

A banner with a green and yellow background featuring a field of grass. The text is centered and reads: DR. LAMAR E. SMITH CENTER FOR EVANGELISM & CHURCH GROWTH.

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We all know there are certain big days of worship in our communities that our churches really mark and celebrate — Easter, Christmas Eve, the first weekend after Labor Day, the first weekend after New Year's Day and Vacation Bible School. Along with our church family, we prepare, anticipate and look forward to the culmination of Lent, Advent and the season of getting ready for other big events and special worship moments.

I think we often do it wrong. Because we work so hard, advertise so much and work to get as many people in attendance as we can on these special days, we can make this an ending instead of a beginning. And as an ending, we find ourselves working hard and setting a pattern of endings in our church: Easter is an ending, Christmas Eve is an ending and Vacation Bible School is also an ending. The next week or weeks after these events, few show up and we are depressed. The lead pastor is often not even there the week after this big ending; they are recovering from the big ending that just finished. Like one writer said, "Nothing is so over as Christmas when it's over."

These special seasons should be beginnings, new beginnings. They were meant to be this. The journey of the church, the Christian journey and making disciples of Jesus Christ is about new beginnings; our church family and community want to be a part of new beginnings.

For most churches, one of the high points and highest-attended services of the year is our Christmas Eve Candlelight service. What can we do to make it a beginning? How do we communicate discipleship, the next message series aimed at the guest, the call to be a part of what is coming the following week, the life of the church or the mission and vision that proceeds naturally from the Christmas story? Do we register the people who attended, contact them after and invite them to what's next, and do we talk about what's next in the service itself? Is the message series that comes after compelling and attractive?

Lent will soon be here, the season leading up to Easter Sunday, probably the biggest weekend of the year. More effort goes into these few weeks and that Sunday than any other of the year. We can easily send a message to our church and community that drives up the attendance yet leaves a sense that it is an ending, a feeling of "*that's done*" that pervades and infects the very message we preached. Easter should include an overwhelming invitation to what follows the next message series, ways to connect, how to take next steps in discipleship, what new small groups or faith community will begin.

Do we follow up on the families of Vacation Bible School children and do we follow up with guests and visitors? Do we offer the first weekend of the fall and winter as a new beginning and communicate the invitation to the community where our church is, an invitation that appeals to the needs they have that might lead them into the next step of discipleship?

So, instead of a church becoming a series of endings, it should be a series of beginnings!!