

## **The place of special days in the development of the local church**

### **By Bob Young**

#### Three organizing events

During the years that I served in local church ministry, especially the 20 years I spent in my last two ministry settings before I began serving in Christian higher education, I used several techniques to keep the attention of the members of the congregation focused.

First, we always had an annual theme. The theme was developed with the input and help of the church, and therefore gave a good opportunity for involving the church members in planning and strategy.

Second, we had at least two major events each year (spring and fall). Most years we had three or four major events. [The reason the number varied was that the spring or fall event would at times be such a large event that it required more planning and preparation.] These major events were always focused on bringing people to Jesus. I found that combining these three things—an annual theme, monthly events, and quarterly outreach efforts—was an effective and powerful tool to keep the local church focused and to give multiple entry points and opportunities to invite friends, family, and neighbors.

Finally, we had monthly “special events” that gave people a reason to invite friends and neighbors. I refer to these as “come and see” events. These events often focused around a Sunday assembly, but there were also weekend workshops, gatherings, retreats, and seminars. The point was that guests and visitors were welcome at the events and that the events had the capacity to appeal to and attract new contacts and prospects. These “come and see” events were always spiritually focused. Folks will come to the church building for games, handouts, carnivals, and a host of secular activities, but we always kept in mind the adage, “What you use to get them is what you have to use to keep them.”

#### An annual theme

The annual theme was the result of involving the church in planning and strategy. A theme is not a specific topic or idea. A theme gives a title and summarizes the annual focus. Here is how I distinguish theme, topic, and idea. A theme is a summarizing concept that ties together various activities or ideas; a topic is a subject; an idea is a concept, often a new concept.

How does one develop an annual theme? Look for points of contact or similarity in the proposed work of the church—what are the unifying themes? Think in terms of the people involved. Think in terms of the “ministry plot” of the local church. Where is the local church ministry going? What are the future hopes?

The theme should have the following characteristics: (1) it should be comprehensive; the theme tries to touch the principal areas of ministry in the local church; (2) it should be measurable and reachable; (3) it should be memorable, not too complex; (4) it should be strategic, capable of helping the church move forward.

A number of resources are available to assist in the development of annual themes. Doing this is not hard, but doing it well requires a significant investment of time and thought.

#### Quarterly outreach efforts

No other group on earth has as much potential to change the world and influence our society and culture as the local church. The truth is that most local congregations are not using their influence to God’s glory. The local church has a corporate influence within a community, but the greatest influence of the local church is in the lives of the members. In many churches, most members are not using their influence to touch the lives of others. When the church combines the efforts and influence of all of its members, functioning as a unified group of believers, the potential is limitless. Outreach efforts such as I am describing call the church to a unified purpose and to unified work together. Over the years, other churches have adopted this model.

The key to effective quarterly outreach efforts is in the “how” and “why.”

HOW. The growth that we experienced in local church ministry, approximately 10% annually with attendance tripled over a dozen years, was largely due to the efforts that kept the local church focused on outreach. These efforts were not hastily organized “guest speaker” days; effective outreach efforts require planning and organization. Most often the events were included in the annual plan and used to support the annual theme. The events had a theme, a catchy title, and were planned so that the “ministry plot” of the church was advanced. As soon as one event concluded, it was time to begin planning for the next.

We usually used a one-month lead-in time, so that we began calling attention to the event a month in advance, giving our members time to understand, commit, and be involved. These events gave the members

of the church a single purpose, and urged them to invite and bring their friends, neighbors, co-workers, and other acquaintances to the event. Tools were provided to help the members become involved. The result was dozens of baptisms annually, and hundreds over the years. Such efforts strengthen the work of the church, increase attendance, bring new visitors and new contacts, give opportunities for more personal Bible studies, and excite the church. The church grows spiritually in its relationship to God, relationally deeper and wider in fellowship, and stronger in number.

I used this plan to grow churches from an attendance of 150 into the 300-500 range. I have also found that in church planting efforts, especially in small infant churches, such a plan helps unite and encourage the new church. Churches have been planted and have found a foothold by using a similar approach.

WHY. I liked using quarterly outreach efforts in local church ministry for several reasons.

One, the efforts kept the local church focused on the goal of winning the world for Jesus. This focus carried over to mission work, and the focus also helped plan the ministry year and understand what I was to be doing and why. The focus helped me avoid the great temptation to get entangled in lots of peripheral and urgent issues that cause church leaders to lose sight of the real priority. Distractions abound in ministry, so every effort to concentrate efforts is helpful.

Two, these efforts build the prayer life of the local church. An important part of the month preceding the event was that the church was focused on a special goal in prayer, and that prayer groups were praying about specific needs. The local church grows spiritually when it unites in prayer around specific matters for a concentrated period of time. God wants to bless such hearts.

Three, the efforts provide an open door into the community, especially into the lives of those sensitive to and interested in spiritual things. The result of the efforts was always a new group of visitors, new contacts, and new opportunities for personal Bible studies, resulting in new members of the church.

Four, the efforts attracted Christian visitors who became excited about the opportunity to be involved in something that was making a difference. I will admit that the church grew because of those Christians who joined the efforts, but the 10% growth I mentioned above was based only on the number of new members and did not include the increase that came through new members who moved into the spiritual community. Both the churches I have mentioned grew incredibly.

Five, the quarterly efforts, coordinated with the annual theme, give a natural opportunity to continually call attention to the goal, and to cast the vision for the church. Since vision-casting is one of the primary responsibilities of church leaders, these efforts provide a natural way to accomplish that. The quarterly efforts boosted attendance, so that the monthly attendance averages were almost always climbing.

Six, the result of the quarterly efforts was greater member involvement and a healthier church with spiritually healthier members. Members learned unity, sensitivity to others, faith growth, and commitment. Because the members were involved in the planning, praying, and preparation, participation was never a problem. (Some churches have special campaigns and only 10-20% of the members are present for the activities if it is not a Sunday morning service. We usually had 70-80% present, and for some efforts the number present exceeded Sunday morning worship numbers due to the presence of a large number of visitors.)

The local church that is serious about doing God's work will have a big dream. A church with a big dream needs a way to make that dream a reality. Quarterly outreach efforts are a powerful tool.

### Special monthly events

We had monthly "special events" that gave people a reason to invite friends and neighbors. I called them "come and see" events. These often focused around a Sunday assembly, but not always. There were also weekend workshops, gatherings, retreats, and seminars. Some of the themes I remember include world missions; domestic missions; "Walk through the Bible;" seminars on family, parenting, finances, retirement, death and dying, dealing with sorrow; and special days to honor military, local teachers, and local law enforcement. Some of these monthly events were overtly evangelistic so that the church focused on a gospel campaign or special gospel series.

These three things kept the church focused on its purpose and unified the church around major themes and activities designed to reach out. Using special days to advance the local work is not mysterious or difficult. May God bless your efforts to build the kingdom and glorify his name.