

**T**he usher in his suit and tie smiled and (being slightly hard of hearing) boomed a greeting into the cold, cavernous narthex.

“You forgot to set your clocks ahead, right?”

Immediately the disjointed pieces of that chaotic Sunday morning fell into place. The full parking lot, the prevailing hush—yes, my husband and I were an hour late for church, which meant we had arrived just in time for the sermon conclusion and the last amen. Wearing our awkwardness like ill-fitting choir robes, we exited as discretely as two people wearing dress shoes can manage in an echoing church entryway. We drove in silence across town to our tiny apartment on Middle Street, an address that had become an accurate and stinging summary of our entire lives in that season.


A career change for my husband had put our workplaces over two hours apart, but we’d cheerfully split the difference and settled in neutral territory exactly halfway between, telling ourselves it was temporary and a good test of our independence within this new marriage of ours. No friends, no family, no church ties anchored us in this new home base, but we were optimistic, so . . . let the church hunt begin!

Throughout that autumn and winter, we visited a dizzying array of Sunday morning worship services. We sat on cushioned pews and on folding chairs. We sang ’90s era praise choruses and traditional anthems from tattered hymnals. We visited churches where we came and went unnoticed and unwelcomed, and we cringed under the scrutiny of probing questions about our “intentions” and hints that it was time for us to join and get busy.

By the time of our early spring visit to The Church of the Booming Narthex, we had worn ourselves thin. More and more often, we would open our eyes on Sunday morning and say, “Let’s go visit your folks this weekend.” We wanted to worship in a place that felt like home, but the process seemed endless and hopeless.

## **Should In-Person Church Be Optional?**

In post-pandemic America, church has become even more optional than it was before the possibility of online worship. Gone are the days when we donned hats and gloves and persevered through rain, sleet, snow, and perfect beach days to make it to



church *every* Sunday! The pajamas-on-the-couch option is nearly irresistible, and the prospect of loading the minivan and hauling the family to church may seem unnecessary when you can take in a sermon and sing a few praise choruses remotely.

## The Tactic of Our Enemy

What are we missing out on if we choose to stay home? What difference does it make in our lives if we decide to become permanent worshipers from our living rooms? Hebrews 10:25 highlights the most important argument for “not forsaking the assembling of [ourselves] together,” and it’s found in the word *together*. It’s like the tactics of cultists and traffickers in their efforts to target victims. They use isolation, separating their prey from any support system, knowing full well that their nefarious arguments and influence will seem stronger in the absence of other voices.

Satan, our enemy, would like nothing more than to encourage believers to stop gathering. In a context of isolation, the sound of our own voices and our favorite online echo chambers can become so loud that we lose our Biblical moorings. By contrast, gathering in person ensures that we will occasionally be inconvenienced or even offended by people from outside our tribe. We may be asked to serve in ways that stretch us and to engage in conversations requiring fervent prayer for insight and wisdom. There’s absolutely no question that the church as a representative of Christ’s Body has flaws, but the reality is that we achieve much more for Christ when we work in concert with our fallen, failing, and sometimes feckless brothers and sisters.

## Come Back Home!

Fast forward to the present moment, and my own season of uprooted-ness reads like a story out of someone else’s life. The past twenty years of joyful ministry and membership with a loving church family could easily put me in the judgment seat over my own tale of a young, newly married couple playing “church roulette” for over a year. Thankfully, the memory of Middle Street living has endured, and it keeps me from wagging my boney church-lady finger.

Yes, we probably were looking for the “perfect church,” and yes, we had commitment issues, but even in those pre-Google, search-the-Yellow-Pages days, there was nothing simple about

cold-canvassing a city and the surrounding area for a friendly and compatible church. It's far too easy to get caught in a never-ending research phase or to cave in to the pressure to hurry up and settle. I wish we had made a list of "nonnegotiables" and had been more aware of the masterful way God uses imperfect people and places in His process of conforming us toward the perfect image of His Son.

Those endless months of Sunday morning upheaval were foundational to my desire today to be the one who extends the welcome, however imperfectly. Scribbling names in my planner when I meet new people at church *sometimes* helps me to remember them, but I still might greet repeat visitors as if they were new. (No one has ever complained.) I want to pay attention, be available, respect boundaries, and most of all, I never want to forget what it felt like to be rootless.

We really do need each other as we live out "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). Both Christians who are living in the on-ramp toward faithful church attendance and those who are standing along the way cheering them forward are in a unique position to put the beauty and uniqueness of God's love on display. Finding community can be a long and challenging process, but the rewards are worth the wait.

Robert Frost wrote a poem in which he calls home "the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." Because I have been "taken in" so faithfully, it's now a joy to persevere in the work of making my own church home feel like home to others. Community is the sandpaper by which we find ourselves continually being remade and reformed, for the truth of the gospel is best understood in terms of our yearning to belong, our struggle with homesickness, and the ache of all our longings for home. ■

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