

BELONGING TO A CHURCH MADE EASY

Just being together will do

Some Sunday mornings the last thing I want to do is go to church. I'm feeling grumpy or just plain worn out, so the thought of having to dress up, be cheerful and sing hymns with high notes I can't reach, makes a slow morning at home a lot more inviting.

But I know if I drag my tattered self to the service, good things happen. The conversations may not be all that deep and the sermon may not relate much to what's going on in my life, but the simple act of being together with fellow Christians has a marvellous and miraculous way of lifting the spirits. I can enter the door an old grump and leave a different man.

I'm glad I belong to a church, then.

But it's not that way for a friend of mine, who finds it difficult belonging to a church because churches have such strict requirements. His wife's church, for instance, expects all its members to tithe their income, give their all to church growth and believe that non-Christian children go to Hell if they die, all of which my friend has trouble with. And then there are the prayer groups, the men's breakfast meetings, the endless programs on evangelism and all the other stuff that members in good standing are expected to attend and do. It's an enormous package he will have to take on, a huge machine in which he must become a compliant cog.

He can't belong to a church like that because he knows if he signs up as a member the church will rule his life.

On the other hand, he has several strict rules and requirements of his own, too. He's not going to join a church that doesn't comply with his personal preferences and beliefs, either. They'd better not wave their arms during hymns, for instance, or sing hymns that repeat verses over and over again. He wants a church with proper structure, but not so much structure that there's no room for discussion or for the Holy Spirit to guide. Oh yes, he has his demands, too!

So, here we have churches and believers, each with their trenches dug, both unmoving in their expectations of each other.

Is this why believing Christians are having difficulty belonging to churches, then? Is it because churches are saying in effect, "If you join us, you'd better do what we do," and Christians are replying with, "Is that so? Well, I won't be joining you anyway if you don't do what I like."

Is there a solution?

Yes. I see it clearly in one Christian couple I know who happily attend and serve in two different denominations without any difficulty whatsoever. And the reason is so simple, too: there are no expectations from either side. The churches don't expect the couple to comply with every denominational identity tag, and the couple don't expect the churches to comply with every personal preference.

And why don't they? Because they're all operating on the premise that when people are meeting in Christ's name, things like where and how they meet are irrelevant. Jesus can feed his sheep wherever. It enables both sides to relax, and it certainly makes belonging easier.

There is a risk involved, of course. A pastor can get himself in hot water for not enforcing his church's entire denominational package, and the couple might be frowned upon by their home church for attending another church with questionable beliefs.

And why is that? Because it's still so important to protect and promote one's own denomination as the best package out there. It's a dinosaur that won't die.

But I've noticed changes happening. I pastor 8 churches, most of which began in the old dinosaur mode, but people are finding ways round the old girl.

How? By removing expectations. No one is demanding things be done a certain way for church to be church, no one is pushing his or her own preferences as the only proper way to worship, and no one is sulking or making obvious hints that they wish things were different. No one's pushing the all the latest evangelical fads and programs, either, nor are they having to tippy-toe round members stuck in traditions long gone. They've escaped all that and they are at peace with what they've got. They are churches at rest. It's not perfect, far from it, but it's better than what they had, and it certainly makes church more inviting to others. They've found a way round the dinosaur.

So, how did they manage it?

Well, the answer I hear most from people in these churches is that Jesus made a promise, that he'd be with any group of people meeting in his name, even if it's only a gathering of two or three. The only essential for belonging is the simple act of being together with fellow Christians because that's all it takes for Jesus to be there with them.

And it's that startlingly simple thought that gets them up after a rough week to go to church. The church may not be all they'd like church to be but they naturally presume Jesus will be good to his promise, so good things will happen. Jesus is brilliant at feeding his sheep, even on pasture that's sparse and patchy.

I'm realizing, therefore, that there's no best way for sheep to worship, nor is there only one set of beliefs and practices that wins trophies for the best-fed sheep.

I'm learning that sheep can be just as well fed in a formal service as an informal one, and the quality of feeding doesn't suffer if we meet in a home rather than a church. I watch sheep at rest and content who don't meet together every week, don't include hymns in their service and don't follow any set routine.

But since when were any of those things required anyway?

They weren't required by Jesus.

He doesn't require much at all, in fact. Christians just being together will do. Formal or informal, it doesn't matter to him. He makes belonging easy!