

# HOW NOT TO START A CHURCH

Dr. Arlo Moehlenpah

- 1. Get a building before you get the people.** You will have enough of a struggle paying for your own housing, utilities, insurance, etc. let alone paying for the expenses related to a church building. My grandfather said get the people before you get the church building. I am sorry that I did not believe him. Jesus said to go and preach the gospel to every creature not to invite them to come to your church building. The apostles went every where preaching. They went to the market places, homes, riversides, and even the synagogues of the Jews. When you win the people they can decide and buy into obtaining facilities to worship. If they put their own money into it they will be more loyal. Where their treasure is their heart will be also. If it is your money then it will be your church not theirs.
- 2. Start having services in January in Wisconsin.** We started having services in January, 1962 in a rented Methodist church building in Junction City, Wisconsin, a very small town about 12 miles east of Stevens Point. It snowed the first eleven Sundays. Since our son was only one and a half years old and our daughter was on the way, I would drive the twelve miles there to try to start the furnace, shovel the snow, etc. The furnace was an old fashioned furnace that used hunks of coal. I grew up in large metropolitan areas and about all I knew about getting heat was turning up the thermostat. After thinking I had gotten the fire going I would return to Stevens Point to get my wife and son. Upon my return I would find one of two things. Either the fire was roaring and we had to open the windows to release some heat or else the fire had gone out and the building was below zero. Then I had to return to the furnace room to try to start the fire again. I “wrestled with devils” in that furnace room.

- 3. Name the church “Apostolic Pentecostal Church.”** I named the church this primarily because of my deep respect for the Apostolic Pentecostal Church in St. Louis, MO pastored by Harry Branding. I grew up in the St. Louis area. I thought it was a good name because we considered ourselves “Apostolic” and “Pentecostal.” However the area of Wisconsin, where we were, was populated by people mainly of Polish Catholic descent. When we told them the name of our church they could not even pronounce or spell “Apostolic” or “Pentecostal” let alone know what these terms meant. Since we were trying to win those who were not Apostolic Pentecostals, I think we made a mistake in our church name. Before I left in five years I created a survey to give to people in the area. If they were to visit or attend a church what name would be most appealing rather than Apostolic Pentecostal Church. Some of the choices were New Life, New Hope, Abundant Life, or Lighthouse for a prefix and Center and Ministries for a suffix rather than “church.” It is not that I am ashamed to be Apostolic Pentecostal or have any intention of compromising or watering down the gospel.
- 4. Don’t do any thing until you have musicians, instrument, vans, etc.** Sometimes we forget that the Apostles did not have the above and yet turned their world upside down. They emphasized “Such as I have I give unto you” rather than what they did not have. Too often we try to do missions work after the pattern of the established churches that we came out of rather than the way the apostles functioned. Every man has his own unique ministry. Some have great ministries of prayer, preaching, teaching, healing, etc. Some of us are not gifted musically. Use what gifts God has given you. If the Lord blesses you with people who have other gifts, then thank God for it.
- 5. Have a full blown schedule of services when you begin.** Do this if you want to burn out quickly. Many home missionaries like myself had to work to support themselves. I taught chemistry at Wisconsin State University. To prepare for my classes at the

University as well as to prepare for a Sunday School lesson, morning sermon, evening service and mid-week service left me with little time for my family or to reach out for the lost outside the walls of the church. I can't think of any thing that discouraged me more that to fast, pray, and prepare for a message and have no one show up but your own family. Many times you would be better off for yourself and your family to attend services at a nearby church for strength, fellowship and encouragement. When you have gathered some people via home Bible studies, prayer meetings, etc. then rent a facility for a revival and bring in an evangelist.

6. **Have the schedule of services permanently painted on a church sign.** If you have the schedule of services posted you feel duty bound to be there in case someone showed that you were not expecting. You would be better off to just have one or two regularly scheduled services. Some times you could take the ones you are winning to a nearby revival or church service. Also, it is important for you and your family to attend sectional, district and if possible some national meetings.
7. **Don't incorporate the church.** Failure to incorporate could cause you to be personally liable if someone injures themselves when attending or working with the church. Also, the contributions of people to the church may not be tax deductible and you may have to pay personal income tax on the contributions.
8. **Don't get professional advice from accountants and lawyers.** When I left Stevens Point after five years, the state of Wisconsin audited my income tax returns and made me pay taxes on my ministerial expenses. The logic was that I had no ministerial income thus could not have any ministerial expenses. My source of income was from teaching at the University. I believe that with some professional help I could have at least functioned as a daughter work and run my expenses as a

missionary effort through an established church or through the district. Also, I put thousands of dollars into building a church-home combination. This enabled the following pastors a place to live as well as church facilities seating about eighty people.

However, years later a pastor some how gave the church to another organization. I do not know exactly what happened but I believe the property could have been saved if I had gotten proper legal advice from the beginning.

- 9. Dedicate your new church in February in Wisconsin.** It snowed the night of my dedication in February, 1965. I almost missed the dedication in that I was picking up people and got stuck in the snow for a while. I should have waited until warmer weather.
- 10. Be independent and refuse all help.** Sheaves for Christ provided \$2000 for the new church. I mistakenly thought because of the restrictions that it was a loan and thus paid it back in two years. About all that was accomplished by doing this was that we won the per capita SFC giving awards two years in a row. Also, at the new church dedication instead of letting people give to help I brought in Bro. Paul Box, the foreign missions secretary, and Bro. C. H. Yadon, the home missions director, and took up offerings for missions instead of allowing people in the district to help the new work. I thought I was being wise and generous but I might have had an independent spirit.
- 11. Get irritable with those who question the way you operate.** There was an elderly man and his wife from West Virginia who moved into the area and started attending church. He questioned all sorts of thing such as where were the offerings going. It seemed whatever we did, he would say “That’s not the way we did it in West Virginia. I got irritated and preached one Sunday night on “Jesus Christ the Same Here, There and Everywhere”. Needless to say they never came back again. I regret that I drove him off.

**12. Use programs that work in large churches.** We went to several Sunday School Conventions. One speaker said we ought to have special days. It sounded good to me so we had a number of weeks of special days. One was farmer's day. I borrowed a loud speaker that attached to my car and went around the countryside playing music and announcing the service. The sound seemed to get the attention of the cows but no people. That Sunday I was the closest we came to having any farmers and I grew up near a large city. Another Sunday was mother's day. We were prepared to give prizes to the oldest mother, youngest mother, mother with the most children present, etc. My wife got all the prizes at age 24. We also had Old Timer's day and I think I got all the prizes at age 26. At another Sunday School convention a speaker suggested having a money hunt. We announced that and hid nickels, dimes, quarters all around the yard. We had then moved to a house in Stevens Point and had a record attendance of 41. We had kids go into all parts of the house. Some in the kitchen and others in the bedrooms. The next Sunday we gave an ice cream cone to everyone who came and I think we had 31. The next Sunday I had to go to Camp McCoy for the Army reserve and we brought in a special speaker. There were eight in attendance. So much for trying to bribe people into coming to church.

## Note from the author:

Dear Missionary,

I wrote the following article "How Not to Start a Church" hoping that it will help you. Unfortunately I have seen many make the same mistakes that I did. Solomon said "The thing that hath been, it is *that* which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there

is no new thing under the sun”. In other words “history repeats itself.” The reason history repeats itself is because “There is no remembrance of former things.” In other words history repeats itself because we do not learn well from history. Ecclesiastes 1:9-11. My sincere hope is that you will not make the same mistakes that I made.

I do not feel qualified to write “How to Start a Church.” We did have a few successes but my purpose in this article is for you to avoid some of the mistakes that I made. Whereas most of my ministry since leaving Stevens Point, Wisconsin has been in Bible College teaching, I still have a burden for missions work. To me the home and foreign missionaries are the “heroes “of our movement. I am applauding your efforts. If I can be of assistance to any of you please contact me.

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