

Introduction

In this step, we'll look not just at venue, but also at one or two other related things, such as the time of worship. This is also a good time to do a very quick and dirty evaluation of online meetings and think about what role they could play in the church. This step is obviously related to what has gone before, particularly 'identifying a venue in which to plant' – Stage 3 of our CP Loop. This is a more specific and tactical step.

What are we looking for in a venue?

Of course, church isn't just about Sundays. But the factors which apply to the main public worship also apply in general to other meetings in midweek. Antioch churches don't have a habit of creating small group Bible studies in homes. This isn't an iron rule, but we've tended to prefer middle size midweek meetings or programmes like Alpha or Celebrate Recovery to the classic home group.

In our experience, the same things then apply to the midweek meeting as to the main weekend meeting, or any meeting which you want to be accessible to people who don't know the church well.

Top things to look for in choosing a venue:

- 1) Is it public? Well known, well used public venues have a big influence over the church. They make it easier for people to come in, easier to direct people, and generally lower the threshold. E247 was born out of a ministry in the Alexandria Library in Rusholme, a very public, accessible space. Upper Room Church in Cheetham Hill has seen a number of people come into a meeting when they have been in Trinity Church in Cheetham Hill. It has very few advantages, other than its position at the crossroads of a busy shopping area. But that beats all its disadvantages. On the other hand, a church I led gained almost no one over the months that it was in a venue hidden away in the back streets of Moss Side. Sometimes people walked around for an hour looking for it and then went home. Public, well-known, easy to find spaces, particularly in busy areas are gold. However, it's not just the building itself. Make sure that people can come in easily. If your building is public but

people have to be buzzed in through a series of doors, it will discourage some people from joining.

- 2) Is it warm? Your committed minority will put up with shivering through an hour in a big hall with inadequate heating. But most people won't. Do something, anything, to make sure that the building is warm.
- 3) Predictable. Hope Church's first venue scored high on being public. When the management changed, it began to score low on warmth, and then even lower on predictability. Sometimes they cancelled and one week we turned up to find it had been turned into a Shia mosque, draped in black. We pulled up the black sheeting and used the building, but the outlook there was dark. We left soon afterwards. Predictable can also refer to the way the building is presented. If the building is open, but it's not been cleaned from a wedding the night before, for example, you may not be able to use it. Upper Room church met in two restaurants in Cheetham Hill. One was shut because the tenant hadn't paid the landlord the rent, and the other was probably going bust, just when Covid hit.
- 4) The right size. Back before Covid, you wanted a venue on the small size, so that the building felt full for the people coming. That changed with social distancing, but will probably change back. On the other hand, you also want some space to grow.
- 5) Breakout rooms. You will probably need some space for the kids to do their thing. Some churches don't run a Sunday school, but if you do, make sure that you have the rooms you need to run it.
- 6) Usually, you'll want a kitchen so that you can eat together in the space. If you have an alternative back-up plan, fine, but a kitchen will also make it easier to serve tea and coffee.
- 7) Storage – it's easier, although not essential to have space to store Sunday school materials, Bibles, equipment etc.
- 8) A shared space. Antioch rules say that we shouldn't use churches. As of December 2020, two of the five new churches are meeting in church buildings. They are often cheap, with sympathetic managers and decent facilities. It depends a bit on what the interior looks like, but they can discourage visitors. Again, in Cheetham Hill, the public bit of the venue outweighed the desire to avoid a church.
- 9) Cheap. Talk to us about your budget. Basically paying above £100 a week for your main meeting is tricky, at the start of a church.

Should we hire venues, rent spaces, or even buy? If you look carefully at what most churches do, they use a mixture of strategies. One is hiring the space for a few hours, another is renting a space over the whole week, and a third is buying a property. Although we're sympathetic to renting during the week, you have to make it fit within a budget. Even if you have three meetings a week in the space, £10,000 a year is a lot of money for a small church. All of these things are negotiable and depend on the specific circumstances though.

Timing

Antioch uses a lot of different timings for its main services. They are, so far, Saturday evening, Sunday morning, Sunday lunchtime/ early afternoon, and Sunday at 4. At the moment, Sunday afternoon is the most popular time. It seems to offer the virtues of making space for children while still allowing adults to sleep in and everyone to get to football practice. You need to think about what works well for children as well as adults, with people's work schedules and natural patterns. For example, Sunday early afternoon in Cheetham Hill works well as it's a very busy period in the day and attracts a lot of passers-by.

How to look for a venue

- Pray – God can open doors. He can give what you can never earn. Praying for him to give you the perfect venue is a great strategy.
- It's good to build relationships in the planning stages. Some venues become available because people know us and are prepared to work with us. Trust can be really important.
- Ask – just walking around the area is crucial. Look for conference rooms, wedding venues, community centres, libraries, schools, adult education centres.
- Google different spaces, like wedding venues.

Breakout Question:

- How did you find your venue? What were the factors that brought you there?

Meeting online

Online presence and meeting have become a huge subject recently. We aren't experts but here are some of our thoughts on meeting online.

Meeting online has to align with your vision. You have to be clear about what you're trying to do and how meeting online can serve that purpose. That vision has to be adopted by your team. Antioch churches put a lot of emphasis on community and hospitality. So if internet ministry is going to take up a lot of time, you'll need to explain to the team how it's building the community in your vision. That may be tricky – our impression is that the size of the churches we're trying to plant don't lend themselves easily to producing excellent video, and if they did, the intersection between the face-face community and the internet community might not be obvious.

For example, Hope has had people joining over Zoom from other countries and cities over lockdown, creating a digital fringe, but this digital fringe overlaps poorly with our face-to-face fringe. As we've met face to face we haven't been particularly attractive to the digital fringe. I've heard one church leader suggesting that they remove the Zoom option as it encourages 'laziness' and no, they're not a tech-phobic boomer.

When you are using tech, or looking at numbers in any context, it's good to be fairly sceptical of numbers. In the Antioch Youtube channel, we produced nightly videos, often just reading compline. These could get reasonable numbers of viewers. Even a good handful was enough to indicate that there was a digital community that might regrow into a face-to-face community. When we looked deeper at the numbers, we saw than in some cases none of those viewers had watched past the first three minutes. There wasn't much of digital community at all. At this point we switched to interview-based videos, which had more of a personal element, and had far, far higher engagement.

That said, we do think that digital meeting has some distinct advantages:

- Business meetings can run well on Zoom. Because listening to your own voice isn't as enjoyable, it's not as likely that people will dominate meetings and it might easier to get different voices.
- Shorter prayer meetings where people are dispersed can also run well on Zoom.
- Where you have people moving in and out of the area, a Zoom room in a church meeting can be an effective way of continuing to connect them. In Hope Church, we have used a curated Zoom room. Someone streams the service from their phone, and



takes part in Zoom discussions when we're in breakout rooms. They then feed back to the congregation.

- Digital meetings have worked well in language groups. I have led an Arabic group, where about half the people in from Greater Manchester, although only one has no connection with the city. I have seen Iranians use digital prayer meeting in Farsi before lockdown – it gives a free space to express things in their heart language.

In summary

With digital meetings, don't chase the numbers, follow vision. Even if the digital engagement numbers were all they seem (and they rarely are), they won't necessarily help you in your key goal of planting and growing a small, replicable church.

What isn't appropriate for your church might work better for the network, though. So if you have a good idea for some digital outreach or meeting, let us know and we'll see if the network can back it, even if it's not time-effective for growing one congregation.