

CBC Blog

One Service or Two? Rethinking Our Multi-service Model

Many of the blog posts I write address matters of church leadership and conversations around philosophies of ministry. To the best of my ability, I try to craft the content (and time the date of its publication) to address relevant issues in our church, Coats Baptist. From heavier matters of polity to lighter topics of Wednesday night dinners, all is fair game if done so with intentionality. I encourage our staff to write with the same approach.

For this post I want to tackle a timely issue for our church, yet one that has remained on my mind for much of my ministry: the number of Sunday morning services. There is no chapter and verse on this issue. However, we do need to think biblically about such matters. To do so I have admittedly written a longer-than-usual post, which I believe this topic merits. For your convenience, however, I have supplied a concise abstract in the paragraph below. As time allows, please give a careful read to the post in full. I trust it will help us wrestle with such an issue at the intersection of church and mission and frame out a more full conversation to be considered.

Summary

God's people are called to gather. They are to be in covenant with other believers as members of a local church. Therefore, a philosophy of worship gatherings matters, both in their nature but also in *number*. This post is aimed at the latter. What the church is and how the church grows are both expressed in the number of worship services a church chooses to hold.

For at least the last 15 years, Coats Baptist Church has offered two Sunday morning services. This post seeks to trace the reasons and repercussions for such a model of ministry in order to address our current state. As of today, there is cause to evaluate the number of our services, which could affect our Sunday morning schedule. While there are pragmatic aspects to determining the number of our services, we must first consider how the number reflects our philosophy of ministry and impacts our mission. (I am not interested in Sunday evening services in this post. I have written [elsewhere](#) on the topic.)

Our current state does not necessitate multiples services. Neither space nor social distancing is driving our current model. We have, therefore, an opportunity to evaluate our Sunday structure in light of a ministry philosophy instead of mere pragmatic pressures. How we move forward from here should be based upon the former, not the latter. In sum, given the consideration of multiple factors, our church should consider moving to a single-service model.

Introduction

It is commonplace today for most growing churches to offer more than one Sunday morning service. This practice is so widespread that many may see multiple services as a sign of church health.

However, prior to the late 20th century most churches only held a single morning service. Therefore church growth was typified not by adding more services, but by building bigger buildings. Enter the megachurch movement. Space fails to trace the mid-20th century movement that swept across much of the United States. But those born prior to 1980 can easily think of the evangelical juggernauts of the Southern Baptist Convention, from Bellevue to Prestonwood along with the famed First Baptist Churches of Atlanta, Jacksonville, Dallas, Woodstock and many others that characterized this movement. God used and is still using these churches. But we must see them as the product of a modern church growth movement that, in truth was tied more to a philosophy of ministry than anyone may have realized. Hold that thought.

Philosophies of ministry became even more apparent with the “seeker sensitive” movement coming into full bloom by the 1990’s. With a slight anti-establishment mentality, this movement promoted a “come and see” mindset fueled by attractional, programmatic platforms all wired to get people on campus and in the door. And it worked. People came by the droves to attend churches that ditched tradition and simply called people to “come as they are.” Coffee in the lobby, jeans instead of ties, and a whole lot of fun. All seemed good on the surface, but left in the wake was something akin to “church light.” Fast forward into the early 2000’s and the landscape was riddled with churches holding a low view of just about everything that is not immediately measurable. A low view of the Bible, theology, discipleship and ecclesiology were discovered to not only be the product of the movement, but perhaps the foundation of it. Space fails again to trace the cause and effect of such movements to current reality, but churches such as North Point Ministries, New Spring Church and Elevation are examples close to home that surely tell the story. However, to their credit, the seeker sensitive folks of Gen-X were more clever than their fathers. Instead of building bigger buildings, they launched more services. It worked, and it saved money.

Hindsight is 20/20. Many evangelicals have now learned from the faults, albeit well intentioned, of their fathers. The last 20 years have seen an observable return to robust theology and intentional discipleship in many churches. It would be naïve to fail to notice a similar, correlating revitalization of SBC seminaries. We have lived through the repercussions of bloated and pragmatic ministry, and it is not pretty. We came to learn that “what you win them with is what you win them to.” If you win them with fun, you have to *keep* them with fun. And that is no fun at all.

However, much of the seeker sensitive pragmatic culture crept into churches who never confessed themselves as such. As a result, one pesky point of seeker sensitive residue became standard fare in many churches: the notion of multiple morning worship services. Intended to accommodate church growth, such culture was unfortunately accepted without any biblical basis for support. What is more, many churches have been guilty of launching multiple services out of stylistic preference instead of true numerical growth. Multiple services provided a clever camouflage to cloak divisions of worship styles. New services launched as a means of reaching new people were in truth a means of accommodating carnal preferences. All that to say,

multiple services is the culture of many churches for a variety of reasons. Whatever the reason, the idea of multiple services is baked into the mind of many Christians as a merely pragmatic move—without much thought given to a philosophy of ministry. Such a disconnect could explain how some churches arrived at multiple services without any real ability to articulate their intention for doing so. That point is worthy of our attention and remedy.

[Note: The multi-site model does articulate an intentional philosophy of ministry, and though correlated to the multi-service model, it should not be equated as such. Although the multi-site model is within the scope of the post, I have opted not to discuss such matters here. Space fails, and the content does not directly apply to the current context and situation of Coats Baptist. However, as a point of reference, the reader should note that the multi-site model is: 1) a construct of historical Episcopalian (Methodist) church government, 2) a network of satellite campuses who share leadership and resources; or 3) the most modern trend of live-streaming services from the main campus to its off-site venues. Whichever the explanation, the multi-site by its own definition is not a collection of autonomous churches regardless of how they may be perceived by those who attend. Thus, I see them as putting forward a less than biblical ecclesiology. This trend has sparked no little conversation among those who see the autonomy of the local church expressed in neither multiple services nor multiple sites. For more information on the multi-site movement in Baptist life, a helpful start would be to see content provided by the [Summit Church](#) and the model defended therein.]

Our history to our current state

Let's consider our past, from recent history to current reality. Coats Baptist has held two Sunday morning worship services for most of its member's recollection. As with many churches, the additional service was added to accommodate growth but then morphed into a traditional/contemporary worship style bifurcation between the two. In some seasons we held "Together Sundays" on the fifth Sundays of the year, which combined the two services into one.

Our sanctuary can comfortably sit 300 people. One should note the difference between packing people in for a one-time event, compared to maintaining a consistent number over the course of Sundays. Any given sanctuary can certainly hold more with choir lofts being filled, people standing in the back, and so forth. Ingress and egress are also concerns we have had for decades. Even the outdoor temperature changes affect seating capacity. People with coats tend to take up more room. That's just reality. All that to say, our sanctuary can seat 300 comfortably. You take that down 10-15% to about 265, and you have an easily-sustainable Sunday number through the seasons. Mark those numbers in your mind.

When I (Pastor Neal) arrived here in 2017 our average Sunday morning church attendance was nearing 300. On peak Sundays in the fall and spring we would see numbers as high as 325. We love (love!) college students but their fluctuation in attendance can alter our average attendance and how we plan for Sundays throughout the year. That's more reality to consider when ministering in a college town. All that to say, we had ample reason to stay the course with two services. Our Sunday morning attendance simply would not fit, and if by chance we could on a given Sunday, there was zero room for growth.

Then COVID. Our numbers declined significantly as did nearly every public gathering. Though our past is important, it is best to think *forward*. Try to think about a future path forward for ministry, in light of historical realities. Here is a timeline over the last two years showing the steps we have taken up to this point.

March 15, 2020 | We held our first “live stream only” service. We continued these services for a total of twelve Sundays.

June 7, 2020 | We reopened in-person worship services at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m., capping attendance registration at 100 per service.

October 4, 2020 | We reopened the childcare ministry for children 6 months to 4 years old. We also added a second identical morning worship service at 11:00 a.m. and re-introduced a different evening worship service at 6:00 p.m. In terms of re-opening from the pandemic, these were significant changes.

January 15, 2021 | We began scheduling on-campus adult Bible study groups and various ministry meetings at strategic times during the week.

June 6, 2021 | We invited adult Bible study groups to return to campus during both worship service hours, 9:30 and 11:00 a.m., with an option to meet at 8:00 a.m. if so desired. In doing so, we tripled our group space from the previous single hour model.

July 11, 2021 | We reopened childcare on Sunday mornings for both worship hours. We also moved those service times up 30 minutes to 9:00 and 10:30 a.m. Furthermore, we secured our children’s ministry area and added a restroom on the adult hallway. These were needed changes to our facility.

Timestamp now: November 1, 2022. We have been at the (July 11) model for nearly 16 months.

Why two services now?

The addition of a second service in October 2020 was largely an accommodation for social distancing. Our numbers at the then 9:30 a.m. service were increasing at such a rate that those in attendance could not maintain courteous space between them. Therefore, a second service was added, not because the facility capacity was reached, but a “COVID capacity,” if you will.

The retention of that second service last July (2021) was a preparatory move for potential growth, not knowing what the next year (2022) would bring. We slid both services forward 30 minutes to perceived optimum time slots (9:00 and 10:30), positioning ourselves for what the Lord would bring. No one knew what post-COVID attendance trends would be. Most of our members have returned and we have seen new additions, but not to the extent of filling two services.

Having held two services for sixteen months, our numbers do not force us into a second service from a standpoint of sheer space. Our attendance is high enough to hold two services, but not to merit two services. Currently the average Sunday morning attendance for 2022, excluding snow and special Sundays (e.g. Easter), is 219. Our attendance is substantially down from the average 2019 attendance of 285 three years ago, a number which was our pre-COVID reality in February 2020. As a point of reference, the average 2021 attendance was 206. If space was the only consideration, none of these averages truly merit two services given our current worship facility capacity of 300. However, there is more to the story.

Our unique number challenge

We are facing the same challenge that most every other church is facing in a post-COVID reality. People are attending church *less* frequently than they did pre-COVID. Regular attendance may have been 3 Sundays a month in 2019. Now it is two. We simply see the same people but *less* often. That's a trend seen nationwide. That's as much a spiritual issue as it is [a pragmatic one, but regardless, the decreased frequency changes what Sunday morning looks like in the pew. To interpret such a reality, our pastoral team uses what we call our "unique" number. It is an analyzed estimate of those who attend at least once per month, member or not. We simply go through the membership and our own memories to create a master list of people we think attend at least once a month. In 2019 our unique number was 363. In 2021 it was 356. For this year, that number is 336.

From practicing ministry to planning services, the unique number is the most critical. Any given Sunday's attendance can be deceiving. To put it in perspective, there may only be 200+ people here on Sunday, but well over 300 people sat in the pew at least once over the course of the last month. That's a reality we need to know. With that said, let us all strive to be faithful in our attendance as we heed the instruction of Hebrews 10:25, "let us not neglect the assembling of ourselves." Forget the models. The ultimate concern is that God's people are worshipping together and are regularly involved in a local church. That said, to factor in the unique number is to consider whether or not we actually *do* need two services. Just ask yourself the question: what if suddenly God sent revival in the hearts of all 336 people this Sunday, and they showed up — every Sunday! Such an occurrence would drastically change the practical need and spiritual condition of the Sunday morning.

Pragmatism or Philosophy

The idea of two worship services drives our current ministry model. Churches hold two services for a variety of pragmatic reasons, from worship styles to simply the need for space. How they schedule those services and build structure around them is discretionary. But in the end, the decision to open a second service is a point of ministry philosophy, [and ecclesiology (doctrine of the church)]. Is a church represented by the single gathering of its people in total, or is it free to divide between multiple services and still be considered *one* church? For years our models of ministry have said "yes" to the latter. Our current model says the same. I must confess, I have agreed.

But my position has begun to shift over the last few years. I am no longer as comfortable advocating for multiple services as I was when I first came to serve here as pastor. I once viewed the issue of multiple services merely as a pragmatic issue. My reasoning was as such: more people merit more services. It was that simple. Plus, you give people options. Who doesn't like options?! Opponents would push back with a counter yet equally pragmatic argument: we can't see everyone in the church among multiple services. They reason as if we could see all 200-300 every Sunday.

My shift in position is not on the grounds of the pragmatic, but the philosophical. I am beginning to understand the nature of the church, and therefore the nature of the worship gathering as something that necessitates all of God's people gathering at the same time. In short, the church is a single gathering of people. A separate gathering of people, even if it's for the next hour in the same space under the same leadership, is a different church. It is an altogether different spiritual experience. I am not endorsing it full stop, but I would gladly point you in the direction of Jonathan Leeman's recent book *One Assembly* as a helpful resource in this matter. He provides a textual grounding for a single worship service that is quite compelling. See podcast episode [here](#).

But my convictions did not come from Jonathan Leeman. They came from serving as a pastor, ministering for many years in multiple Sunday services. In fact, I've never been a pastor (nor a church member as an adult) in a church that only had one Sunday morning service. The shift in my position has come from ministering the ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Supper. In short, churches that have multiple services never truly experience the ordinances *together*. Nor do they ever truly sing, pray, sit under the same preaching of the word, and even see one another worshipping all *together*. I believe such separation leads to negative side effects on the Christian life and thus separates the gathering into two separate churches. Just think about it: how would it feel for your family to never eat dinner together? What if mom and son ate at 5:30 p.m., left to run errands down the road, and high-fived dad and daughter as they came into the house to eat *the same meal* but at 6:30 p.m. Are they a family? Well, kind of, but give it enough time, and it certainly wouldn't seem like it. I wouldn't want to be a part of that family. Well, the Lord's Supper is the family meal of the church. Baptism is to be done before *the church* as candidates are baptized into *the church*, not a portion of the church. That's a point of sound theology that I have always known, but it has recently begun to work itself into the fabric of my life and ministry.

All that to say, churches must consider how they view the church. Is it a local gathering of believers unable to be duplicated, or is the church free to divide among hours and locations (and sometimes even days) while still maintaining their New Testament integrity of a church? I am personally beginning to be persuaded toward the former.

Where do we go from here?

We have lost much of our pragmatic concerns for two services: social distancing and space. Let's agree to concede that the former (social distancing) is now a moot point for most Harnett County citizens. Further, we understand that given our current average attendance we can all fit into one service. So where do we go from here? In light of all that has been written above, allow

me to float a few thoughts (in the practical and philosophical spaces) regarding both one service and multiple services.

A few thoughts about moving to one service:

1. One service would help the overall relational unity of our church. To spread only 200-250 people over two services is to spread people quite thin. With one service, we would all follow the same Sunday traffic pattern together.
2. One service would help with the volunteer base for both the service and the adult group hour. The assumption is that we would only have one children's ministry discipleship hour before or after the service with Kid Sermon in conjunction with the service.
3. One service would allow us to worship together. As a preacher, I could address Coats Baptist as a whole in a single sermon. No more "what did I say last hour?" Instead, I could address them as "one man" (Neh. 8:1) and they would observe the ordinances as such.
4. One service would drive a greater consistency in whole families attending Sunday morning discipleship groups. Being that there would be no overlap, children and students would attend the worship service with their parents, while afterwards their parents would be encouraged to attend a group at the same time as their children.
5. A move to one service requires us to defeat two possible false narratives:
 - a. The first is that our church is shrinking and therefore failing. That would be a discouraging, but also false narrative. Our unique number proves much of our decreased attendance has to do with the frequency rather than the cessation of attendance.
 - b. The second is that we could simply "launch another service" if numbers increase. Although that may be true, that runs contrary to a philosophy of ministry that sees the church as a single gathered body of believers.

A few thoughts about continuing multiple services:

1. Two services provide flexibility for our people and their schedule. Surely on some Sundays, people need to attend a different service than they did the week prior.
2. Two services allow our church to grow. Harnett County is growing and we should be looking to reach a growing population. With only one service we will be limited in our ability to meet the needs of guests. Further, if we close the gap between our attendance and our unique number, such ability will be even less. We will simply run out of space.
3. Connected to the multiple services conversation is the *structure* of those services. I'll take the liberty here to provide a brief comment on our current structure. We presently have back-to-back services, giving us three group hours in total (two with childcare). What is the reason for such a model of Sunday morning services? *Group ministry* (i.e., Sunday School). Offering groups in conjunction with services puts the greater facility into the conversation. We only have enough facility space (classrooms and hallways) to accommodate one worship service attendance (250-300) at a time. As good as it may sound to have one group hour between two services, our facility simply cannot support it. (Think with me: two services growing to 250+ each cannot fit together in our greater facility space. We don't have enough classrooms to support 500 people.) If the aim of

Sunday morning is for people to attend *both* a service and a group, then one group hour between two services actually stifles on-campus discipleship efforts. The facility cannot hold two services funneling into one group hour. We certainly don't want to say to folks, "We want you to attend a Sunday morning group, but there is no space for you."

Therefore, if the desire (philosophy of ministry) is to have both groups *and* (multiple) services on Sunday, *and* with the good faith push for everyone to attend both, then we must a) double stack our services as current, b) change our philosophy of ministry to move groups off Sunday morning or off campus (or only have one service), or b) build a bigger facility. In July 2021, we chose option (a). Again, our philosophy of ministry matters. In short, if you launch a second service and the intention is for those in attendance to also attend a group, then you must have adequate space for them to do so. Only our current model is able to provide multiple services along with enough space for everyone to attend a group if so desired.

Three ways to grow

So how does a church grow? As shown above, churches typically grow in either size or space. They build bigger buildings or they launch more services. But that is not because they have to grow in this way. It is because they have likely chosen to respond to growth in such a way. But there is a third, and more biblical way that churches can grow. They are to *plant* churches. They grow in *number*. Let's look at these three ways of growth in light of our situation.

1. Build a building. What does it take to build a building? It takes *money*. If churches want to keep one services (or even expand spaces for multiples services) it is going to come with a cost. Not every church has the money, or the land, to build. Surely there are growing churches who have the need to expand, but cannot due to some physical factor. What is the next option?
2. Plant a church. Planting requires *polity*. It requires leadership pipelines, teams and likely a plurality of elders. The polity of many churches all but keeps them from planting another church. I have made this argument extensively that one of the leading reasons our church should entertain moving to a plurality of elders is a *missional* reason. (See reason #4 [here](#)) But what if a church can't build (either due to finances or space), or plant because they lack the polity and the pipelines to plant?
3. Launch a service. Churches that can't build, and can't plant, *launch*. It's that simple; they are forced to either turn people away or launch a second service. That is where most churches are, and where Coats Baptist is today. It should be noted that launching a second service is not a bad option, full stop. Some churches are forced in this direction, at least for a time. Extenuating circumstances may demand it, for example. However, we should see the launching of a second service as not the *best* option, and one that churches should strive to improve with either building or planting.

In sum, it is missionally imperative that all churches seek to mold their ministries towards multiplication. It is the mission of every local body of believers to make disciples and multiply the

church. Therefore, we as Coats Baptist make every effort to posture ourselves towards church planting. Financial allotments, leadership pipelines and polity structures should be revised, updated and leveraged with such a kingdom enterprise in mind.

A Suggestion for 2023

As we plan for the year ahead, your pastors would recommend that we consider moving to a single service model in the near future. Even as we've considered our unique number and the growing population in our area, we do not see our current attendance as requiring two Sunday morning services. Please prayerfully consider such a change in our schedule as seeing the Lord's best for our faith family here at Coats Baptist.

Praise the Lord. Psalm 150.