

Don't Live in Isolation—You Need a Loving Church Family

My wife and I have been visiting different churches in the past several months. We are in search of a place to call home. This isn't an easy process for a traveling minister like me. I'm gone many weekends, so I can't commit to certain duties at a local church, and I don't feel as connected as those who are there every week.

But I need a place to belong, where I can hear God's Word, be refreshed in worship and experience the support of a spiritual family. During our recent journey, we've visited all kinds of churches—Baptist and Baptistical, charismatic and evangelical, denominational and non-denominational. We've been in black, white and blended churches; we've attended churches with older congregations as well as a church with lots of excited teens who crowd the altar every week.

What I've seen during our "spiritual tour" of Troup County, Georgia, has encouraged me so much. I've experienced God's family in all of its diversity, with all of its quirks and warts and weaknesses. I'm certainly not looking for a "perfect" church. (And I know if there were such a thing, it wouldn't remain perfect once I joined it.)

What thrills me is that, even though churches aren't perfect, God has placed His special people everywhere. No matter where I go all over the United States, there are faithful congregations providing a witness of Jesus Christ. They are winning new converts, discipling new and seasoned believers, feeding the homeless, running women's shelters, giving out lunches and bookbags at local schools, visiting nursing homes, evangelizing college campuses, caring for prisoners, providing counseling services and sending teams on foreign mission fields.

Many American churches today have big struggles. We can't meet our budgets, we can't recruit enough volunteers to care for kids, we want to grow but we watch people leave and never come back. Some of our leaders struggle with depression or burnout. And often our witness is tainted by our hypocrisy. Yet God still dwells in the midst of His flawed people, in good times and bad.

I hear a lot of complaining today about church. Some people have even given up on it. People complain about music styles, music volume, sermon length, meeting times or an unpopular decision the pastor made. Or sometimes people just get offended at another church member and storm out. Since the global church began 2,000 years ago, we've been tossed and battered by theological divisions, heresies, immature leadership, strife, scandal, gossip and—maybe the worst problem—spiritual complacency that has quenched the fire of the Holy Spirit.

And yet the church survives. With all of its problems, the global church has never been as big as it is today. The gates of hell have not prevailed against us. Today I'm so thankful that Jesus dwells among His people, and He speaks to us when we gather, whether we meet in a 5,000-seat megachurch, a traditional building with pews, a converted warehouse, a storefront, a movie theater or a home with seating for only a dozen worshippers.

Psalm 84:1-2a (NASB) says, "How lovely are your dwelling places, O Lord of hosts! My soul longed and even yearned for the courts of the Lord." You won't yearn for God's house if you don't first realize how lovely it is. Don't focus on the problems or nitpick about things you want to change. Instead, embrace the people who provide your spiritual support network. They are a gift from God.

Psalm 122:1 says, "I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'" Are you glad when you go to

church? If we're honest, many of us dread Sunday mornings. We have a beef with the pastor. We have unresolved disagreements with a brother. Or we are just angry and frustrated because we can't have our way. No wonder so many of us have pulled away from fellowship.

In this challenging season of coronavirus panic, we are being told to keep our distance from people, stay away from crowds, don't shake hands, avoid travel, use plenty of sanitizer and live in cautious isolation. I'm not saying you shouldn't use wisdom to avoid contagion. But those advisories have given us a convenient reason to stay away from church. We prefer to live in quarantine.

Please examine your heart. Do you love the church? Do you long for His house? Or have you distanced yourself from God's people? With all of its shortcomings, the local church is God's family. I encourage you to rediscover why God created you for community.