

Churches shifting summer worship from Sunday to Wednesday nights

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#)

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c. 2012 Religion News Service SALEM, N.H. (RNS) As New England sweltered in early July, Sunday mornings came and went without a single soul showing up for worship in the hot, stuffy sanctuary of First Congregational Church of Salem, N.H. Even the pastor stayed home.

But God wasn't forgotten. Worship just waited until Wednesday evenings, when the cool comfort of the basement fellowship hall drew as many as 40 to sing and pray. That's 50 percent more than the church attracted when it met on summer Sundays.

"If people take a break from worshipping, they sometimes don't pick that habit back up," said Owen Williams, a longtime deacon at First Congregational, a United Church of Christ congregation. But because Wednesdays keep people coming, "we have a depth of commitment throughout the year."

Summer has a way of thinning out pews on Sunday mornings as the sun-loving faithful take to trails, outdoor markets and backyard projects. The predictable pattern poses challenges, especially for smaller congregations.

More and more, however, churches are rediscovering Wednesday -- a traditional midweek church night -- as a prime time to gather the flock for casual worship in summer. Early adopters report improved attendance, slightly fatter coffers and invigorated spirituality as curious newcomers drop by and join in.

"It is becoming more common for churches to experiment with different times, days and venues for worship gatherings," said Elaine Heath, associate professor of evangelism at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. "The prevailing attitude of church insiders, though, seems to be that the worship gathering that really 'counts' is the one on Sunday morning."

This Wednesday (July 18), First Church Congregational in Methuen, Mass, will begin a three-week experiment with Wednesday worship. For the first time this August, the only worship services at Plymouth Congregational in Plymouth, N.H., will be on Wednesday evenings. Worshippers will exit to the sounds of live music as crowds arrive for outdoor concerts on Plymouth Common.

"People were a little taken aback initially," said Emily Knapp, a deacon at First Congregational Church of Georgetown, Mass., where a shift to Wednesday worship has boosted average summer attendance from 15 to 40. From September to May, attendance averages around 80.

"But churches sometimes get stuck," Knapp said. "This has helped us say, 'Yeah, let's try new things. Let's be innovative.'"

Midwestern churches are also joining in the summer Wednesday shift.

Good Shepherd Church in Owatonna, Minn., also added a Wednesday service this summer and began immediately seeing new faces in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod congregation.

Immanuel Lutheran Church in Eden Prairie, Minn., has held summer Wednesday services for three years and draws only about 20, most of whom come on Sunday, too. But it's nonetheless important to make the services available to those who're away on summer Sundays, according to Senior Pastor Paul Nelson.

Wednesday nights aren't necessarily an easy sell. Trondhjem Lutheran Church in Lonsdale, Minn., has revived its Wednesday night worship this year but attracts only a few Sunday regulars.

"Most of the people who aren't available on Sundays, because they're up at a cabin or something, they don't come on Wednesdays either," said Pastor Howard White, who lets two seminarians lead midweek services. "It's not a substitute for Sunday. It doesn't make up the difference (in reduced summer attendance). For us, it's just an alternative style of worship."

For some, the shift to Wednesdays brings variety to a familiar weekly rhythm. At Immanuel Lutheran, Wednesdays are humming during the school year as 300 gather for Christian education classes and choir rehearsals. Since people are used to coming on Wednesdays, the summer routine brings a refreshing change of pace:

leave the notebooks home, arrive in shorts and praise God.

For others, the shift means overcoming resistance. The Rev. Vicki Keene, an interim pastor in the United Church of Christ, encourages a summer shift from Sunday to Wednesday services in every congregation she serves. Most parishioners have responded enthusiastically, she said, but some have pushed back.

"There were a couple of elderly couples that said, 'we've been worshipping at this church for 40 or 50 years, and it's just pitiful that our church won't be open on Sundays,'" said Keene, who is interim pastor at First Church Congregational in Methuen, Mass. "Traditions are strong. ... We'll just have to see how this all unfolds."

Church leaders say benefits are outweighing costs. Wednesday evenings draw quite a few who work in Salem's giant retail sector, Williams says, and who can't worship on Sundays because they work. Families with school-age kids seem to like it, too.

"It's a nice break in the middle of the week to see my friends," said Merri Carlson, a Salem mother of two teenagers. "And it means I don't have to cook that night."

Though Wednesday services can help a bit with summer cash flow, congregations prefer to focus on the spiritual benefits. At Burr Oak-Hesper Lutheran Fellowship in northeast Iowa, organizers either skip offerings altogether on Wednesdays or designate the entire collection for a specific cause.

After work on Wednesdays, passersby in Hesper or Burr Oak are apt to see a bonfire outside a church. Curious young adults occasionally stop to hear Pastor Matt Larson play guitar, listen to his lesson and roast a few marshmallows.

"It has opened the door a little bit more for the younger generation because it's a little bit different and informal," said Linda Folstad, a member of the evangelism committee at Hesper Lutheran Church. "And that's what we were hoping for."