



COURAGEOUS
STORYTELLERS

MEMBER RESOURCES FOR CHURCH COMMUNICATORS

EASTER IS NOT YOUR SUPER BOWL

By Kelley Hartnett

If you've been in church communication for very long, you may have experienced what I like to call the Pre-Easter Pep Rally. It's like a regular worship team meeting or all-staff gathering, except, given the urgency and "Let's get 'em" messaging, you wouldn't be terribly surprised if your pastor's closing, "Amen" signaled Gatorade showers and confetti cannons:

"This year, we need to BRING IT! We've gotta play like we mean it! I wanna see some hustle! You wanna win some souls, don't ya? You've gotta WANT IT!"

If you're really lucky, that particular team meeting will conclude with some fun mixed metaphors:

"This Easter, it's all hands on deck! Let's knock it outta the park this year! This is our SUPER BOWL, people!"

Oh, good grief.

And also—Easter is our *Super Bowl*? I mean, I get it: Easter is a big deal. Actually, Easter is the *whole* deal. But if we're looking at our Easter *worship gathering* as the end-all, be-all of our church's ministry—which is what calling it the Super Bowl implies—we've chosen a truly terrible analogy.

Here's why:

If we view Easter as our Super Bowl, we'll be too focused on the scoreboard. The attendance scoreboard, that is. Putting too much emphasis on how many people show up on Easter (or to any other gathering) is problematic for a couple of reasons:

1. ATTENDANCE ISN'T THE MOST HELPFUL METRIC.

I don't know what your church's particular mission or vision statement is, but I'll bet it's not, "Have as many people as possible attend our church." Somehow, though, church folks have gotten obsessed with the size of our gatherings. It's the first question we ask one another at conferences, and it's one of our favorite things to report to our leadership board: "We grew by 3% last year." But what's behind that number? Are they new folks, or are they from the church down the street that's embroiled in some controversy or another? Are those new folks getting connected in community? Are the people who've been with us a long time doing anything as a result of their time in the pew on Sunday morning? That's awesome that they've won the 100% attendance award, but do they look any more like Jesus than they did a year ago? Which leads to all sorts of other interesting questions like, "What's a disciple look like, anyway?"

Look, I'm not saying we shouldn't count how many folks come to our gatherings; I am saying we should be using that number only in comparison to other things: the percentage of that number who are serving their neighbors, the percentage of that number who are engaged in sacrificial financial giving, the percentage of that number who are clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, feeding the hungry, caring for the widows and orphans.

2. EASTER ATTENDANCE NUMBERS CAN UNNECESSARILY INFLATE OR DEFLATE OUR EGO.

Easter is one day on our calendar—an important day, to be sure, but it's one day. If attendance is down, we feel disappointed and frustrated; if attendance is up, we feel victorious and impressed with ourselves... which is a little silly, given most of those "extra" people won't come back until Christmas.

If we view Easter as our Super Bowl, we'll spend unnecessary time, energy, and money on the half-time show. Cool church? It's dead. *A lot* of churches have a band and a light show and videos and a mobile app and on and on and on. But we spend gobs of resources trying to come up with the Best Service Ever for Easter, because "this may be the only time we see these folks all year." I get that we want to captivate people while we have them, but bells and whistles simply aren't the right method anymore. Our whole *world* is bells and whistles. People aren't looking for more of that mess; they're looking for a break from it.

Know what most churches *don't* have? Authenticity. Rawness. Emotional vulnerability. Most churches are still acting like members-only country clubs, speaking a language only insiders understand. Remember Super Bowl 50's half-time show? It involved Bruno Mars *and* Coldplay *and* Beyonce and most of us were like, "Wait... what? What just happened?" That's not how we want people to experience our gatherings, and if we turn Easter into the Super Bowl, we may inadvertently head in that direction.

Know what *e/else* many churches don't have? Evidence they're actually making headway on that whole, "Thy kingdom come" thing. If you're considering adding a new video screen or paying professional musicians for your Easter service, please divert that money and energy toward relieving suffering in the world—and invite folks to join you in doing *that*. You wanna wow someone? Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with our God.

If we view Easter as our Super Bowl, we'll have a bunch of spectators. After our Easter gathering, it feels good to receive those "Best service ever!" messages on Facebook. It's an affirmation of the hard work we've put in and the hours we've invested. But it's also an indicator of the consumer mentality that's taken over our churches. "It's Easter, and I've invited my whole family, so you'd better impress them!" Instead of thinking about how we can amaze people, let's figure out how to *engage* them.

If we view Easter as our Super Bowl, people will only remember the commercials. Because of our tendency to bedazzle our Easter gatherings, there's a risk we'll bury the main messages of hope and healing, reconciliation and love. Most of us don't remember much about the actual Super Bowl, right? We just remember that hilarious Doritos commercial and that disturbing heroin PSA. Similarly, if we put too much effort into, say, the music, on Easter Sunday, people may remember that killer accordion-banjo duet instead of the Gospel.

Let me be clear: I'm not against killer accordion-banjo duets, or any other music—or any other art for that matter. I'm really just talking about allocation of resources, here. If we only have the time and money for one art piece, let's make sure it's the *right* one. Not the Bruno-Mars-meets-Coldplay-meets-Beyonce one.

Now, let me flip this around a little bit and suggest there might be a *good* way to look at "commercials."

Chances are good we'll end up with a lot of people at our church on Easter, even if we didn't actively market to them and even if we didn't spend a bunch of time, energy, and money preparing for them. They'll be there. So how can we show them who we are, as a church, *apart from just Sunday morning stuff*—while we have their attention?

Why? Well, because [worship gatherings are no longer the primary entry-point into a life of faith](#). Sure, lots of people show up to Easter services. But unless we inspire and engage them, we may not see them again until Christmas. And let me be clear: I'm not talking about them not being "in church"

between Easter and Christmas. I'm talking about them missing out on life-giving involvement in an authentic community compelled by God's love to do good work in the world.

So, rather than looking at Easter Sunday as our Super Bowl—throwing all of our planning energy and budget at that one service—let's plan how to create curiosity about what *else* we're doing. It'll take guts.

- Before Easter, develop some creative, alternate on-ramps for people who have no interest in attending a worship gathering. Think TED-talk style lectures series that address community concerns. Or social justice ministries. Or taco Tuesdays. Or *whatever*. Consider hosting these gatherings in the community, rather than on your campus. Remember: The goal is not to get people to church; the goal is to help them know Jesus and then live like He did. It doesn't matter where that happens.
- Be *super* bold, and instead of having Easter services on your campus, break into teams to do simple gatherings and meals around the community—school gyms, elder care facilities, hospital chapels, prison visitation rooms, homeless shelters, subdivision clubhouses, homes, bars. Yes, that's a massive amount of coordination, but you have plenty of people in your church who are waiting to be asked to do something incredible. Don't let the professionals "own" Easter. Let your church family get some play action.
- Include an audience participation element in your Easter worship gathering—beyond the usual, I mean. Devote an entire part of your service to making sandwiches for people who are experiencing homelessness. (Yes, it would be a logistical nightmare. It'd be loud and messy and crazy. But wouldn't it be amazing? Talk about a memorable "commercial"!) Allow people to ask questions during the service. Create some sort of text poll—not to be cool, but to be *real*.
- Make it easy for people to give you their contact information if they want to, and then follow up within a couple of days. (See the bit about Disneyland below.)
- Instead of making a cool music video to accompany the feature tune in your Easter worship gathering, allocate that time to making a mini-documentary about your church's justice work or to film a story of someone who's been deeply affected by your church community.

This is certainly not an exhaustive list, and I honestly don't know if any of these ideas will "work." But I do know that what we're doing right now isn't working.

Finally, if we view Easter as our Super Bowl, we'll be tempted to go to Disneyland when it's over.

If we put too much energy toward our Easter worship gatherings, we'll be exhausted, a little bitter about how much time we spent away from our families for the past 10 weeks, and likely already dreading the ramp-up for the Next Big Thing. And, unlike the Super Bowl, Easter's not the end of our "season." We simply *can't* check out and go to Disneyland when Easter's done. We're not doing sprints here; we're in *constant* training to be and build a massive force for good in the world.

So let's do *that*, OK? Let's quit worrying so much about the scoreboard and the half-time show. Let's stop producing spectators. Let's take some risks and call some audibles. Easter's not our Super Bowl. It's *everything*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Kelley spent a decade working in established churches and helping to launch new ones. Currently, she's focused on writing, volunteering for organizations that care for vulnerable populations and making progress on her journey toward minimalism.

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