

17 Helpful Thoughts on starting a Recovery Church based on our experience:

1. Locate an existing recovery community so that the leaders and pastor may become acquainted. The Salvation Army or the local Mission may be an example. Ours was the local Gospel Mission that had a 12-step long-term treatment/housing program. These men were the starting congregation that added mass to have a meaningful worship service. Pastor Campe spend 6 months attending and getting acquainted with these men and their leadership.
2. Tailor the worship space to the people who are anticipated. Don't make the space bigger than the anticipated congregation. It is always better to be too cramped than too spacious. When the Recovery Church branched out to a new congregational space in Minneapolis the space itself, while beautiful, wasn't conducive to a small congregation and always made it feel as though the congregation was a failure in numbers in attendance. Determine what the size of the space necessitates a meaningful worship.
3. Communion is the theological element that ties everything together. The theology of the sacrament is the ever-present bond that allows us to function with diversity of theology and opinion. See attached liturgy that has been developed at The Recovery Church.
4. Combine elements of the Bible and the Big Book in every sermon. Theme preaching is probably best in that it allows the new people who are accustomed to the Big Book an entry into a theological understanding. Understand that your congregation will have little or no Biblical understanding and in fact may harbor anti-religious feelings.
5. Have lay people distribute the elements, share their story of hope, and do readings and always be on the lookout for the laity to participate in worship.
6. Make the music a voluntary ministry for any people who want to participate. Quality of music is not as important as participation. This goes for everything but preaching.
7. Always begin the worship service with your tie to the community. I always introduce myself this way: "Good morning, I am an alcoholic named Jo." Look for the way in which we are tied together out of our brokenness rather than our strength. Introducing myself as an alcoholic always puts me at the point of connection rather than the point of separation.

8. Try to do the worship service so that it is not contingent on financial giving. The people who attend our church really can't afford much. If you are looking for a congregation with money, you need to look elsewhere. Make sure that the congregation is less concerned with money and more concerned with message. With that said, some outside source of money will be needed to make the recovery congregation viable. The money that comes from the congregation generally will not be accustomed or able to support a professional staff. Create a business plan that takes into consideration of a congregation that will never be able to afford itself without outside support.
9. Personally invite a group of leaders to join in the planning and don't worry about elections or church politics. The recovery community carries with it little history of "this is the way we always have done it." So, be less concerned with governance and more concerned with the message of unity and acceptance.
10. Preach about a loving God who accepts and loves all. Judgment and guilt and shame have no place in our recovery ministry. We have lived that life before and now wish for new life that is tied to the spirit of forgiveness rather than separation.
11. Never badmouth the existing church. Try to use it as examples of how we can learn and benefit. The minute you fall into the trap of negative about the existing institution of church the people become defensive about even the things they don't agree with.
12. In every worship service have a layperson tell their story. A short 4-6 minute "Story of Hope" is included in every worship service. If the person who has signed up for the story isn't there that morning we turn it into a time of sharing gratitude.
13. Have a prayer time in every worship service for anyone in the congregation to lift up joys/concerns/needs/celebrations. Determine how long you want it to go and cut it off when the time is up. After the layperson is done lifting up the "joys or concerns" the pastor responds..."In your mercy..." The congregation responds..."lord, hear our prayers."
14. Start every worship service with a "giggle or groan." I start every worship service with a joke to get the congregation moving. Some of them are stupid,

some sexist, and some politically incorrect and some of them are really funny. I have people from the congregation send me the jokes from the Internet and I pick one out each week. This has gotten to be really a big part of the service that people like a lot. It is really stupid theologically, but it works!

15. End with the Lord's Prayer and everyone coming together and joining hands.
16. In the beginning of worship after announcements and the joke time have everyone get up and shake hands and give someone a hug. We have become a really big hugging community. The recovery community is used to more physical contact at meetings and thus the greeting, hugging and joining hands at the Lord's Prayer time works.
17. When I am gone on vacation or business I have lay people take over. See one of our guiding principles about keeping staff small.