

The Move to Multiple Meetings

We are asked regularly about the lessons we have learned re the establishment of more than one meeting on a Sunday.

Just to give you a **historical context**, following the extension of our building in September 04 (which seats around 500) we grew rapidly so that we had to launch a second morning meeting a year later in September 05. Three years later as I write, we start our third meeting in the evening in two weeks' time. We have been particularly helped in this process of establishing multiple meetings by our friend Steve Nicholson from the Vineyard movement – Steve is based in Chicago – and much of what follows is drawn from his experience. Here we have some key principles that help us make decisions and establish multiple meetings with at least a measure of success.

Guiding Principles:

Firstly, it's highly ideal that you do this in a context of **some momentum** and growth. If your church has not grown for the last ten years, it is unlikely that by dividing what you already have into two that it will help you! Going to a second meeting should not be taken lightly – for us it was as important a strategic directional call as our £2 million building project a number of years before.

Secondly, you do want to do it with a sense of God speaking so that you can move ahead with a **sense of faith** and anticipation that God will help you with the challenges that lie ahead.

Thirdly, the move to multiple meetings reflects the **missional motivation** which is at the heart of the church's life.

Here are some of the key **numerical principles** that have helped us as we have made this decision:

1. We have always worked on the principle that when our auditorium is 80% full – that is people sitting down during the preaching – we are full.
2. It's important to work these figures out on your high attendance Sundays - if you are hitting 80% on your 'high' Sundays it's time to extend your building, move to another venue, or go to a second meeting.
3. As we moved towards two meetings, we worked on the principle that we didn't want a divide or split of more than 60/40 - in other words we didn't want 300 at the first meeting and 100 at the second. We worked very hard on retaining the integrity of this principle, including changing the time of one meeting at an early stage to move people forward and asking a particular ministry group to move to the other service.

4. Ideally, you never want to be under 50% full in your auditorium's capacity i.e. 100 people in a 300-seater venue can rattle somewhat!
5. Also ideally, attendance should be no less than 170 – 180 in the smaller of the meetings in order to maintain critical mass (based on a Sunday attendance of 400 or more). This is particularly important in a church context that places a high value on corporate worship. If you have been used to a celebration of 400 then the worship experience with a group of less than 170 feels very different.
6. We found too, that it is easier to go to two morning meetings than straight to an evening meeting – this helps particularly when it comes to volunteers. (This may differ in university towns and cities.) The length of our meetings is 1 hour and 30 minutes, with a 30 minute 'turn-round' between the two morning meetings (9.30 and 11.30am). Our third meeting will be at 5.30pm – the time of the start of meetings has a greater effect than one might realise.
7. More preparation needs to be given to Sunday planning during the week. On the Sunday the pastoring of the meeting is extremely important - you have to start and finish on time, notices should be brief, preachers must be disciplined and ministry times included in the 90mins where appropriate. The loss of the luxury of flexibility to run over time is weighed against the benefit of reaching more people for Jesus.
8. We preach the same message at each meeting, and we launched our second and third meetings at key growth points in the year – for us, September and January. We have added the extra meetings in September and profile these changes with massive leaflet drops, advertising our Sundays and encouraging everyone to invite people along. Our third meeting commences at the end of a week of mission.

Implementation points

One of the questions we are regularly asked is 'How do you know which meeting people are going to?' – we found a **simple questionnaire** to be a reliable indicator of which meeting people will attend.

One of the greatest challenges you will face in going to a second or third meeting is the **volunteer challenge** – you need to release a lot more ministry to run the Sunday meetings. So, for us to launch an evening meeting requires us to recruit, train and release 100 more volunteers a month (25 per week). Obviously, where there is children's ministry at both morning meetings, the volunteer challenge is higher. We have found running a ministry fair on a Sunday as part of our launch strategy to be an effective way of connecting people to ministry opportunities created by the extra meeting.

When we moved to two meetings we had to **pastor the sense of loss** that some of our congregation felt. We did this publicly on Sundays, identifying

with people's sense of loss ('I don't see my friends anymore'), and providing an exhortation to see the costs of the move as worthwhile as we reach many more people with the gospel.

We have found that as we have provided more options and more space, God has given us more people.

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