

Beginning A Ski Ministry

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Before you approach the management about the possibility of doing ski ministry you will want to think through many of the following ideas. It is helpful to write up a proposal of what you want to do. This gives the management time to examine your thoughts and ideas. As you approach the management, come with confidence. Ski areas need you. They can meet the physical needs of skiers but they cannot meet the spiritual and emotional needs. Approach the management as a professional who has something to offer. I will be happy to provide letters of reference from the ski area management here. It is also helpful if you can get people who ski at your mountain to write letters to the management requesting that ski services be held.

Once permission has been granted, choose an area of the mountain that the majority of skiers can get to. If you have your service on an advanced slope you will eliminate many people from attending the service. Try to choose a beginner or intermediate slope. If you can find a place that is visible from the top of the chair lift it is helpful. You will want to place the cross a short distance from the unloading station. Sometimes people fall as they get off of the chair and this will be distracting to your worship service. Try to pick a scenic place. In short, you need good visibility and good accessibility. If there is a tree nearby, you may want to put the cross close to it. If you don't there is a chance that the groomer will hit and destroy your cross.

The cross needs to be at least 10 feet tall. Even then, you sometimes have to dig them out after a big snow. At the end of the season tie your cross to the nearest tree with a rope. Otherwise the snow melts and the cross falls down. Then it snows again the next year and you can't find the cross. Then you get to spend your time building another one!

We put a sign on the cross saying, "Church Service Here Sundays at 2:00 p.m." We also put wooden signs on poles all over the ski area announcing the services. The ski area announces the services over the loud speaker system for us. We put the service times in the newspapers and on the radio. Getting a brochure with service times and locations into hotels and real estate rental offices will also help your attendance. Some ski areas have even put the church service announcement in their trail map brochure that they give to all skiers. The signs should be the same color as the ski area signs. Sometimes the ski area will even make these for you. It would be wise to get all signs approved (color, size, wording, location) before you make them. We also try to get there early enough each week to write down the information about the services on the chalkboards at each lift line.

The time for the service varies from area to area. Ask the management when the most people are on the mountain. Avoid the lunch hour unless you are doing your service on the deck while people are eating. From noon to one o'clock our mountains are pretty empty. Avoid having the service too late in the day because people start heading back home. The management will probably be a big help in this area.

The service follows the order of worship in our brochure. We bring other responsive readings from time to time. You may want to develop your own booklet of responsive readings and songs for use each week. At some ski areas we have the same people attending each week. Other ski areas get different people each week at their services. Develop relationships with all employees. They are one of your main sources of consistent communication with the public. In Gatlinburg they bake cookies for each ski area employee

at the beginning of the season so people will remember them and feel good about what they are doing.

If you can play the guitar, this is an added bonus. Music attracts people. You will find that once you get one or two people at the service, others will come. No one wants to be the first one there. Welcome the people as they come. Find out where they are from, how long they have been there, what runs they have been on, etc. I sometimes ask, "Where do you attend church when you are at home?" This gives you a good idea of their background. These kinds of questions usually lead them to ask you questions and it is a good time for you to share your testimony with them.

We keep our services 15-20 minutes in length. The colder it is the shorter the service! One day in a blizzard a guy came up and asked, "Couldn't we just pray today?" And we did! The devotion is an inspirational and short message. Our devotions are about 10 minutes in length. We emphasize the basics of the faith and try to avoid things that denominations fight about such as the Lord's Supper and Baptism. We try to emphasize nature and God's creation. We try to help people to move from worshipping the creation and move to worshipping God, the Creator. We try to keep it on a positive note and not make people feel guilty.

People ski up and most of the time they form a semi-circle around the leader. The leader takes off their skis so that they can walk around and pass out brochures and shake their hands, etc. Most of the time they leave their skis on. If it is a really nice day they might sit in the snow and take their skis off. You can put your ski hat between tow ski poles and let people know that they can give an offering if they like. This money goes for the cost of printing brochures, making crosses, signs, etc. Never call on someone from the audience to pray unless you know them and know that they feel comfortable doing so. We usually have a team of two people to lead a worship service. With two people you can have a greater chance to interact with more people on a one-to-one basis before and after the service. My partner or I will lead in prayer or we may close with the "Lord's Prayer." This gives them an opportunity to be involved in the service. I always tell them that my name, address, and phone number are on the back of the brochure and let them know that I would be glad to talk to them or be of service to them while they are in our area. Try to keep track of attendance each week. It will help you and it will help the ski area management to know what is going on.

We wear badges to identify ourselves. This also lets people know that we have permission to be there. The badges have three lines. Mine says, "Tahoe Resort Ministries, Debbie Wohler, Ski Chaplain." They are the same color as the ski area badges. Fred Weatherly of Mammoth Mountain wears the host uniform of the ski area. The badges are a good way to start a conversation. People ask, "What's a ski chaplain?" or "What's a worship service?" Because of our badges people often mistake us for ski area personnel and ask questions like, "How's the easiest way down this mountain?" Even this is an opportunity for conversation with skiers.

You will probably want to develop a name and identity such as "Tahoe Resort Ministries." The ski area can't have every denomination holding services there. They want an interdenominational approach. This doesn't mean that we are apologizing for being a Baptist or trying to hide it. It says right on our brochure that we are Baptist and we announce it as well. If you are a part of a ministerial association, see if they will designate you as their representative with the ski area. That way the ski area knows that every church in town won't be hitting them up to do a service.

We give the ski area a list of all the ski chaplains. This way they know who is authorized by you to do the service in case you are sick or away. Ski chaplains have to fill out an application and go through training in order to do a service. We put their name, address, and phone number on the list. The person at the desk asks to see their badge or driver's license. As you become more well known there can be problems with outside people trying to get on the mountain to do your service. (This is a problem for us because we do worship service at seven different ski areas each Sunday.) Our ski areas give us a day to go up and do the services. One ski area will even reserve a parking spot for the chaplain of the day.

At Easter we give each person who comes to the service a helium balloon. At the end of the service the worship leader says, "The Lord is Risen" and the congregation responds, "The Lord is Risen Indeed." We repeat this sequence three times and then let go of all of the balloons to symbolize that Christ has risen. Everybody on the mountain sees it. On Christmas Eve we hold outdoor candlelight services at one ski area and indoor candlelight services at another. We've held these in restaurants, bars, or meeting rooms.

What do we use as resources for devotions? Anytime I hear a good sermon you can be sure that I am taking notes and will condense it into a ski sermon. Illustrations are a must in a ski sermon. You have a short period of time to get the message across.

Besides ski worship services the following ideas have been successful: emergency chaplaincy services; Bible studies for employees; special event worship services; skiing before and after services and helping those who have fallen; chair lift conversations; ministry to the ski patrol or consider becoming a ski patrol person yourself. If you can only do Christmas and Easter services the first year you are making a good start.

Encourage those who do make use of the services to take the time to write to the ski management and let them know they appreciated the service. Or have them stop by the management office on their way off the mountain. This has tremendous public relations value with the ski areas. The management likes to feel like they are a part of something good.

You may want to ask the people who do attend how they heard about the service. Did they see a sign, hear an announcement, or see it in the trail map? This will help you know which method of publicity is the most effective. You would be welcome to come to Tahoe and see how we do ski services. We hold a class in resort ministry each year the week before Easter. I am excited about the ski ministry programs that could be developed in other areas. If we can be of further help to you, please contact us at Tahoe. May God richly bless you as you serve Him through this ministry.

Adapted from an article by Debbie Wohler in the 1993 National Resort Ministries Conference notebook. Used by permission.