

Finding Your Place in God's Family

It's often difficult to find a healthy church—much less become a healthy part of one. Here's why you should make the effort.

☒ Nearly 10 years ago, while taking care of my aunt's bed and breakfast in Alaska, I met an unforgettable woman named Lynne. As we chatted over freshly baked scones and coffee, I asked her what she did in her free time.

She was a shepherdess.

Intrigued by her response, I began peppering her with all kinds of questions about her flock and quickly began drawing rich spiritual parallels between her descriptions and biblical teachings regarding sheep. I promised myself that one day I'd study this scriptural theme more in-depth.

Last spring, I decided to track Lynne down. Thanks to some help from Google, I located her, reintroduced myself, and garnered an invitation to spend a few days with her and her flock. Our time together became the foundation of *Scouting the Divine: My Search for God in Wine, Wool, and Wild Honey*.

I went on to spend time with a beekeeper in Colorado, a farmer in Nebraska and a vintner in California. Along the way, I opened the Scriptures, asking each person how he read various passages, not as a theologian, but in light of what he did every day.

Their answers illuminated passages of the Bible in a whole new way and deepened my relationship with God. I learned so much! One of the most treasured lessons I took away from my time with the shepherdess was just how much I need to be part of a community of believers.

People grow in their relationships with God in a myriad of ways. For me, reading the Bible, praying and connecting to God through spiritual disciplines reignites my faith and renews my hope in the one who was, is, and forever will be. Though church* definitely played a role in my spiritual formation—especially during my early years—my desire to attend a local church waned over time.

My reticence was exacerbated by the transient nature of my life, which included five major moves during the last 10 years. With each new city, finding a church became increasingly difficult. Like dating, searching for a place to worship can be awkward and uncomfortable—especially if you lose your sense of humor.

Even after settling into a home church, I often struggled with the gap between what the church is and what it could be. I wondered why some churches are more concerned with style than substance and marketing than making disciples. I firmly believe that small groups are good, but more often than not I've found myself in gatherings that lack depth, real connection or a willingness to put faith into action.

As a result, my own desire to attend church decreased until I began to wonder, *Why do I go at all?* I tried to console myself with the fact that even Jesus went to church. Technically it was the temple, and He didn't always like what He saw when He got there, but nevertheless, He went.

The Gathering of Believers

Standing in a muddy Oregon field with her flock, Lynne unknowingly reminded me of some of the most basic reasons why the gathering together of believers is essential. As I watched the woolly creatures graze, she explained that sheep are defenseless. They don't have sharp teeth or pointed hooves. Without protective features, their only defense is to flock together. That's why whenever a predator is nearby, a flock

will gather closely.

“What happens to a sheep that wanders off on its own?” I asked.

Lynne explained that those that leave the flock are the ones that get picked off by predators, become infected by parasites or overindulge in grass until they become ill. It’s only within a flock—under the watchful eye of a good shepherd—that the sheep are protected and enjoy a healthy life.

I couldn’t help but see the parallels between a flock and the church. From its foundation, Christianity has never been about isolation. In Genesis, we read the simple but profound observation that it is “not good” for man to be alone. This is the first time in Scripture that something is labeled “not good,” and it has to do with the relationship between a man and a woman. Yet I wonder if the statement reflects a basic life principle: We need one another.

Throughout the Old Testament, spiritual leaders are consistently given encouragement in the form of friends, followers and wingmen. Moses and Aaron, David and Jonathan, Elijah and Elisha, Naomi and Ruth—just to name a few. Jesus’ first act in ministry is to call 12 followers who will form a band of spiritual brothers. When the church is birthed in Acts, the Spirit descends on people who are gathered together.

What do these people do after the tongues of fire (see Acts 2:3) fade? They keep gathering together. They teach the story of God. They sing. They share meals. They pray. They spend time together. Because of their common love for God, who is described as the Good Shepherd, they can’t help but form a close-knit community (see Acts 2:42).

Reflecting on these passages, I’m always intrigued by how little Scripture tells us about what the believers actually do when they’re together. Sure, there’s music, encouraging, teaching and eating, but what about the format? The length?

The location? The order? The time of day? The specific elements of the gathering seem far less important than *actually* gathering.

Unlike the sheep in Lynne's upper field, something far beyond safety happens when followers of Jesus come together. Throughout the New Testament, we are reminded of the things God works in and through us as we live in community.

Colossians 3:1-17 challenges us individually and corporately to live out our days in a way that is pleasing to God. As the people of God, holy and wholly loved, we are to clothe ourselves with gentleness and patience, forgiving others (and ourselves) at every turn, overflowing with love and thankfulness. The apostle Paul writes, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (vv. 15-17, NIV).

In the company of fellow believers, our own sinful nature, petty grievances and selfish desires are exposed, not so that we become divided and bitter, but so that we may be set free, redeemed and transformed into all God has called and created us to be. The church becomes the formative foundation where we learn to live out the ministry of reconciliation (see 2 Cor. 5:18).

The church has never been about what we can *get out* of it as much as what we can *give through* it. As members of the body, we have the opportunity to grow together and learn how to function properly with our unique gifts, talents and callings. Along the way, we garner strength for our own faith journeys and may even find that the gathering of Christians—the church—and this adventure of following Jesus is not only fun but also contagious! Our love and unity become an invitation for the world to know Christ (see John 17:21).

I have a hard time arguing with those who say the church is

broken, messed up, inefficient, dysfunctional. They're right. But despite all these weaknesses, God has chosen to put His name on it. He has chosen the church as His bride. She may have frizzy hair, smeared makeup and holes in her dress, but in the end she is still the bride of Christ. Knowing that makes me want to love her, defend her and serve her.

Among the Flock

As we walked among the fields, Lynne explained that rivalries exist among the sheep. Ewes who have just given birth tend to be a possessive bunch. Rams are often at odds with each other—sometimes even dueling each other to death if they are outside the presence of the shepherd.

Watching the flock interact reminded me that sometimes it's tough to stick together in a confined area. The sheep behind you will race you to the greenest grass. The sheep in front of you may have gas (or worse).

Within a flock, sheep slow each other down, step on each other's hooves and trip each other. Being in a flock has never been easy for sheep, but it's how they were designed to live and flourish.

In the same way, being in a church isn't easy for many people—including me. The church, by nature, is inherently flawed. But it's in this place that I encounter God in unexpected ways. Not only do I experience acceptance, forgiveness, grace, love and compassion from fellow believers, but also I am given the opportunity to extend them to others.

Within the church, I'm beginning to appreciate many of the intangibles that emerge in the process of living everyday life together—learning to work through ups and downs, disagreements and tensions, innovations and failures. As we pursue God through life's potpourri of tragedies and triumphs, we learn to love more deeply and find ourselves becoming a little bit more like Jesus.

The church reminds me of just how much I need people in my life who are different from me. I cannot count the number of times someone has shared with me his testimony about the way God is working in his life and has pushed the boundaries of my understanding and knowledge of God. Or the times someone has challenged my beliefs and encouraged me to dig deeper into knowing what I believe and why I believe it.

The church is one of the central places where the poor have their needs met by the rich and the rich discover how they desperately need the poor. I remember sitting by a slightly tone-deaf single mom who was singing songs of victory with all her might when everything in her life shouted defeat. The sight of her gave my own faith texture and strength.

In church I rediscover that I am not alone on this Christian journey. I'm reminded that I have only a snapshot of the larger story of what God is doing in this generation and the grander story of what He has been doing throughout history.

By adding my voice to the familiar chorus of "Amazing Grace," reciting from the Common Book of Prayer, celebrating the sacraments, or listening to the wisdom of John Wesley and those who have gone before, I partake in the beautiful story God has been unfolding since the beginning of time. And I am reminded that God has not failed us yet—nor will He.

While I taste portions of these truths in my personal time with Christ and the Scriptures, the flavor is never as wondrous as when I experience them in the presence of fellow believers. For these reasons and many more, I recognize that whether or not I like it, I need the church. I can't be all I've been created to be on my own.

I'll see you on Sunday.

Margaret Feinberg () is a popular speaker and the author of

Scouting the Divine: My Search for God in Wine, Wool, and Wild Honey (Zondervan).

** Church is loaded with meaning for many people. For the purpose of this article, I want to clarify that the church has never been a building. I would like to sidestep the discussion of denomination, size or liturgy and focus on the church as the organic yet intentional gathering of believers in whatever form that may take.*