

Selecting A New Church Name

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Many churches are named to signify a place, like Main Street Church. Others are named to designate a denominational affiliation, like Faith Baptist Church.

Other names, such as Community Bible Church, open broad doors while some names hold out spiritual ideals, like Church of the Open Door.

Many church names present biblical pictures, like The Good Shepherd Lutheran Church. Some contain nearly an entire system of theology, like Pillar of Fire Mount Zion Holiness Church of the Straight Gate.

Whatever name a church has, a good name is better than a bad one. And a great name can be one less barrier that a church must overcome to reach out to its unreached community.

Today many churches are changing their names. To some this is a new concept. But changing a church name is not as new as many people might think.

For instance . . .

The vast majority of early Americans were Anglicans. In fact, two-thirds of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Anglicans, as were George Washington, John Madison, Patrick Henry, Alexander Hamilton and John Marshall.

After the American Revolution, the Anglicans lost their dominate position. Since the Anglican Church was identified with England, thousands of Americans left to become part of the free churches with reflected America's zeal for freedom. Not until the Anglicans renamed themselves the Protestant Episcopal Church were they able to enjoy growth again.

Why Change Your Name?

Why would anyone want to change their church's name? Here are four reasons some are choosing to do so.

1. A New Location

When Park Street Church moves to Fifth Avenue it will need to change its name or suffer a loss of identity. If the name is not changed, there will be increased confusion as new people move into the community and are unaware that Park Street Church is now located on Fifth Avenue.

2. A New Target.

The First German Baptist Church initially ministered to a primarily German audience. However, over the years the community has changed and a new target audience must be reached. Without a name change, it is unlikely that people of other ethnic descents will even attempt a visit.

3. A New Identity.

Twenty years ago Broadway Presbyterian Church struggled through difficult times. Many people left and joined other churches in the local area. Broadway is now experiencing love and peace within her membership. Yet, her previous reputation lives on. A name change is one way she may clear away the old memories and create a new identity.

4. A New Direction.

Faith Community Church organized a VISION 2000 team to redefine its mission and has decided to set a new direction for the 90s. Noting that their community has many hurting people, they elected to communicate their new desire to help with a new name - New Hope Community Church.

Seven Guidelines

If you have given some thought to a new church name, here are seven guidelines to think about as you work through the choice.

1. Choose a name that attracts the unchurched.

One key to reaching the unchurched is to use a church name that is understandable and attractive to them.

- Consider what unchurched people think about names like "Faith," "Grace," and other names with religious sounding connotations.
- Narrow your choice down to five names and then survey people in movie lines, ball parks, shopping malls and by phone to see what they think of your choices.

2. Choose a name that sets you apart.

Churches tend to choose similar names. One church realized that its name was like nine others in the same area.

- Ask yourself what causes your name to stand out.
- What makes your church unique?
- How is your church different from other churches with similar names?

3. Choose a name that is simple to remember.

An unwieldy name must be classified along with a poor location or a run-down facility -- each can be eclipsed but it often takes extraordinary effort to do so.

- Keep your name short.
- Don't try to say too much in your name.
- One word is best but two or three words is okay.

4. Choose a name that will help people find your church.

One pastor jokingly said, "It takes Daniel Boone to find our church." His church, like many, was established in a small, quiet neighborhood which today are off the beaten path.

- Help people locate your church by naming it after a street, a local attraction, a physical landmark or other unique feature.

5. Choose a name that removes barriers.

Some people remember churches as places with long lists of "don'ts." People shouldn't trip over your theology because of what your name suggests.

- Look at a potential name through unchurched eyes.
- Ask unchurched people to give you their first response upon hearing your new name.
- Hire a consulting firm to investigate possible new names for you and make a recommendation on which one to select.

6. Choose a name that expands your potential.

Don't limit your drawing power to one city or geographical area unless there is tremendous potential for growth in that area.

- Select a name broad enough to include an entire city rather than simply a neighborhood.
- A name with regional identity rather than a city.
- A name with wide appeal rather than a limited appeal.
- A name that communicates to a larger audience rather than a smaller one.

7. Choose a name that communicates vibrancy.

Church names that communicate excitement and celebration are attractive to people who are hurting and in need of support.

- Use a name that includes words like "hope" or "life."
- Try using the word "new" since people like to be part of a pioneering venture.

- Ask if your name communicates excitement.

Some Considerations

You may be very happy with your church's name and have no desire to change it. However, if you do decide to change your name, consider the following.

- List your church in the Yellow Pages or the local newspaper under your denomination. Research has found that most new residents who are church attenders look for a church either through one of these means.
- Check with your denominational leaders to see what, if any, regulations they have concerning your name.
- Take the proper legal steps to file a name change with your state government. In some cases you will simply need to file a DBA
- Change all the items containing your old name, such as church stationery, bulletins, programs, business cards, brochures and church signs. Don't wait until you use up all the old stationery, etc. If a name change is important to make, it is important to change it throughout.