

'What We're For' Church Service Guide

HOW TO RUN A 'WHAT WE'RE FOR' CHURCH SERVICE

The options for how to incorporate your 'What We're For' event into a meaningful worship service are endless. We encourage you to get creative and share ideas, but here are some of ours:

SING

Focus on worship songs with themes of justice. Some examples include

- Call for Mercy – Garage Hymnal
- Surely We Can Change – David Crowder Band
- God of Justice – Tim Hughes
- Justice and Mercy – Matt Redman
- We Could Change the World – Matt Redman
- You Have Shown Us – Martin Smith
- Do You Feel the Mountains Tremble – Hillsong United

PREACH

Read key passages from the Bible concerning the poor. Preach on a passage from the prophets, or on an aspect of God's justice. (See sermon outline on pg 3)

STUDY

Do a church wide bible study for 4 weeks leading into or out of your 'What We're For' event.

Justice focused Bible Studies are available via www.micahaustralia.org/bible_studies.

We particularly recommend Baptist World Aid's 'Samaritan Nation: Global Poverty and our Response as a Nation' which can be downloaded at:

www.baptistworldaid.org.au/get-involved/be-vocal/catalyst/resources.

PRAY

Spend time praying as a congregation, or in small groups. Pray for justice and Australian Government Aid Giving

- Praise God for his character of justice, and his love for vulnerable in our world.
- Praise God for the impact that Australia's international aid program has overseas; for the children who have been able to access education, the people that have been assisted after disasters and the communities that now have access to clean water.
- Pray for the Sustainable Development Goals, that they will unite the world in its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty.
- Pray for our Government, that they will make wise decisions regarding Australian Aid

WATCH

Watch the Campaign for Australian Aid's promotional video in your church service.

Find the video here: http://bit.ly/australian_aid_video

ACT

Invite your congregation to join your 'What We're For' BBQ or meal after your church service.

For more information on 'What We're For' events, and to register your event, visit

www.australianaid.org/host.

Church Sermon Notes – What Are We For?

The notes are designed to help craft a sermon that speaks to the issue that our Church is currently known far more for what it stands against, than what it stands for. These notes and illustrations emphasise that when the church is known for living out God's way of love and justice, it not only thrives – but it changes the world.

Assembled are a range of examples demonstrating what happens when the Church is known for what it stands for and the impact that it has. These are pulled from the Bible, and early Church history. They are designed to help reinforce the message of the transformative and attractive power of a church that is known for justice.

Introduction

Introduce the problem. The negative public image of the church, and the impact it's having on people leaving or dismissing the faith.

You don't need to be a rocket scientist to recognise the negative public image the church has these days. When Christianity hits the news it's so often in a negative light. If it's not sexual abuse or financial corruption, it's yet another issue that we're taking a stand against and shaking our first at our culture about.

And it's costing us. People are leaving the church in droves.

Statistics on People Leaving the Church (ABS statistics and Australian Communities Report):

- 577,000 people who identified as Christian in the 2001 census ceased to do so by 2011
- Baptists lost 12,000 people, mostly young, but gained about 55,000 through births (less deaths) and immigration.
- Of the Australian population, 29% were once religious but are now no longer.
- Only 4% have become religious from a position of not being religious.

Here are some statistics that you can use to point out what the church is known for and how that's impacting our public image. For many churches, this might be a distraction and lead to people wanting to analyse these issues further, so it may be better to skip. The statistic on institutional child abuse is most topical and not so controversial (broadly condemned by those in and out of the church).

According to the Australian Communities Report (2011):

- 7 out of 10 people said the church's stance on homosexuality had an impact on blocking their interest in Christianity, with 29% saying it completely blocked their interest in the faith.
- The next most significant belief blocker was the idea of believing in a loving god that would send people to hell – 25% said it completely blocked interest.
- The third most significant blocker was the church's stance on woman.
- And even amongst those open to Christianity, 53% said that church abuse had a massive negative influence on their view of the church (this was research from 2011, prior to the Royal Commission on Institutional Child Abuse, which would suggest things have likely gotten worse).

If this is our public image, it's no wonder we're struggling to keep people in the church.

The Church in Australia is known for and being judged for its misdeeds and the things it stands against, far more than what it is standing for.

Transition – A Church Known for What it is For!

Transition from talking about our current public perception and church decline, to the way the early church functioned and the growth it experienced. Here are some biblical snapshots of the early Church community in Acts. The key point to explore is that this is a community known for what it is for and its radical care of one another.

Amidst persecution, the movement that Jesus started 2000 years ago grew to become the dominant religion of the Roman Empire by midway through the fourth century, and eventually the largest religion in the world.

In the book of Acts we get a glimpse into what this community looked like.

Acts 2

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Here was a community of people engaged in one another's life, deeply devoted to learning and understanding more about their faith, praying together and sharing fellowship with one another. Far more than just gathering on Sundays, they come together to share meals and break bread in one another's home. There was a joy and gladness about them, and they praised God together.

One of the most remarkable features of this community was that despite living in communities where many were poor, no-one in this community was in need. The reason for this is extraordinary. The care they extended for one another was so great, that all were willing to sell property and possessions so none would go without.

That's the kind of community that grabs the attention of others. The kind of community others want to be a part of. The Bible tells us, this type of community saw them **'enjoying the favour of all people, while the Lord added to their number daily'**.

This radical spirit of generosity was such a critical feature of the early church, that Luke reminds us of it again, 2 chapters later in Acts 4.

Acts 4

32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all 34 that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Examples from Early Church History – What Are We For!

Below are some examples of how the Church continued standing up for and radically living out Jesus call to justice and compassion. Some or all of these examples can be used. These examples demonstrate the church living out what it is known for, in a time where it continued to grow in numbers and influence.

This radical generosity and care didn't end in the first century. We continue to hear amazing and transformational stories of compassion as the Church continues to grow and take hold in the Roman Empire.

The Value of Human Life

In the ancient world which Christianity grew, there was a low value placed on human life. Christians, by contrast, took the opposite position believing that all human life had value, as everyone bore the image of God.

Infanticide

Prior to the rise of Christianity, infanticide was a common practice in the Greco-Roman World. It was accepted by the state, and advocated by philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and Seneca. Deformed babies and unwanted girls were often abandoned to their deaths.

Christians behaved differently, declaring infanticide murder and taking steps to rescue and care for abandoned children.

Alvin Schmidt outlines how under the pressure of intense Christian advocacy and the influence of the Christian Leader, Basil from Caesarea, perceptions began to change and infanticide was outlawed in the Roman Empire.

Gladiatorial death matches

Many of us are most familiar with the Greco-Roman disregard for life as expressed through the Gladiatorial death matches. Predominantly, slaves, criminals and prisoners of war, were forced to fight to the death for the entertainment of the masses. Thousands upon thousands were killed for brutal spectacle. Christians objected to the practice, boycotted the games and eventually, Christian advocacy saw them come to an end, with the Roman Emperor Honorius banning them in 404 AD. The non-religious historian W.E.H. Lecky suggests,

“There is scarcely any single reform so important in the moral history of mankind as the suppression of gladiatorial shows, a feat that must almost exclusively be ascribed to the Christian church.”

This is a big call from Lecky, but it's his belief that the end of the Gladiators came with the acknowledgement that all human life has value. An enormous and world changing shift in Western thought.

A Community of Love

The early church was known as a community of love – one that stood up on behalf of the neglected, the oppressed, the sick and the impoverished. It was a community that embraced John's call.

1 John 3

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

19 This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence:

The second century Christian historian, Tertullian noted how this costly and sacrificial love was recognised as central to Christianity, even amongst its detractors.

"Our care for the derelict and our active love have become our distinctive sign before the enemy... See, they say, how they love one another and how ready they are to die for each other."

The Christian Bishop, Dionysius, notes how the Christian response to a plague sweeping through Rome around AD 260 demonstrates this behaviour.

"Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another.

Heedless of danger they took charge of the sick attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains.

The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of elders and deacons and laymen, winning high commendations so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way equal of martyrdom."

So well-known were the Christians for their care and charity that the Pagan Emperor Julian, in 360 AD, wanting to stop the growth of Christianity, bemoans in a letter to a friend the difficulty that he is having.

"These impious Galileans, not only look after their own poor but ours as well so all can see that they lack care from us."

As a result, many commentators have suggested that this profound and uniquely Christian response to need helped infuse the notion of charity into Western civilisation.

The Historian W.E.H Lecky,

"The active, habitual and detailed charity of private persons, which is such a conspicuous feature in all Christian societies, was scarcely known in antiquity."

We hear the stories of the way in which the early Church was powerfully known for what it is for. A radically loving, sacrificial community; challenging the values of the society around them, reshaping the world to be more like the one that God intends and as a result, enjoying the favour of all people and seeing the lord add to their numbers daily.

Example from Our Recent History

There are many examples of the way in which the church has lived out a movement for justice, known for the things it stands up for in recent history as well.

The End of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

In the 1700s the Transatlantic Slave Trade was at its peak. Thousands of Africans were captured, transported across the Atlantic and enslaved in the Americas. Transportation conditions were appalling (one in four people died in transit) and freedom was stolen.

The Clapham Sect were a group of social reformers from the Church of England who, motivated by their faith, were dedicated to ending the slave trade. Their most famous recruit was William Wilberforce who was a British Member of Parliament and their lead spokesperson .

In 1788 Wilberforce outlined the terrible atrocities being conducted by the trade, and introduced a motion indicting the trade.

The motion was defeated. Slavery was big business, involving thousands of slaves, hundreds of ships, and millions of pounds. Upon it depended the economies of Britain and much of Europe. Few people in England shared the abolitionists' sense that slavery was a great social evil. Some presumed that slaves were a justifiable necessity or that they deserved their plight.

As the campaign to end slavery continued opposition intensified. Planters, businessmen, ship owners, traditionalists, and even the Crown opposed the movement. Many feared personal financial ruin and nationwide recession if the slave trade ceased. Wilberforce was vilified. Admiral Horatio Nelson castigated "the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies."

As early as 1789, Wilberforce's resolutions against the trade passed only to be rejected on fine legal points. 8 more rejected bills followed between 1791 and 1805.

The Clapham Sect and Wilberforce persisted and finally, on February 23, 1807, a bill to abolish slavery was passed by 283 votes to 16. The House cheered. Wilberforce wept with joy.

Passing a bill and enforcing it were two different things. This last goal took another 26 years. On July 26, 1833, the final passage of the emancipation bill was ensured when a committee of the House of Commons worked out key details. Three days later, Wilberforce died.

Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect, today are a reminder to the world of the great good that we as Christians stand for, and the amazing things we can achieve when we act.

Conclusions

Conclude the sermon with a reminder of how when the church lives out God's call to be people of love and justice, we can change the world and show them what we, and what God stands for.

In the book of Isaiah, the prophet reminds us of how God wants us to live out our faith. Not with hollow spirituality and insincere piety, but with justice and compassion.

Isaiah 58

*5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for people to humble themselves?
Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?*

*6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?*

*7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*

*8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness[a] will go before you,
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.*

*9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.*

*"If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,*

*10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.*

We should be a church that is known not simply for the things it stands against, but what it stands for. Our community should be known for far more than just getting together on Sundays, and known for far more than preaching, praise and prayer – it should be a church that is known for justice.

We've seen the amazing impact we can have on reshaping the world to be more the one that God intends when we do this, and the way that draws people into our community.

The prophet reminds us that when we become a community of love and justice that our light will break forth into the world, like the coming of the dawn and light up the darkness, as if it were the noon-day sun.

Application

The world has made huge progress against extreme poverty in the last 25 years, child mortality and income poverty has more than halved! Yet, despite this progress:

- Every year, 6.3 million children still die under the age of five, mostly from preventable causes
- 21 million people are trapped in forced labour/slavery.
- About 800 million people still live in extreme poverty, and suffer from hunger
- 57 million children of primary school age are not in school

As Christians, these statistics should disturb us. We should be people that seek justice, that want to see the hungry fed and the oppressed set free.

This means that while we should respond with personal generosity and compassion, we should also be willing to call on our nation to respond with justice. Giving their fair share in overseas aid is one way that nations do their bit to build a just world, and help pull down the barriers that hold people in poverty. On this score, our Government hasn't been doing well. It's implementing the largest cuts to aid in the programs history, that will leave us being the least generous we have ever been when it comes to aid giving.

We need to remind them and the nation that the Church is for justice, and that's why we are for Australian Aid.