

Church Profile

Reaching Out to Those Who Don't Come In

Woodland Drive-In Church,
Grand Rapids, Michigan

VERLYN D. VERBRUGGE

In the spring of 1970, Pastor Ray Rewerts of Fifth Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, challenged his congregation to initiate a ministry in the Grand Rapids area to a group of people who were not being reached through traditional outreach programs. Inspired in part by Robert Schuller's ministry at a drive-in theater in California (the beginning of what became the Crystal Cathedral), Fifth's congregation decided to open a drive-in ministry where people could worship in their cars. Jack Loeks, owner of Woodland Drive-In Theater, offered the use of his premises for this project and even helped with the advertising. For the first two years, Woodland held services only in the summer, but by 1972 it had become a year-round ministry—and has been ever since.

When drive-in theaters started closing all across America in the 1980s, Woodland Drive-In Church, by this time a thriving ministry, had to make a decision about its future. The church decided to move to a five-acre piece of property owned by Fifth Reformed, where it expanded a parking lot and built a permanent structure from which to transmit worship services. We now transmit over car radios on a low-wattage FM band rather than through speakers hanging inside car windows.

In the initial stages, Fifth Reformed Church financially supported the drive-in ministry, although worshipers have always been given the opportunity to place contributions in an envelope and to deposit them with one of the greeters after the service. But within two years of moving the church to its new location in the 1980s, drive-in worshipers themselves had paid for a permanent building. And since the mid-1990s, the ministry has been completely self-supporting.



Verlyn D. Verbrugge (verlyn.verbrugge@zondervan.com) is senior editor in academic books, Zondervan Publishing Company, and pastor of Woodland Drive-In Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Who Comes?

People often ask me, What sort of people would want to worship in their cars rather than entering a church building? Everyone at the drive-in has a story, and each story is different. We have two types of attenders: occasional (temporary) and permanent. I'll begin with the latter.

Permanent Attenders

■ Tom grew up in the Christian Reformed Church but always felt uncomfortable in large crowds (the technical term is agoraphobia). Shortly after his marriage, both he and his wife, Donna, dropped out of church. After a number of years, he heard about the drive-in and began to attend our services. Now

he is one of our most active volunteers. His car provides a safe haven. His wife attends regularly with him.

- Shirley developed significant problems with allergies to perfumes. Attending church became a weekly misery—she suffered red eyes and stuffy nose for the next day or two. She and her husband began attending the drive-in, where they could control their own environment. Worship became a pleasant experience for her again.
- James had emphysema and other breathing problems that required the use of an oxygen tank. He would at times go into severe coughing spells, which he knew would disturb others. At the drive-in, he could put his oxygen tank in the back seat, and his coughing disturbed no one.
- Corky had developed chronic back problems. No way could she continue to sit in hard church pews. In her car, she could position pillows in a way that would make sitting tolerable, and she could even recline the seat if need be.
- Tina grew up in a “hellfire and brimstone” church, which turned her off church completely as she grew older. Yet she knew she wanted Jesus in her life as Savior. Finally she decided to attend the drive-in. She resonated with the positive preaching of God's amazing grace, and the style of ministry allowed her to slowly ease herself back into regular worship. She still avoids the traditional church. “If it were not for the drive-in,” says Tina, “I would not be going to church.”
- Patty had dropped out of church and drifted away from God. Her church had treated her like poison when she filed for divorce. But there was an aching need in her heart to develop a stronger relationship with Jesus through Word and worship. After many years of avoiding coming to grips with that issue, she came to the drive-in with a friend. She found love and acceptance from the other worshipers and, most of all, love and acceptance from God.
- Karen is a free spirit who loves the outdoors and does not like the boxy feeling she gets in a traditional church building. She loves the sky as a ceiling and the birds chirping in the trees. She also loves the casualness of our worship service.
- Almost every Sunday a van or two with severely mentally impaired adults attend our service. These people understand little of the service, but they know they are “at church.” Their strange noises and constant rocking would most likely disturb some in a traditional worship setting.



Temporary Attenders

The other category of people who attend the drive-in are temporary worshipers. We at Woodland see ourselves as performing a service to other churches in the community by offering a place to worship when particular needs arise.

- Fred had surgery on his leg and needed to keep it elevated—not easy to do in a church pew or chair. So for a few weeks he attended our services. After the healing took place, he returned to his regular church.
- Yvonne had gone through some personally trying times and stopped going to church. She wanted to get back, but she was wary of the enthusiastic welcome she might receive (“Glad to see you! Tell us about yourself!”). She was still hurting so much that if she received such a greeting she knew she would probably burst into tears. She wanted to get back into church life at her own pace—and with a certain degree of anonymity and distance from others. The drive-in offered that. After about six months, she felt ready to join a traditional church again. We thanked God for the privilege of being a part of her transition.

It is not unusual after a period of time that someone in the first group of visitors asks about joining our church. We are not, however, an organized church that holds membership papers; in contrast to the Crystal Cathedral, we never intend to become formally organized. Instead, we work with Fifth Reformed Church to get such people on their membership roll. While they may continue to worship at the drive-in, they are officially members of Fifth.

I should point out that we do offer opportunities for fellowship at our church for those who want it—coffee and cookies before and after the service (or during!). Four times a year we have an all-church dinner in the “parish house” on the church property. At least twice a year, we also have a communion service as a second service in the large room of the parish house, so that those who desire to express their relationship with Jesus and with each other in that special way can do so. Elders from Fifth assist me. (Tom, by the way, always sits in the back row, next to the door!) As pastor, I greet worshipers both before the service in their cars and after the service as they leave. I also visit worshipers in the hospital, if notified, and perform weddings and funerals on request.

Why Not Just Stay Home?

Why don’t these people just stay home and watch a worship service on TV? Perhaps because getting up on Sunday morning and driving to church feels very different from sitting in one’s bathrobe watching the tube.

Our service itself, though, is very traditional. We begin with an organ prelude, after which the worship leader goes to the microphone to get the service started. Since congregational singing is impossible, music is arranged for the beginning, middle, and end of every service. I read Scripture and offer a congregational prayer (preceded by written prayer requests the greeters bring forward). These range from traditional prayers for healing to prayers for people threatened with the loss of their home because of financial difficulties, those coping with substance abuse or depression, and those facing broken homes or experiencing physical or emotional abuse.

The center of each service is the sermon. The challenge of preaching to a worship community like this is to make sure that the messages are deep enough to enable regular attenders to grow in their faith but simple enough so that the first-time worshiper can understand it. While I don’t preach the same evangelistic sermon each Sunday, just using a different text, I do make sure that each message includes an invitation to people to accept Jesus as their personal Savior.

Why Not More Ministries Like This One?

Most people think our mode of worship is unique, and it is true that there are few such year-round ministries anywhere in the world. But frankly, I wonder why there are not more drive-in ministries. Surely every large community has the types of people who benefit from our services. These are people in the shadows, those who want to go to church but find the traditional church too trying for them. You may even have such people in your church. How is your church reaching them with the love and grace of God?

Yes, it takes a tremendous amount of effort and a large contingent of volunteers to make a church like this an ongoing ministry. At least thirty people serve regularly in different capacities, most of whom now come from within the drive-in community. But the rewards are tremendous: meeting people’s needs and advancing the kingdom of Christ. *Soli Deo gloria.* ■