

# The Salvation Army Leadership Letter

Issue 2:



Te Ope Whakāora

## The Church Service A beginner's guide

Dear Mark

You ask about the Church Service – so here are a few comments to get you started with better church services.

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A few years ago, I read Robert L. Randall's *What People Expect From Church*, and it turned my church service world upside down.

### The Issues

In the Foreword to Randall's book (which I gather is out of print), Lyle Schaller says, 'The seekers, shoppers, and pilgrims of today are looking for a church that can offer them a high quality and meaningful response to their personal and religious questions.... They seek a church that understands their yearnings.'

And there are many seekers, shoppers and pilgrims like this out there. Indeed, over a decade ago U.S researcher George Barna found that 90 million American adults were looking around for another church. Many of our adult attenders do the same – many thousands of them every Sunday.

Some may just be incurable shoppers. But many, perhaps most, are seekers and pilgrims who yearn for answers to their deepest longings – leading them to go from church to church till they find them.

Then Barna gave us even bleaker news a few years later. In further research, he found that three-quarters of attending adults in the U.S. felt they didn't experience the presence of God during worship – and half of all regular church-goers hadn't felt connected to God or in His presence at any time in the previous year. And only four percent of Protestant senior ministers thought it was anything to worry about! So church goes on as it has done for years, and all the time our seekers and pilgrims cry out with Job, 'Oh, that I knew where I might find Him' (Job 23:3).

### The Service – A Crowd Gathered Around Jesus

Robert Randall wrestled as a pastor with the yearnings of those searching crowds.

Building on the brilliant work of Scott Peck before him, and Jesus' ministry to the crowds of his day, Randall says we come to church with four great human longings – which are met when we gather in worship around Jesus. So the church service (or meeting) is just a crowd of needy people gathered around Jesus.

Take any day in Jesus' ministry and you'll find there were roughly three groups of people in the crowds who gathered around him.

Some, like the disciples, had already trusted him as the Son of God. Others, like the Samaritans of John 4:42 and the seekers of John 7:31, were making the discovery that he is the Saviour of the world. Finally, many in the crowds were observers who were fascinated by what was happening but weren't interested in following Jesus just then. Indeed, some later became his enemies – like the crowds in Matthew 27:19-25.

So it's the Bible and the crowds who gather around Jesus that set the agenda for all we try to do in our services. We may meet in large city auditoriums or in tiny country churches. The minister and choir may robe or all dress casually. The service may be majestic and ornate or completely unstructured. But at the end of the day a church service is just a crowd of needy people gathered expectantly around Jesus.

All discussion of the church service begins with this.

### **What People Expect From Church**

People come to church today with the same expectations as the crowds who once gathered around Jesus.

1. They come **yearning to feel understood**. From the rough and tumble of life they make their way to church hoping that somewhere in their contact with people that day they'll be assured that they're okay and Jesus is still Emmanuel (God with us).
2. They come **yearning to understand** – searching for explanations, looking for pictures and ideas they can graft on to their present sketchy understanding of life so they make a better job of getting it together tomorrow.
3. They come (at least, most do) **yearning to belong** hoping that somewhere in the church family they'll get close to people and form relationships that outlast the ups and downs of the years.
4. They come **yearning for hope** – looking for ways to get their lives into perspective, straining to hear the sounds of a new promise, hoping someone will massage their dry bones with visions of a brighter tomorrow, searching for someone to paint a smiling sun in their grey sky. They come, indeed, longing to hear the word that will 'jump-start' their deadened hearts.
5. Finally (and I've added this to Randall's list), mixed up somewhere in all these dreams, they come increasingly **yearning to worship** – because they're discovering they're made for worship and worship brings them their highest joy.

People yearn for this crowd around Jesus. They yearn to 'repair to the church on Sundays', as an old saying puts it - meaning they return again and again to have the pieces of their lives put back together again. And they're repaired in the same way as people in Jesus' day because, even today, we're all restored when we gather around Jesus and feel the humanising presence of one another.

### **Services That Connect With Our Yearnings**

So Mark, here are some things you can do to help people in your Sunday crowd (however small) connect with Jesus – as the crowds did in Matthew 15:29-31 (the scene that opens Randall's book).

1. Keep the yearnings of the crowd in mind when you or others **choose the songs** you sing on Sundays. Don't just go for your favourites, or your worship leader's favourites. Put a 'mission wash' through the service, and choose songs that both connect with God and reach into the lives and struggles of those attending. Remember, 25% of them probably have major pastoral needs that day.

If you have good numbers, choose songs like, 'Come, now is the time to worship,' with its reminder that everything's been done so we can come. And choose songs people can sing easily – remembering that the fewer the number the simpler the tune; so if you have small numbers you may not manage the above song. But you can choose simpler songs with similar emphases.

2. Keep the yearnings of the crowd in mind when you **prepare and offer your service prayers** – and we have a lot of work to do in this area. Few outside the more liturgical churches do this well. But I saw it done brilliantly in an evangelical church recently. Throughout the 'praise and worship', the worship leader prayed right into the struggles and searchings of the worshippers so they felt the service was about them, their needs, and how they could all connect with the great God they were worshipping.

Prayers that connect with our struggles and the world's pain have an extraordinary evangelistic impact on newer less churched people who are attending – as well as on those who're already following Jesus. Triumphalistic praying, that pays little attention to the struggles we all have, passes many in the crowd by, leaving them unmoved and unchanged.

3. Keep the yearnings of the crowd in mind when you **prepare and preach your sermons or messages**. Remember that the people we preach to now are different from the people we preached to years ago. Before 1960, most Kiwis had a reasonable knowledge of the Christian faith; since 1960, fewer and fewer have any knowledge of the faith at all. So we now need to craft sermons that speak to the churched, partly churched and unchurched people attending our services.

To reach today's hearers, we need well-crafted, seeker sensitive sermons with warm relational introductions, sermons that speak with power on the great life-issues our hearers struggle with – and sermons that don't require hearers to have a Christian background (as many don't). And we can preach this way whether we're speaking from Bible passages or from topics.

4. Keep the yearnings of the crowd in mind when you're **closing your services** – suggesting the different responses people can make that day as they take the next step on their faith journey.

Some may simply want more information on what the Christian life is all about. Some may be ready to start following Jesus that day. Some may have started but been overwhelmed with difficulties. Some may have followed him for a long time but been knocked back by a crisis. And some may be nearing the end of the journey and want assurance and support. Whatever the emphasis of the sermon on the day, encourage people to take the next step on their faith journey, and explain how they can take that step.

5. Finally, keep the yearnings of the crowd in mind **as the people leave the service** – creating 'relational' opportunities for them to connect with others when the formal part of the service is over. A cuppa after services, church cafes, and other fellowship opportunities provide forums for people to develop their relationship with God and others further; and some of the best ministry will be in the café after the service (if you have one).

### **Tying It All Together**

In a Radio Rhema message last year, Dr Ravi Zacharia put all this perfectly when he said that, as an evangelist, he believed the Church has missed the most powerful 'evangel' in this world – and that's the church at worship on Sundays.

For when people come to worship, they gather together around Jesus – and as they focus on him, he puts their lives back together again, helps them on their way, and gives them hope for tomorrow.

Many other wonderful things happen at church, but the church is at its best when people meet him.

Work hard at your church services, Mark, so more and more of your people meet Jesus there – and meeting him, have their lives changed forever! Goodbye.

### **Gordon Miller**

Territorial Church Growth & Development Consultant

Email: [gordon\\_miller@nzf.salvationarmy.org](mailto:gordon_miller@nzf.salvationarmy.org)

### **For discussion at Leaders' Meetings**

1. What proportion of the people, and especially the newer less churched people, at your services are in each of the four groups Randall mentions?
2. How well are your present services meeting the yearnings of the people in these different groups – connecting them with Jesus?
3. What changes do you then need to make to your services, so as many people as possible in each group connect with Jesus – and leave, like the crowds of Matthew 15, praising the God of Israel?
4. And what will some of the indicators be that the people in each group are indeed meeting Jesus and going forward on their faith journey – even if it's only starting?