



What is an Onramp?

An onramp is the transition point in which a new church moves from random acts of kindness and outreach to a clear direction in service. The onramp is important because it represents a clear point of direction (leaders know where they are going), a service focus that will be sustained and grow, and an important point for partners, volunteers and leaders to “get on on the bus” as this ministry builds service momentum. The onramp retains some of the simplicity and easy participation of the random service approach (anyone can cook hotdogs), but it is intentionally pointed at longer term direction and service that can be sustained in the community over time.

Onramp Principles

Simple Lane to Somewhere Principle: An onramp doesn't look fancy. You can't even see the multiple lanes of the freeway filled with big rigs and fast cars. It is a humble place that is based on quite a simple concept: A single lane in which you speed up. Onramps represent simple service like random acts of kindness, but they are very different because of their purpose and how they are connected to the fast lane.

How does your service onramp take the simplicity of random service and create a focus that can lead somewhere?

Road Trip Principle: An onramp provides a place where “people get in the car together” and have the opportunity to build relationships. This applies to leaders and team members as well as community members who are being served. All experience the opportunity to build relationships because they are together enough to allow trust to grow and barriers begin to dissolve. If the activity doesn't create repeated relationship opportunities, in which people who are *not looking for church* get to spend time with serving Christians, it is not an onramp, it is either marketing or outreach. The onramp activity should “beckon” and “call” people to join in, either as repeated recipients of service, or as service volunteers.

How does your service intentionally place people next to each other in a *repeated or extended fashion* so that relationships can grow?

Hitchhiker Principle: In the DC area, all parking areas have what is known as a “slug” lane. This is the place where commuters can pick up an extra person to allow them to enter the car pool lane. People wait in line to ride in the back seat of a car that will be going on the onramp and then the freeway. All good onramps have a lane like this—an intentional place where people and volunteers can join in. These activities are relationally connecting, and they foster an atmosphere in which people can build relationships because they are together. The activity of the onramp *is designed* on purpose to offer a “free ride”, to take people who are stuck somewhere that they could not go on their own. The onramp should take them to new levels of service, new friendships and trust and new opportunities to become a leader. Without this feature, the activity is not an onramp, it is simply another random road leading to nowhere.



How does your service offer an intentional place to get on and ride? Do both volunteers and community members know how to join in? Does life change occur as a result of this “ride”?

Lead Foot Principle: The onramp is the place where you speed up. The onramp for a new church should exhibit this quality—increasing energy, interest, gathering speed through leaders and volunteers joining in, stories of excitement and impact. You will know that you are on an onramp when the speed is increasing and momentum is growing. Look for this quality in your service. But don’t try this on a residential street. Increasing speed can be dangerous when there is nowhere to go—only allow real speed to build on an onramp, lest the people in your car find themselves in a very sudden and dangerous stop. We see this when churches over “sell” the impact of block parties or other community events. People are really expecting something to happen. If you are going to build momentum, make sure that it is on an onramp that goes somewhere, otherwise you will create a lack of trust the next time you start to speed up. Onramps are a safe place to speed up, and we should expect to see momentum grow if we are on an service onramp. Be careful about momentum until you are on the onramp, and put the pedal to the medal when you get there.

Do you see momentum growing in your service? Does the service lead somewhere so that it is safe to speed up?

Don’t Do a U-Turn on the Onramp Principle: Be careful that your service really offers what you advertise. If people are coming to you for nutrition or food help—be credible and effective in offering food help. Service based ministry is not a “bait and switch” or “scalp gathering” approach to evangelism. You should build relationships and trust around the service focus that you have chosen. If they are coming for food help then you can build on that in the areas of nutrition, cooking, budgeting or something that is related. You should not take them up the onramp and suddenly turn left from service to a religious encounter group. Its not honest nor is it effective to hang out a carrot of service help and then switch to something totally unrelated.

How does your service really deliver on the kind of help it promises?

The Permanent Onramp Principle: Even when our first vehicle has left the onramp is safely on the freeway, we will keep the onramp open permanently. We will always need what the onramp offers, a place to get on, a place to raise up leaders and build our momentum. Even when we are offering more complicated programs, we will keep the simple entry point so that we can continually recruit volunteers and engage people.

How will you keep a simple entry point of service open permanently?



Roadmap Principle: The leader sees ahead and knows where the onramp will take the church. You should intentionally select an onramp (a service focus and direction), based upon how it fits with the direction of the church and the needs of the people. Onramps and freeways are not good places for exploratory driving (you know that couple slowly driving down the street and looking at the houses one by one). By definition an onramp has directionality—it goes somewhere. Once you are up to speed you are intending to sustain this service, grow it and drive it for some long period of time. The needs assessment and your sense of calling should inform this selection.

How does your service direction represent an intentional and long term choice?

Gas in the Tank Principle: Since you are planning to drive for a while and run your service at high speed, you are going to need fuel. Random driving around doesn't require as much concern for gas in the tank, because it is short-term and we can stop at a station if we need gas. Freeway driving requires greater advance thought. We have to intentionally plan for the people and financial resources to operate service.

How are you planning to sustain the service that you are starting?

Milemarker Principle: I had the privilege of visiting Alaska for a month when my children were younger. Our hosts presented us with a copy of a book entitled, "Milemarkers" which detailed every stop along the roads across the state. If we are in fact building momentum and going somewhere, then we should be able to detect forward motion. At first this is slow, because the car isn't going that quickly yet, but as we build momentum the milemarkers and the other sites move by more quickly. If we are truly moving people forward through service then we should be able to see lives changing. The lives of leaders, volunteers and those we serve. One sure way to know you are moving is to observe the changes that you see around you. Program activity without life change is not ministry. Take note of the first milemarker that passes as an important moment in the course up the onramp.

Is your service producing life change? Have you seen a ministry milemarker go by?

The Story of Charles: Coffee and Coats.

Charles was a drug addict who lived in a notorious project in a city in central California. He spent his days trying to steal or work for enough money to feed his habit. He had no real family to speak of, except some brothers who were addicted or in jail. A local ministry decided to establish an onramp ministry in this apartment complex. They didn't just show up once, but began visiting this complex each week with coffee, donuts and whatever other things they could give away. He would come by, with a suspicious look and jumpy reactions, looking for a narc or some kind of trick in this service. But the coffee and donuts and greetings kept coming his way.

Ministry Onramps- Principles



This was a good ministry onramp because it fostered volunteerism from among church members who helped and offered recreation for children, some just visited with residents over free coffee and donuts. It was simple, only requiring a soccer ball, a coffee table and a box of donuts with an igloo of coffee. It was highly relational, since the entire program consisted of playing with kids or visiting over coffee. What made it effective was the repetition that built trust and the leadership that modeled caring relationships. Charles made it known that he preferred hot chocolate to coffee, and a new menu item was added.

Charles wasn't looking for a church. In fact, while he was hungry and enjoyed the donuts, he thought these people were strange. Week after week, the people set up their coffee table and offered free coffee and donuts (and hot chocolate). When it grew cold, they collected coats and brought them along. Charles needed and took a coat and stayed a little longer for hot chocolate.

This onramp lead somewhere—its direction was based in a specific locality and responses to specific needs of people living there rather than being thematic. Not only for Charles who grew to trust these people, but for all the residents of this complex. The church began offering children's recreation and puppet presentations each week to go along with the coffee and held some bar-b-cues on the site. A Friday night music venue was opened nearby creating another connection place for these folks. And it worked. Not only did the ministry build a committed group of volunteers and leaders, but men, women and children came to trust these volunteers who personally assisted them in coming to faith, rebuilding their lives, finding jobs and better places to lives. Dozens of families were changed forever.

Charles married another new convert with two children and made a home in a house that he bought. He got a job in construction that provided a good income. His fellowship in the church was warm.

This was a service onramp that was simple, relationally focused, consistent and lead somewhere. It produced life change and growth among believers and participants alike. Milemarkers passed: compassion among volunteers, growing trust with residents, addition of hot chocolate to the menu, people coming to a transforming faith in Christ.