

USING SEASONS TO SUSTAIN AND BUILD CHURCH MINISTRIES

Introduction

The rhythm of our year is impacted by many seasons. There are the weather seasons – summer, autumn, winter, spring and their associated feelings and events; the university/school seasons – particularly with their exams and holidays; the financial seasons revolving around the financial year, and the religious seasons especially Christmas and Easter. The energy of a congregation and community will ebb and flow throughout the seasons of the year.

The recognition of “seasons” is not new to the church world. Every church at least somewhat plans their programs around school holidays. But many of us have found that there is a regular rhythm to the church seasons that can be harnessed to make the most of the resources and energy that God gives a church.

Peter Sweetman (Senior Pastor at Bridgeman) has worked hard on this and has presented some seed thoughts at two retreat groups that I facilitate. I have taken his ideas and broadened them below. Bridgeman is a large, ministry-oriented church that has a strong presence in its community, so not all these ideas will be appropriate for your church, but I’m hoping they will stimulate your thinking about effectively harnessing the seasons in your programming.

This is just the beginning of my thinking. I’m sure there is much that you (leaders and pastors) can add to these initial ideas. Any further insights from your experience of the seasons in church life would be greatly appreciated.

The Importance of Annual Rhythm in Church Programs

The Holy Spirit will initiate certain unique strategies through which a local church is enabled to reach out to those for whom God has raised them up as a special witness. This requires leaders to both discern these strategies and then maintain and grow them over a long period. Leaders are required to be both present in and involved in these key events.

Ministry effectiveness and the penetration of a community require the repetition of these key strategies and programs. The church community and the local community grow in both awareness and trust as ministries are sustained. The volunteers who undergird these ministries become more effective over a number of years and so it is important that teams remain intact for a significant period.

Rhythm is what enables leaders and followers to maintain sustained momentum. There are different seasons throughout a year in a church community e.g. waiting and listening to the Spirit, intense energy and output, steady and repetitive ministry, rest and renewal. Understanding these seasons and maximizing the opportunities of each period increases the effectiveness of a church in serving Christ.

Church Ministry in Seasons

January

Season: Many away on holidays, people resting after Christmas, new people checking out the church, university and school students are free, few church or recreational programs are running.

Suggestions: Rest staff early January, prepare for year, maintain quality of church services (as only program), envision team, get your team away on retreat, equip school/university students (Malyon leadership conference?), run youth camps.

Interesting Idea: Hold a major community event at the end of January to make the most of the renewed energy and to involve new people straight away e.g. garage sale, church camping weekend, festival.

February

Season: People have greatest energy, church attendance is highest (regulars and irregulars come), newcomers are at church, ministries are kicking off.

Suggestions: Launch new initiatives (e.g. visions, programs, personnel, church plants), ensure all ministries are functioning, commission those serving (in church programs, community and workplace), run a combined church wide small group and preaching series (to get people into small groups and to focus the energy).

Interesting Idea: Plan a prayer event at the conclusion of the church-wide series to pray over the year.

March

Season: Energy still reasonably high, people starting to pull back, Easter approaching.

Suggestions: Run courses to equip people (e.g. Alpha, Careforce), share vision and build in newcomers (e.g. meals, seminars, classes), commence vision/budget planning for next financial year, good time for camps for youth and young adults.

Interesting Idea: Call for people to make Easter services a high priority for ministry - inviting their friends and family.

April

Season: Easter (one of the key outreach opportunities of the year), school holidays around Easter, Anzac Day has become another Australian “religious” holiday.

Suggestions: Work hard on Easter outreach opportunity, letterbox drop community, provide special services over Easter, celebrate well on Resurrection Sunday, advertise a follow-up program for new people who attend, rest staff after Easter if possible, make a special emphasis of Anzac Day.

Interesting Idea: Door knock targeted areas giving away free gift packs and inviting the community to Easter activities.

May

Season: Winter sport in full swing, State of Origin, no public or school holidays.

Suggestions: Good month for special outreach/care events (e.g. State of Origin night, single mums’ pamper day, community care day, mothers’ day events), good month for a sermon focus (e.g. new vision, prayer, mission), good month for church to specially seek God.

Interesting Idea: While you can’t necessarily plan it, look for seasons of reaping. May is sometimes such a season following the community events and outreach programs early in the year. Pentecost Sunday (baptisms, etc.) can be a focus.

June

Season: Some people tired and less enthusiastic, flu season, exams, leading up to school holidays.

Suggestions: Don’t do anything requiring continuous energy, break the normal programs for holidays, run one-off outreach events as programs break up, the holiday is good time for volunteer activities (e.g. short-term mission trips, kids’ holiday clubs).

Interesting Idea: Run your vision and budget on the financial year. This keeps vision linked with finances, makes planning easier (April to June), and produces some energy in the middle of the year.

July

Season: School holidays (but Australians holiday less in winter), some new energy but for a shorter period, shorter days, colder.

Suggestions: Could be good time for another church-wide series, good time for special outreach activities making use of young people on holidays (e.g. youth events).

Interesting Idea: Call for financial commitments in response to the presentation of vision and finance on a special Consecration Sunday.

August

Season: Weather beginning to change, more positive season, no school or public holidays over weekends (Ekka during week).

Suggestions: Use the month for celebration (looking back and forward). August is a good time for church anniversaries.

Interesting Idea: Produce a thanks and praise booklet instead of an annual report. People can share what God has done over the year and it can be used for thanksgiving.

September

Season: Spring, school holidays, many people away, some have a little more time and energy, lots of Christian camps.

Suggestions: Mid-year holidays are probably better for kids clubs (less people away), but also opportunity here. Good time for community outreach events, mission trips, social events.

Interesting idea: Make sure you give staff a rest (holiday?) before entering the final busy season.

October

Season: Some new energy from those who have holidayed.

Suggestions: This is the last big opportunity for equipping and preparing the church. Equip leaders, reflect on ministries, plan for the following year, run equipping seminars for the church, hold a church conference.

Interesting idea: Plan a season of prayer focusing on the short-term and long-term future of the church.

November

Season: Very busy month for some – exams, Christmas preparation, breakups. Exhaustion is an issue. Probably the month of lowest surplus energy – people are surviving.

Suggestions: Be careful about running any programs that require major church-wide effort. One-off community care events still raise volunteers.

Interesting idea: Use the month to prepare for the big outreach activities over the Christmas period.

December

Season: Exciting and harried month with a very strong focus on Christmas, best opportunity for outreach.

Suggestions: Make the most of a season in which Christianity is noticed. Use breakups as outreach opportunities. Encourage street parties. Run outreach programs e.g. hamper, seniors ‘events, Carols programs, Christmas lights, special Christmas services (including Christmas Eve).

Interesting idea: Write notes of appreciation to all your leaders and volunteers, building this focused encouragement into the rhythm of the church.

Conclusion

I love the way that God throughout history has used a combination of the culture of the times and his divine intervention to fulfill his purposes. Discerning and working with the seasonal rhythm of the church year won't guarantee God's work in those seasons, but it may better harness the energy of God's people as they seek to follow and serve him.