

Congregation on Vacation?

OVERCOME SUMMER SURVIVAL MODE

When you were a kid, summertime meant lemonade, swimming pools, riding bikes all day, and long, lazy afternoons. As you step into adulthood, responsibility begins to get the best of your summertime urges, and endless summer nights become two weeks a year vacation and a prayer that your car's air conditioning can last one more summer.

For those serving in ministry, summertime can be an all out nightmare. Fears of congregants on vacation, Sunday school teachers on break and nursery workers taking the summer off begin to take over sensibilities. Not to mention the impact low attendance has on the church budget.

For many, the summertime blues in ministry is something to be endured. "Survival mode" is the mantra for many ministries as church administrators impose spending freezes and worship leaders begin

tapping the children's ministry for substitute musicians.

For more seasoned leaders, summer is recognized for what it is: a season, and as anyone will tell you, seasons change. While some pastors may begin having recurring preaching-to-an-empty-room nightmares and some leaders fear vacant Sunday school classrooms, others choose to meet a challenging season with different strategies.

keep the passion alive, and focus on Who is there

For Pastor Ed Ivie at Living Waters Community Church in Bonita Springs, Florida, shutting down and offering a bare-bones weekly ministry schedule could be an option if he chose to take his cues from other churches in the community. In fact, it's

not unusual for many to literally close their doors for the summer.

Bonita Springs may have one of the most extreme exoduses of seasonal dwellers in the entire country. Many people who have homes in this area of South Florida consider them a strictly "winter residence." Consequently, huge portions of the population head north for less humid surroundings and an escape from an influx of tourists from all over the world.

In spite of having a local culture that writes off summer as anything but a time to capitalize on tourism, Pastor Ed has found a strategy that works. "We don't compromise any of our ministry. We do the same things in the summer that we do during the rest of the year," explains Pastor Ed.

Choosing to focus on those who attend year round and challenging his people to take ownership of their church, Pastor Ed teaches faith



RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

building/discipleship messages during the summer to encourage maturity and train new leaders. “I tell our seasonal people they may not have a seat when they return in the fall because we are going to grow even in the summer,” Ivie says.

As a result, Living Waters had its highest attendance for the year the last two weeks in July, and it has grown in numbers consistently over the past two summers.

complement the environment—don't compete with it

“Every environment creates an opportunity” has become a motto for Pastor Jim Wiegand at The Freedom Center in Fenton, Michigan. Asking his congregation for all hands on deck, Pastor Jim leads the charge for The Freedom Center's largest evangelistic outreach of the year in the middle of summer—a Fourth of July celebration that reaches 5,000 plus people.


Pastor Jim says it is his goal to focus on a few key things during the summer that are not overly demanding. “Everyone can be involved for one day,” explains Pastor Jim. “Keeping the same ministry schedule through the summer months just wasn't making sense.”

Wiegand says he used to get frustrated when members of his congregation would disappear on weekends during the summer. Then

he realized that many of these people were factory workers who were in buildings with no windows all week, and that resenting them for wanting to enjoy the outdoors would only result in resentment towards himself. “I want to give people as many ‘wins’ as possible, so summer for us is camps, family retreats, outreaches and relationship building.”

Pastor Jim is quick to point out that missing church is not good for people spiritually but also realizes they will be back in the fall. The goal is to have a unique infrastructure in place when they return. “Our church calendar really begins in the fall,” he adds.

Something else Pastor Jim has noticed is an influx of people exploring church in the summer. “For many families, it is a time when schedules slow down enough to check out church,” he explains. “Our church is actually growing during the summer, but you wouldn't know by the numbers—that is reflected in the fall when people return from vacation.”

Summertime does not have to be an endless lament for lost sheep to return. It can be a season of growth if you are able to discern the rhythms of the community at large. Whether you're doubling your efforts or keeping your Sunday school program steady and consistent, you can swing for the fences and come up with a strategy that suits your leadership team and community. 

JOSH WELLBORN is the student ministries pastor at Mount Hope Church in Lansing, Michigan. During the summer months he can be found taking students and leaders on day trips to the sandy beaches of Lake Michigan, the best kept secret in the Midwest!

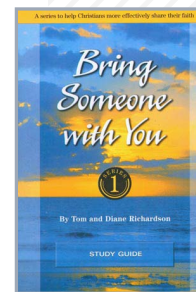


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