries

I found the first pieces of the Sunday jigsaw quite quickly.

As I moved from church to church, up to three a Sunday, I came to see that Sundays were letting us down badly. Sometimes it was what we did or how we did it; but it was usually both, in the same service or meeting.



I was intrigued that the smaller the church the longer the Sunday notices took, up to 10 or 15 minutes in small churches. I couldn't work out why we kept the children in so long when they were obviously bored with what was happening, and I never forgot the church leader who took his restless boy out at the 40-minute mark and gave him a hiding. I couldn't work out why we prayed such churchy or triumphalistic prayers when all we needed to do was to use words that everyone would understand. The preaching too (of messages taped, videoed or heard on Sundays off) was often boring because the messages were poorly delivered, or too old fashioned to connect with people, or so triumphalistic that they offered things preachers could never deliver – like automatic healing. But patchy as the preaching was, I never heard of any preaching wars anywhere or anything remotely like them.

But one thing about the services troubled me more than anything else which I discovered was the church's Achilles heel.

It was the **music and singing** and the music wars they led to, because churches were struggling with what to sing, when to sing the songs they chose, and how to sing them. Finally I worked out that inadequate though the preaching was, people often put up with it because it was just another human being talking to them about God. But the singing was different because when people sing they connect directly with God themselves - and if they can't make that connection because of song choice, or something else, they leave, try another church, or give church away as thousands did from all parts of the church. And people still do that because we don't address the issues that turn them away.

Of course what churches do during the week is also important.

But I found that no church that did Sunday mornings poorly grew - no matter how good its weekday activities were. And no church that did Sunday mornings well failed to grow – especially if it did weekday things reasonably well. In fact, the Sunday morning winners grew even if they did some weekday things poorly because Rick Warren's *evangelistic power of worship* principle saw the churches soar beyond their weekday weaknesses.

When it comes to growing general churches or corps, we win or lose on Sunday mornings!

Sunday mornings – two later discoveries

I learned the first few lessons quickly as I visited many churches; I learned two further lessons through reflection over time.

First, Robert Randall's little book *What People Expect From Church* taught me that **there are remarkable similarities between today's church services and the crowds that once gathered around Jesus** – although the crowd dynamics are vastly different.

Take any day in Jesus' ministry and you'll find there were roughly three groups of people in the crowds. Some, like the disciples, had been following him for some time. Others, like the Samaritans of John 4.42 and the seekers of Jn 7.31, were discovering that Jesus is the Saviour of the world. Finally, many in the crowds were observers who weren't interested in following Jesus just then; indeed some later became his enemies, like the crowds in Mt 27.19-25. And those three groups – the committed, the interested, and the indifferent – are still the groups that gather around Jesus when we meet for our church services today. They're also the three groups Paul expected to see at church on Sundays in Corinth, as the NIV text and text notes of 1 Cor 14.23-24 indicate.

Second, helped by Randall, I came to see that **people come to church today with the same expectations as the crowds who once gathered around Jesus**. From the rough and tumble of life they make their way to church *yearning to feel understood*. They come to



church *yearning to understand*, looking for pictures and ideas they can graft onto their present sketchy understanding of life so they do a better job of getting it together tomorrow. Many attend church *yearning to belong*, wanting to form relationships that will outlast the ups and downs of the years. They come to church *yearning for hope*, hoping someone will jump-start their deadened hearts and point them to a better tomorrow. And somewhere mixed up in all these dreams, over time people come to church increasingly yearning to worship because they're discovering they're wired to worship Someone greater than themselves.

Twenty centuries after he came, people still gather around the now-ascended Jesus yearning for the same things.

When leaders grasp these things, they change the way they do church as we'll now see.

Sunday mornings – starting with the basics

To win on Sunday mornings we must grasp these six closely related principles:

1. **Church today is for the same three groups of people that once gathered around Jesus:** the committed, the seeker and the indifferent – as the NIV Study Bible text, text notes and study notes of 1 Cor 14.23-24 indicate.

In the Bible's longest comment on the church service, with its repeated mention of the *church*, Paul makes it very clear that we need to do church with the believer, the seeker and the unbeliever in mind. The particular issue Paul discussed with the Corinthians was where their widely practiced gifts of tongues and prophecy fitted into their services which aren't our concern in this Letter. Rather, the point for us is that he expected unbelievers and seekers to turn up at church, as they do now, and that their presence should shape the way we do our meetings.

2. **The 1 Cor 14 dynamic can be best captured by the [The Sunday Meeting graphic](#).**

As you'll see, we can divide the average service or meeting into three parts, with some features of parts one and two being interchangeable.

The **Christians** will of course be present but some **seekers** and **unbelievers** should also be present, and all three groups (including the men) should be able to sing the songs easily and the preaching connect easily with them; if it doesn't, first-time visitors won't be back. We know from research that the average local visitor decides within the first eight minutes whether they'll be back, so that's the red-light part of the meeting. The rest of part one is the orange (and still very risky) part and the miscellaneous yellow part with its bits and pieces still has some degree of risk. The third part is green because we've built a relationship with the visitors so 'the ask' at the end of the message can be quite direct – provided we kept connecting with them throughout the message.

That's the 1 Cor 14 way of doing church, and when we do it this way we connect with all three groups throughout the meeting – from the first word to the last. But as well-travelled readers know, even after all these years of talking about 'reaching the lost', we still rarely do church this way. So as recent research confirms, the national church keeps declining as we reach fewer and fewer people. Yet even small churches or corps can have over 100 mostly-local visitors in 12 months, with hardly a person returning. But that church would double in size over 3-4 years if the meetings issues



were addressed – in one case, with the new people later giving the church the leaders they so badly needed.

As that church learned, the solution to their growth problems was perfectly simple though hugely challenging: get Sunday mornings right and you'll hold and begin discipling your local visitors!

3. Win Arn and later researchers found that **if we're doing Sundays reasonably well, we should hold one in four first-time local visitors** – a friend with his large church holds one in three (33 per 100).

So here's the refined Win Arn formula. For every 100 visitors we get, 33% (33) should be back for a second look and 75% (24-25) of returnees should be assimilated into the church within 12 months.

That's what happens when we get our Sunday mornings right. Our problem isn't that unreached or partly reached people won't come to church; they still do, in quite large numbers. Our problem is to hold the ones that do come because when we hold them they'll bring their friends leading to even faster growth – just as they did in the early church when they didn't have any evangelism programmes at all!

4. Drilling down further into the visitor equation, **family-aged first-time visitors with a little church background, as many have, come with three questions they want answered** – what's *the singing* like, what's *the preaching* like, and what can you do for *our children* in church time because the last thing they want to be doing is baby-sitting their own children (as I've heard them explicitly say!).

Get all three of these areas right and you'll hold many of them, get two areas right and you'll hold some, get one right and you'll be struggling, get none right and your visitors will almost certainly not come back.

So generally speaking, winning on Sunday mornings is about 30% music and singing – perhaps interspersed with brief moments of prayer and/or testimony, about 30% preaching and response, about 25% children's church time ministry (25%, because some growing smaller churches have an adequate though not outstanding children's programme), and about 15% is the rest.

5. **The 7 Practices Of Effective Ministry underlines all this emphatically** in the key Practice #5, on the outsider, which I now start with when I'm beginning to coach from the book. In my view, the top of p.146 is the most important paragraph in the book – especially the second sentence. And I think the bottom of p.150 is the most important sentence in the book ...their insiders decided the needs of outsiders are more important than their own!

That is 1 Corinthians 14 in its developed form: don't do anything in church that gets in the way of reaching those who don't yet know Jesus. And as we'll see, that still gives you huge scope for developing awesome meetings!

6. **We get all these meeting things together best** when, viewing [The Importance of Sunday Mornings graphic](#), we see corps/church life in this way.

As the above doubling church showed, up to 50% of building prevailing churches comes down to winning on Sunday morning which is still the preferred time for most people to attend church.



Likewise, over 50% of prevailing comes down to what we do the rest of the time because it's out in the everyday world that we build relationships with some of the people who later look in on church. And much discipling and pastoral care is also done during the week, away from Sunday morning church altogether.

But if you can't get people to come on Sunday mornings you're simply not going to grow a general church – and you're certainly not going to get great general church soldiers and members out of people who dig their toes in and say they'll follow Jesus but won't have a bar of Sunday mornings because they can't stand them!

Whichever we way look at them, general churches and corps win or lose on Sunday mornings!

Sunday mornings – some pieces of the meeting jigsaw

Here are some of the biggest pieces of the jigsaw.

1. The First Eight Minutes

The first eight minutes is the most dangerous part of the service or meeting!

It's dangerous because we don't have any relationship with most first-time visitors at the start; or if we do have a relationship through weekday ministries etc, they mightn't have any idea of what actually happens at church or have any understanding of the Christian Faith. So if we sing our songs and pray our prayers primarily for the present church family, the visitors probably won't be back because they'll decide church isn't for them – especially if they'd met obvious cringe factors like strong Satan talk which may fit perfectly well later.

The first eight minutes is also unfortunately the time when some of our best people are still arriving at church so numbers may still be thin, the meeting rather unsettled as people walk in, and the singing struggling because there simply aren't enough people there to sing the songs. In fact, songs that went poorly at the start may go better later.

So here's the first lesson for winning on Sunday mornings: ***craft the first eight minutes so the singing and praying connect with all three groups of people, put your most singable songs on in this spot, and lead warmly and well without any waffle, trivia, clowning around like a large home group fun night, or sloppy speaking.***

The average visitor decides within the first eight minutes whether they'll come back; fail here and you probably won't see them at church again.

And that would be an awful tragedy when people's destinies are being determined by what you do!

2. The Meeting Leading

Leading can also make or break a meeting and many factors make for effective leading. Here's a few.

- *The leader's position on the platform is important.* Obviously you can't lead well from the back of a deep platform nor from the extreme right or left of a



wide platform so the best position on a sizeable platform is somewhere at the centre-front of the platform. However, some musicians with a gift of leading can lead effectively while playing their instruments from somewhere fairly close to the centre-front of the platform. But less gifted people, who're the majority, should lead from a centre-front lectern because in most situations that's closest to the majority of people and is therefore the position of greatest influence.

- *Leaders preparation is also important* and less experienced leaders should write out the brief comments they'll make and practice them – even if they don't follow their notes closely on the day. The discipline of thinking it out and practicing it will add to their fluency and effectiveness. With leading, practice still makes perfect.
- Above all, leaders should remember that *a Sunday meeting is not a large home group*; it's quite different because it has a different focus, different people and people-to-building dynamics, different disciplines and different objectives. In fact it's a different 'beast' altogether!

Confusing the Sunday meeting with a large home group is the single biggest mistake that smaller churches make and it costs them dearly. They frequently follow a bitsy start with some singing and waffly announcements and move on to an extended time of sharing and celebration which goes far better in small groups where close relationships are the important thing. Meetings in smaller corps and churches also tend to go on far too long.

The 'doubling' church I coached realised this and over time tackled all these issues and grew significantly because it moved from being a club for the present church family to a visitor-friendly and mission focused church. So more and more visitors stayed and some later moved into leadership. And that's the way it always happens!

3. **The Song Choice**

Song choice is a special challenge for smaller churches and corps.

Smaller churches often struggle to find enough competent musicians to play the music, enough songs that are easy to sing and enough people to actually sing them, so the first few minutes of the meeting can be very tricky.

But song choice brings other challenges which affect all churches, and generally speaking, we tend to sing songs that are too difficult for the average person to sing. Sometimes the songs are *too musically demanding* for people to sing; the music team has practiced them so they're fine, but the people haven't! Sometimes the songs are performance songs and not really suited to congregational singing. Sometimes, in fact often, the songs are too high so they're out of the reach of some women and most men and even impossible for seeker men to sing; these songs need to be put in a lower key. And sometimes songs are in the *wrong position in the meeting* because they're too difficult for the smaller number of people at the start of the service to sing; put them later when more people are present and they may be fine. But whatever size our church or corps may be, having a Dream Team to plan Sunday mornings will help with these and other issues; view the [Dream Team booklet](#).

A senior Salvationist leader with vast experience brought all these things together



perfectly in this way. Reflecting on my comments in an earlier Letter, he wrote, 'I get tired of trying to sing performance songs in a congregational setting. Often these songs are poorly led and I as a person who had 10 years of vocal training find it so hard that at times I give up. What must a non-churched person feel?'

He's right; having been turned off by poor song choice so many times, he got tired of it all when he just wanted songs he could sing easily. But what worried him most was how off-putting it all was for non-churched people – those 'lost people' we keep talking about reaching. Well, we'll never reach them while we do church that way!

Or to give another illustration, over the last few years I've sat a number of times near a young seeker woman in a very good church that I occasionally look in on. One day near the end of a good basic meeting that hadn't really grabbed her, I watched her when we rose to sing 'Just a closer walk with Thee' in an appropriate key. It's certainly not the greatest song ever written. But she and the rest of the church got into it with all their might because they found it so easy to sing; experiencing church at its best for that passing moment was another small but important step on her journey to becoming a Senior Soldier.

The interesting thing is that doing a meeting well is really extremely simple: *never mind what the music team thinks or wants or demands (yes, may even demand!); start with giving the people something they'll enjoy singing.* That's the 'song choice' issue that so greatly saddened the Salvationist leader I mentioned!

4. **The Preaching**

Our preaching, like our leading and singing, is also costing us dearly and we're simply not preparing well enough.

More often than not, we take partly digested and poorly arranged material to the Sunday meeting when the ground rules for preaching well are very simple – as they are with the music and singing. Here are some basic ones:

Start your preparation early so the message grows in your spirit; I had to, because I had two messages a week so I started 10 days before preaching the messages. Start with the big idea you want to get across and shape it into clear points or strong transitions; I forget most Video or DVD messages I look at within a few hours because they don't go anywhere. Work hard at your introductions; Spurgeon the great Baptist preacher warned against making the porch (introduction) too big for the house (message) you're building! Go back to [The Sunday Meeting graphic](#) and craft your message so you reach the most advanced believer, the newest seeker, and the least interested unbeliever and keep the three 1 Cor 14 groups in mind when preparing every message; so depending on the message, point one might go to seekers and unbelievers, point two to aged believers, point three to new Christians and a possible fourth point may go to struggling believers. Finally, go for a warm, clear, and wonderfully convincing landing; not the weak, vague, apologetic and unconvincing landings we so often use – remember, you're dealing with people's destinies!



Sunday mornings – the unbeliever challenge

Today surrounded by a dying church, we desperately need to rediscover Rick Warren's *evangelistic power of worship* principle – the sheer converting power of a great church service or meeting because when meetings are done well they have huge converting power.

Several years ago, Rick made these points about reaching unbelievers at church.

- First, he said '**While unbelievers can't worship, they can watch believers worship**'. He said, 'When the early church worshipped, non-believers came to faith in Christ. Non-Christians can't worship, but they can see the kind of joy worship brings us. They can see how God's Word transforms our hearts, comforts us, and interacts with us. God can use our worship services to draw non-believers to himself.'
- Second, Rick said '**Worship is a powerful witness to unbelievers if God's presence is felt and the message is understandable**. Both of those are essential parts of a worship service when witnessing to unbelievers'; and he added that in Acts 2 God's presence was so evident in the disciple's worship at Pentecost that it attracted the attention of unbelievers throughout the city, and through the miracle of tongues the message was understandable. He concludes, 'that's true today as well.'
- Third, Rick said, '**God expects us to be sensitive to the fears, hang-ups, and the needs of unbelievers when they are present in our worship services**'. He says that's exactly what we do when we have people [especially special guests] over for a meal; we're just that little bit more polite, might use better dishes, may present the meal a little more attractively and talk a little bit more courteously. Now, says Rick, show the same courtesy to your visitors at church. Certainly don't water down the gospel. But be nice to them; they're your special guests!

If I could wave a magic wand, I'd bring back the *evangelistic power of worship* to our churches next Sunday – and what an awesome thing that would be!

Sunday mornings – the great challenge!

There are many other things I could have included in this brief introduction to Sunday mornings, but the few I've mentioned will get us started. When I finish the series, I may write *Sundays 201* to take the discussion further.

But to tie the many strands of this Letter together, play tracks 7b-10 of Willow Creek CDLS0504 and listen to Bill Hybels' passionate plea to make our gatherings and meetings and services memorable.

Powerful, isn't it! But shockingly true, because we'll never 'reach the lost' till we change the way we do Sunday mornings. As Bill says, the outsiders he surveyed found church services totally boring. It's exactly the same here.

My coaching colleagues and I give the leaders we coach our unreserved commitment to help them make this transition, wisely, warmly, and effectively so they more and more experience the *evangelistic power of worship* that so powerfully blesses believers and so compellingly draws unbelievers and seekers into God's great Family.

To turn our churches around, we've got to start winning again on Sunday mornings – so let's start now!



Questions for you and your team

1. Go back to a recent Sunday morning meeting and work through the meeting evaluation questions in the Dream Team notes. How did you do, what changes will you now make to the way you do future meetings, and if you don't yet have a Dream Team when could you have one in place? (When you've formed your Dream Team, use the questions to review your meetings regularly)
2. Remembering the second Randall discovery, how much account have you been taking of people's basic yearnings when choosing your Sunday songs, praying your meeting prayers, planning your preaching series, crafting and preaching your messages – and developing relationships with people you work with during the week? And what steps will you now take to connect with these yearnings on Sunday mornings and during the week? (Take time over this exercise, even spread it over two sessions, and record and monitor the steps you'll now take)
3. Looking again at The Sunday Meeting graphic and *7 Practices* pp 146 and 150, how well have you been connecting with seekers and unbelievers in choosing your songs, praying your meeting prayers, planning your preaching series, crafting and preaching your messages, and shaping your landings and appeals? And what steps will you now take to minister to all three 1 Cor 14 groups at your Sunday morning meetings? (Again record and monitor the steps you'll take)
4. Thinking of the refined Win Arn formula, how many first-time local visitors have you had over the last two years, and what percentage of the earlier visitors were absorbed into the church within 12 months of their first attending? What trend is emerging with more recent visitors and what steps will you now take to lift your visitor retention rate to one in four or better? (Record the steps you'll take and monitor your progress)
5. Thinking of the three questions the average family-aged visitor with a little church background may ask you (about the singing and preaching and children), how would you answer their questions, which areas are you weakest in, and what steps will you now take to ensure your church or corps is geared to assimilate these visitors into your corps or church family? (Record your answers and the steps you'll take, and monitor your progress)
6. Carefully examine the first eight minutes of two recent meetings and discuss how well you led this most dangerous part of the meetings, how well you connected with the three 1 Cor 14 groups had they been present, how well the singing went, and in general what kind of impact you'd expect those first eight minutes to have on visitors with little or no church background. Now discuss what steps you'll take towards doing this section of the meeting excellently. (Summarise your assessment, record the steps you'll take and monitor your progress).
7. Looking now at your meeting leading in general, how well do you do this, how much preparation do your leaders generally do before leading, and are there large home group things you do when leading that you simply wouldn't and couldn't do if you had a much larger attendance? What steps will you now take to raise the standard of your meeting leading and prepare for the much larger attendances you expect in the future? (Record your answers and the steps you'll take, and monitor your progress)
8. Looking back over recent meetings, do you choose songs that are too musically demanding for the average person attending, do your songs tend to be performance-type songs that the music team raves over but your people struggle with, do your songs tend to be too high for some women and most men to sing, do you put your easiest songs on at the start of the meeting so it starts well, and how do you think the



senior Salvationist leader I mentioned would rate the songs you've been singing recently? (Record your answers, future steps and progress)

9. Given that General Shaw Clifton said 'the preaching of the sermon is still deemed to be a climax to the meeting', do you start your preparation early to let the message grow in your spirit, do you start with the big idea and shape it into clear points or strong transitions, do you work hard at your introductions so you don't over-introduce your message, do you shape your messages to reach the 3 groups of 1 Cor 14, and do you craft your message to have a clear, powerful and life-changing impact on the people who'll listen to you? (Record your answers and the steps you'll now take to lift your preaching to a new level, and monitor your progress)
10. To complete this meeting evaluation, listen again to tracks 7b-10 of Willow Creek CDLS0504 and its challenge. How 'memorable' are your meetings, are people being noticeably changed (not just visibly moved) at your meetings with believers getting breakthroughs and seekers finding Jesus, and what steps will you now take to make your meetings 'awesome' and 'memorable'? (Record your answers and steps, and monitor your progress)