

Into the Future: Why We Need to Create an Alternative Service

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Is it possible our current Sunday service is lacking some core elements of persuasion and conviction that speak to the heart of our need for rebirth and salvation? Are few new people joining our movement through our Sunday service because we don't offer them what they really need, when they do show up? If so, what can we do about it? A specific kind of alternative service can help us attract and hold more "first-timers" and bring spiritual renewal and revival to our ranks.

Robin Debacker conducted a survey that gathered information from Unificationists about their Sunday service experiences. Contacting individuals via private Facebook messages, she collected 350 responses over a four-month period -- two-thirds from the 50+ age group, and 103 from second gen. Responses came from 195 cities around the world -- 38 states in the U.S. and 32 countries. In summer 2014, the survey results were discussed on this Blog and presented on her website dedicated to that project. Key facts gleaned from her survey were:

- Nearly 25% of those surveyed do not attend a Unification service, and have distanced themselves or dropped out entirely.
- 70% of those who indicated they attend a service on a regular basis said they are not inspired, and do so out of a sense of duty, or for social reasons only.
- The majority of second gen respondents said that most of their second gen friends are not interested and do not attend a Unificationist service. Of those who do attend, many said they are searching for more open and honest discussion, more practical application, and more second gen leadership.

The Sunday service program model still remains the primary weekly gathering in the Unificationist faith community. Yet that model has failed to be the gateway program to persuade and convict the "unchurched" and "spiritual" seekers to become intimately involved with our faith community. Some have "joined" through Sunday service, but not that many. In some areas, efforts have been made to use home church, tribal messiahship or small group models to address how to "bring non-Unificationists into the fold," but such efforts have yet to gain the prestige or influence of Sunday service.



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A closer look at what is going on during our Sunday service program provides important insight why that program is not convicting people to embrace our truth and way of life.

Research into church growth shows that if a local church has not experienced significant growth over a five-year period, it is unlikely it will do so into the future, until changes are made to the existing program. (See Charles Arn's *How to Start a New Service: Your Church Can Reach New People*.) What happens to church members who attend Sunday service regularly over a long period of time and see no new members joining? In that case, it has been shown such congregants often become self-satisfied, arrogant, cold, and even harsh.

It turns out that often happens because the message being delivered from the pulpit is largely aimed at teaching and uplifting the "faithful" -- those who see themselves as longtime members in need of just a little encouragement and inspired persuasion to "be better" at what they do in life. In other words, the life and death approach of the Gospel of Salvation is downplayed, and in its place a kinder, gentler approach to taking care of one's spiritual life is emphasized (see D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones's *Preaching and Preachers*).

For decades, the Sunday service in my faith community has been attended by members active in our movement for 20-40 years. The sermon-giver is typically focused on encouraging the congregation to make any necessary changes in their lives that will result in greater happiness and life fulfillment. Rarely does a first time guest or spiritual seeker show up. Because few new guests attend a given service, there is little focus during the sermon on attempting to persuade and convict congregants to the reality of sin and one's need for repentance. Yet, recognizing the need to repent for one's sin has always been a key element in True Parents "message of salvation."

“In order to subjugate Satan, you cannot be forgiven by just asking, ‘Heavenly Father, please forgive me.’ You have to shed tears in order to return to God. You have to feel the pain of your face swollen from crying. You even have to feel the pain in your stomach. This is the realistic situation. You have to shed tears in repentance for your sins. That is very important for each one of you.” (*“True Parents and Ourselves,” May 7, 1972*)

The general consensus on sermon length has been that it should not exceed 25-30 minutes. A lot of focus is placed on having good music as a way to inspire attendees, and the emcee is charged with being “professional” at creating a light, friendly and welcoming atmosphere before the service officially starts. Families in the community take turns providing snacks and coffee after the service. All in all, it’s a satisfying service for “the faithful,” but that service is not convicting many new people to accept True Parents “message of salvation.”

If we agree our local Sunday service has been largely for satisfying the faithful and not a gateway program for new members to join, then we can consider providing an alternative service. What would such a service look like, and how would it eventually get a better result at convicting and persuading attendees to accept True Parent’s message of salvation?

Service type: The first thing to do is gear the service towards the unchurched and spiritual seekers. By doing so, you’ve got a much better chance to get people in front of you who are looking to make significant, even life-altering changes. This is a more “evangelical” approach to service, one that seeks to convict the listener to the need of salvation through True Parents.

The music: Although I’m a musician, I recommend we put far less emphasis on the production of music during the service. The more time spent on the production aspects of the service -- especially the music -- the less emphasis is placed on the more essential aspects to the success of the service, like prayer and sermon preparation. Focus more on some core holy songs and encourage second gen to open up a wellspring of creative inspiration, and write more songs that reflect their spiritual understanding and orientation towards our faith tradition.



The sermon: We are not taking full advantage of the wealth of insight, teaching and wisdom delivered to us by Father during his speaking ministry in America. Using the core themes on the Bible’s understanding of our human condition, we should strategically tap into the hundreds of speeches Reverend Moon delivered to us while he conducted his public ministry in America -- along with the recent True Parent’s compilation speech books published at True Mother’s direction.

Sermon length: Let’s move away from the idea a sermon should only be 25-30 minutes long. Such an approach is not conducive to the “moving of Spirit” in the room. The idea that the “Word of God” being preached must not exceed a certain number of minutes smacks of being limiting and controlling. Father’s sermons delivered at Belvedere for more than 20 years averaged around four hours; if you take away time for the translator, you are still at around two hours per sermon.

Service prep: The main focus should be on supporting what is the most important reason those people are sitting in that room: to listen to the Word of God and be convicted to surrender to God’s way of life. Ancillary activities like emcee, song leader, band music, choir, ushers, announcements, coffee hour, etc., ought never become of primary interest or concern. Yes, do our assigned jobs in a good way, but don’t let

any of those secondary elements ever trump the delivery of God's Word.

People expect us to be different. When they attend our service they ought to feel that nowhere else have they ever had such an experience. Self-help talk, lecture format presentations with PowerPoint slides and informational talks can be experienced at hundreds of other venues throughout America. There's nothing new or different there. This alternative service will provide a once-in-a-lifetime encounter with the Spirit of God as manifested in our age through True Parents message of salvation. That's our hope and that's our faith. It's unique and eternal.

Implementing the alternative service I've outlined will let us see more people being convicted about True Parents message of salvation. When the 70 Top Gun graduates return from Korea, I hope they seriously take a look at how to create an alternative service, as I outline here.

By taking the risk of committing to such a service, not only will we see more new people getting on board, but we will also see among the longtime members a spiritual renewal and revival. It's very possible such a service also will be appealing to many old-timers, who perhaps have concluded that they are also in need of a life-altering encounter with God through True Parents message of salvation.

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