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## A New Church Home

5 questions to ask when looking for a place where you belong.

by Julie-Allyson Ieron

Several years ago, everything at our home church changed. The first sign of trouble was when the chairman of the elder board resigned and left the church. Then our pastor resigned. The search committee selected a new pastor, but not only did his sermon delivery differ from our previous pastor (a matter of taste), he also differed theologically on several key points.

After praying about it for three months, my family and I felt prompted to move on. So we began our long, sometimes tiresome search for a new church home.

According to the Barna Research Group, we aren't alone. One in seven people will look for a new church this year. In case you're among that one in seven, here are five important things we learned are critical to a search process.

### 1. Does This Church Preach the Right Message?

In Acts, the New Testament church was described as a group who "joined with the other believers in regular attendance at the apostles' teaching sessions and at the Communion services and prayer meetings" (2:42, TLB). And the apostle Paul encouraged his young protégé Timothy simply to "preach the word."

This mandate may sound like a given, but some preachers strive to make the gospel more appealing by watering down its message. According to pastor/church-growth consultant Richard Krejcir, "A healthy church will never sacrifice the integrity of the Bible or neuter its message." So first look for a place where truth is preached from the Bible, where God's Word is seen as living, relevant, changeless, and inerrant, rather than just a "good book" filled with advice on how to be a more loving, moral person. Look for a place you can invite friends to and feel confident they'll hear the gospel truth directly from Scripture, a place where difficult passages as well as straightforward ones are preached with clarity.

You can tell if a church preaches the right message:

- By carefully listening to the pastor's sermon. Does he continually paraphrase Scripture, or use direct quotes from God's Word?
- By following along and taking note of all Bible references he quotes.
- By revisiting those passages at home to be sure he's handling the intent of the verses accurately.

### 2. Is This Church a Caring Community?

We all want a church home where we feel welcomed, a place to belong. For example, my friend Gail is a 40-year-old single who moved cross-country three years ago because of a job transfer. Gail looks to

church as her main source of friendship and nurture. About the church she found when she relocated, Gail says, "I really love it! People show they care about me through asking me to get involved in projects."

My family and I had begun trying out yet another new church just a few weeks before my mom and I arrived at the emergency-room entrance at 5 a.m. to see my dad rolled into the cardiac surgical unit. We held his hands for a moment, then had to let go as he made the solitary journey toward the surgery that either would save his life or end it. We prayed. We watched the second hand of the waiting-room clock make its methodical sweep. We barely spoke.

Finally, at 12:50 p.m., a stone-faced waiting-room attendant ushered us into a private room to await the surgeon's report. My mother and I stared down at the vacant hall until a glowing face peered around the corner, the face of Ted Olsen, the visitation pastor from the church we'd been visiting. He squeezed our hands and prayed with us as we awaited word about Dad. We knew that a church whose pastor genuinely cared for newcomers as much as for its faithful members was a strong contender in our search.

You can tell if a church is welcoming:

- When people in the seats around you introduce themselves before or after the services.
- When the pastor or a visitation team offers to visit you.
- When people your age or stage of life invite you to participate in events.
- When the church meets special needs through ministry opportunities such as divorce- and grief-recovery groups, 12-step programs, seeker studies, or other opportunities to integrate unchurched groups into the community.

### 3. Does This Church Provide Meaningful Worship?

Worship is a matter of taste; and a major divider among contemporary churchgoers: Do you like high church? Old-time hymns? Gospel songs? Worship choruses? With or without percussion, organ, or live orchestra? Personally, I like blended worship music; the great and meaty hymns melded with catchy and haunting worship tunes. But that's just me. My friend Lydia (not her real name) is just the opposite. To her, worship isn't worship without a high-church sound and feel.

But for all our style preferences, in the end it's the message in the music that counts. In itself, exciting music doesn't necessarily draw us into God's presence any more than majestic or brooding music does. Worship isn't simply about meeting a style preference or eliciting a purely emotional response within the worshiper; its purpose is to focus on and glorify God.

You can tell the worship style is right for you:

- When the worship doesn't feel forced.
- When your mind and heart are engaged during a service.
- When you feel welcome to participate in a way that makes you feel comfortable.
- When the tone focuses on who God is rather than on human talents and personalities.

#### 4. Is the Church's Location Convenient?

For 35 years, my friend Barb attended the small family church where her parents were married and where she was dedicated as a baby, baptized as a teenager, and married as a 30something. For decades Barb's clear soprano voice could be heard soaring above the choir as part of the praise team. She envisioned her son, Noah, growing up in the same church, alongside cousins, grandparents, and lifelong friends.

But urban sprawl intervened, causing Barb's young family to move to a home 40 miles from the church. While it's difficult to make the break, Barb readily admits, "As Noah gets older and develops relationships with other children, we want him to have Christian friends in our community. We'd like him to go to school with some of the same kids with whom he attends Pioneer Club at church."

Barb's church search relates to the real-estate principle of "location, location, location." She's looking for a place closer to home where she can attend daytime Bible study with other young moms, where Noah can make friends, and where her husband, Matt, can find intellectual challenge and a place of service.

Your church needs to be located at a distance that's convenient enough for you to feel you have the opportunity to get plugged in, to be an active member rather than just an attendee.

You can tell when a church's location is convenient enough:

- When your children see some of the church children at their school.
- When driving to an evening or midweek event doesn't leave you exhausted (or wishing you'd stayed home).
- When a church small-group meeting is located in your neighborhood or community.

#### 5. Can You Plug into This Church's Serving Opportunities?

God gives you gifts and talents for use in building his church. But when you make a church change, you may be in temporary limbo, waiting and watching for opportunities to serve your new community.

For example, my friend Barb says that besides missing the family atmosphere of the church where she grew up, she'll miss her participation in its music ministry. While she admits it will take time to find her niche in her new church family; time she'll spend nurturing her young son, Noah, and deepening her faith through participation in the women's Bible-study group; she's confident she'll once again find areas in which to be an integral part of her new church home.

Sometimes it takes initiative from the pastoral or ministry staff to help a newcomer fit into ministries. My single friend Gail credits her new church's pastor for helping her become a true serving part of the church. "Currently I'm involved in a weekly Bible study," says Gail. "This is a direct result of my minister specifically e-mailing me and having lunch with me to discuss the Bible study."

You can tell a church has opportunities for you to serve:

- When reading the bulletin you observe ministries listed that fit your spiritual gifts and interests.
- When you contact a ministry leader about your interest to serve and receive a concrete, welcoming invitation to participate.

- When a ministry leader actually initiates contact with you to invite you to participate in a new or ongoing ministry of the church.

Searching for a new church never is easy. But despite the hurdles you'll leap over in the process, if you pour a great deal of prayer into each step and each visit you make, you can find a place to call home.

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