

Church Life – 2

By Pastor Alan Utting



'The church is not a place you go to, it's a family you belong to.' Anonymous

Some of my friends have grown weary of attending church and have even said they need a break from it. Have you ever felt that way too? The danger is that taking a break can easily turn into dropping out altogether, and before long, we may begin to drift away, sometimes even losing our children to the world in the process.

The apostle Paul recognized the value of the local church and, following his conversion, devoted his efforts to establishing congregations throughout Asia Minor. Despite encountering challenges such as misunderstanding, physical harm, and betrayal, he remained committed to his mission in the face of strong opposition to establishing churches (2 Corinthians 4:7-12).

Despite its imperfections, the early church over time ultimately changed the Roman Empire. Today, churches in communities worldwide continue to make positive impacts. Such transformation occurs when individuals engage with God and dedicate themselves to serving others. For these reasons, among others, I hold the church in high regard.

Biblical Perspective

Jesus used the word 'church' only in Matthew 16:18 and 18:17, referring to the church as the 'called out' ones. Acts chapter 2 records the establishment of the church.

Paul develops the understanding of the church in his epistles. Jesus died for the individual, but Paul emphasises that He died for the collective group of believers known as the church.

'Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless' (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Observations - cautions

1. As a pastor I made it a rule never to speak negatively about the church in front of our children as they were growing up. After all, why would they want to attend church if they heard us criticising it? Children often mirror their parents' attitudes.
2. It is far better to leave a local church and join another than to stay while harbouring strong negative feelings. The way a person leaves one church often influences how they settle into the next. I deeply admire those who choose to not gossip or speak negatively about their past experiences in joining another church.
3. When there is clear evidence of spiritual abuse or leadership without accountability, and no willingness to change or grow, it is wise to move on. However, we must also be careful that people are not leaving simply because they are not getting their own way.
4. If you are in a leadership position and individuals choose to depart, it is important not to take their decisions personally or attempt to prevent them from

leaving. When appropriate, acknowledge their contributions and offer public well wishes upon their departure. Over time, their future endeavours may contribute to the broader impact of your ministry.

5. When churches continue for years with declining attendance, there are times when it may be best for them to close, at least temporarily. In time, that same church may be revived with new wineskins (Matthew 9:16–17) and experience renewed success.
6. When concerns about the local church appear justified, our response should be to pray and even fast asking God to bring renewal, instead of joining in with further criticism.
7. Even after retiring from official ministry roles, we should continue to support current leaders. It's common to feel insignificant after stepping down. One pastor I know even managed nine retired pastors in his congregation. What a challenge! The key for those no longer active is to show grace to those still serving.

Observations – well being

1. Although Scripture does not specifically refer to the church as the 'bride of Christ,' the concept is implied in passages such as Matthew 25:1–13, 2 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5:21–27, and Revelation 19:7–8 and 21:1–2. I have never seen an unattractive bride on her wedding day; likewise, God envisions His bride as potentially radiant and full of beauty.
2. The church exists for more than just meeting our personal needs. Get involved in helping others and, when appropriate share your faith and you will thrive.
3. Small groups remain an efficient means to facilitate worship, Bible study, fellowship, and outreach (Acts 2:43–47). Additionally, they support the directive to gather together regularly as outlined in Hebrews 10:24–25.
4. Church leaders face unique pressures and appreciate support through friendship and prayer. If you have concerns, discuss them respectfully in person after prayer, rather than spreading negativity or writing letters. Discussing it over coffee is a useful approach. If needed, bring someone calm to help ensure a fair conversation. Remember, anger is rarely truly righteous; it's best to approach issues with love and forgiveness, as Jesus did.
5. Learn to submit to godly leadership that is also accountable to the congregation. When this balance is in place, it provides a powerful environment for the Holy Spirit to move and work.
6. Churches differ in worship styles, outreach, and teaching focus. Stay open and respectful toward various approaches—both small and large churches have value.
7. Dissatisfaction within the church highlights the importance of seeking 'God's glory' afresh. Historically, the church has remained the most remarkable instrument, empowered by the Spirit, for bringing about transformation of societies for good.

Resources

Tim Keller, *Center Church*

N. T. Anderson and C. Mylander, *Extreme Church Makeover*