

When the Pandemic Is Over, Don't Stay Disconnected From Church

Churches have been on lockdown for months. COVID-19 forced us to go virtual, and the pandemic has turned pastors into awkward television evangelists who preach to empty auditoriums using smartphones.

Now, more than six months after the shutdown, some congregations are reopening—with masks, social distancing and even temperature checks. Instead of hearing a worship leader say, “Turn to the person next to you and give them a hug!” we have learned to smile and bump elbows—or maybe not. We also have noticed that a large percentage of church members haven't returned.

In August, church growth coach Thom Rainer predicted that between 20-30% of people who attended church before the pandemic will never come back, including 1) the non-committed, 2) those who never joined small groups 3) the “church critics,” 4) cultural Christians and 5) those who already went to church infrequently before the quarantine began.

I was a bit perturbed when I first read Rainer's article. Why wouldn't anybody be excited about going back to church after this painful season of isolation? The truth is many Christians don't see church as essential. And some Christians are nursing grudges against fellow church members. COVID-19 has become an easy excuse to stay home.

I'm not advocating that people return to church if their health is at risk or they don't feel comfortable being around crowds yet. This virus is still a cause for concern. We need to protect each other, especially those in our congregations who are the most vulnerable. But if you or someone you love is

feeling tempted to never go back to church—I offer six reasons why you need to be connected to God’s people instead of living in perpetual isolation.

1. The church is still God’s Plan A. Heaven does not have a Plan B. Jesus is the head of His church (see Col. 1:18) and we are His hands and feet. Jesus announced before He went to the cross: “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). Jesus intends to use the church—even in its weakness—as His primary tool to reach the world with the gospel. To reject the church is to reject God’s ultimate strategy to bring heaven’s kingdom on earth.

2. The Holy Spirit has called us to be together. When we were born again and baptized, the Bible says we were mystically unified with all other born-again believers and connected to each other by the Holy Spirit. The Lord also connects people in local congregations. This connection is holy, and we should never make light of it or damage it. Paul told the Ephesians to “be eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” by being in close fellowship with each other (Eph. 4:3). To reject this union of believers is to dishonor the work of the Spirit.

3. God accomplishes more through His corporate people than through isolated individuals. The Holy Spirit dwells in every Christian believer, and the corporate church makes a much bigger impact than one person does. This is why Jesus told His disciples after He went to the cross that we would do “greater works” than He did on earth (see John 14:12). And because healthy churches can pool resources and organize volunteers, they are able to offer ministry to children, youth, families, singles, the needy and the lost overseas—in a way you could never do while sitting home alone.

4. God’s authority flows through His church, not through “Lone Ranger” Christians. Some people I know who’ve been hurt by

church leaders say they can never submit to another pastor again. Yet God has delegated to certain people the task of building up the church (see Eph. 4:11-12). It's totally acceptable for you to leave an unhealthy church with poor leadership, but you should quickly find a new church where you can be equipped to fulfill your ministry. You can't grow in your faith if you have a "my way or the highway" attitude.

5. It is by living in Christian community that we learn to love and serve. Paul told the Hebrews: "Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but let us exhort one another, especially as you see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10:25). People who live in isolation find it difficult to develop character, and they often get discouraged; those who walk together in close fellowship inspire each other, and they improve each other just as iron sharpens iron.

6. If you leave the church because of hurt or resentment, you make it more difficult to find healing and reconciliation. It might sound spiritual to say you are pulling away from people to focus on God. But the New Testament says your relationship with God is directly related to how you relate to others. People may have hurt you, but God will use people to heal you. Don't let the hurts of the past paint you into a lonely corner. Choose to forgive. Take a risk and keep loving.

Please don't check out of church or give up on God's flawed saints. Even if you stay home until this pandemic is completely over, make a decision now to return to church when the threat has passed. There is a place for you in God's eternal family. {eoa}