

*Confessions of a Church Hopper*

*Advance*, August 1993

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*Abstract:* During one of those times "in between" pastorates, my wife and I had *many* Sundays off. We used this time to visit lots of congregations. After years of pouring our lives into others we needed a season to be replenished ourselves. In the course of our travels we got back in touch with how it feels to be an *outsider* to the church experience. This article passes along those learnings. Losing contact with the newcomer's perspective is fatal to church ministry.

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My family has recently been in transition between pastorates. During these weeks we have had a unique opportunity to visit a number of fellowships as we await our next assignment. I used to think negatively of church hoppers until I became one. Our role reversal, trading pulpit for pew, has given us a firsthand education on how visitors feel about a new church.

The good news about our church sampling experiment is that we found much to like in the assemblies we visited. One preacher tends to experience another's service the way a restaurant critic has a family dinner. Every church seemed to struggle with the same challenges. Nevertheless, they generally featured friendly people, high-quality music, and preaching that spoke to our hearts, regardless of church size or style.

What bothered us was the question that had plagued me while pastoring: if all this great stuff is happening, why aren't more people coming and staying? Some of the answers became clear in a short time, and we learned much about how visitors to our church must have felt.

While we did not have all the reactions listed below on a given Sunday, here is what we have to confess as veteran church hoppers:

- *Our biggest struggle was just getting there.*

A professional minister approaches Sunday morning with the intensity of a matador entering the ring. It is the core activity, the defining moment of his or her week. Ministry reaches the broadest stream of people at these times, and the minister will be evaluated by how well the service goes. I am only as good as last Sunday.

A few weeks of church hopping helped us to see things from the congregation's perspective. While the weekend is the time of peak activity for the preacher, church attendance requires lay-people to get up early in the middle of a 2-day vacation. On Sunday morning the bed seems especially warm, the kids are sure to be cranky, the car fails to start easily, and the coffee in the kitchen smells delicious. It would be so much easier to stay home and watch Christian TV.

As a pastor I had no compunction about asking my people to battle through all of these impediments, spend half of their weekend in church, and then tithe for the privilege. Why? Because the worship service was freighted with so much significance for me that I just assumed it would be the same for them.

We awakened to the fact that just getting to church is quite a challenge and no small sacrifice for the average family-the committed, regular folk. To my chagrin I had to admit that I had always secretly felt that I would be a better church member than most of my parishioners if our roles were reversed. What a shock to realize that I responded to the challenge of just getting there exactly as my former congregation had - by arriving late.

Looking back, I wish I had shown more encouragement and respect for the effort my own people had made to attend our activities. Had I known how much more difficult it all seems when you are not the center of attention, I would have reacted differently and learned more humility a little sooner.

- *Our biggest questions were about the simplest things.*

My training had led me to believe that new people come to a service with burning theological questions or gut-wrenching pain. After all, why else would they show up if they did not need us to straighten out their lives? Surely they were all absorbed by issues like, why does God allow suffering? is man the product of evolution or special creation? or who really did author the book of Hebrews?

As church hoppers, our biggest theological question was "where is the bathroom?" Our most gut-wrenching need was to find out when the service started. While rest room locations were clearly marked (sometimes), the schedule of activities proved to be a rather elusive piece of information. In pursuit of it we found out that many visitors are primarily concerned with the simple mechanics of church attendance (e.g., parking and childcare). They may not have figured out what their questions are supposed to be at this point.

These seemingly basic issues were complicated by a lack of sources for the needed information. Some of the churches we attended did not advertise sufficiently (e.g., yellow pages and newspapers) to catch our attention if we had not been looking for them. Even then the information we got was sometimes incomplete. Most frustrating was calling the church office and getting either no answering machine or one that did not offer the service times. We discovered one church through word of mouth, found out the schedule by repeated long-distance calls, only to almost miss our chance to attend because the sign marking the entrance to the property was so small we missed it on the first pass.

Our many travels showed us that people often operate on incomplete or wrong information, and sometimes we do little to assist them. Of special concern was that we persevered to attend services because we were highly motivated. What of the visitor who is only marginally committed to the venture? If a person is looking for excuses for not making it to church, they are legion.

When pastoring, my work was so important to me that our building seemed the very center of the universe, a city on a hill that cannot be hid. To the uninitiated, however, churches are invisible. A round of church visits proved that unless an assembly acts aggressively to bring itself into a high public profile through advertising, communication, and outreach, would-be visitors may not know it exists. In the end, I was convinced that personal invitation will be the most successful way to bring outsiders in. Our experience would have been completely different had some caring friend served as a guide.

- *Our biggest desire was to be anonymous.*

After a lifetime as a minister's kid and a decade of pastoral ministry, I still found being in a new church a little unnerving. As my wife and I discussed where we wanted to sit, we invariably concluded that the back was the only safe place. The reason was simply that we wanted to enter as unobtrusively as possible (being late helped here) and leave the same way. The back-row strategy seemed ideal for taking in the worship while avoiding other worshipers. The alternative was to sit farther forward, arrive on time, and risk actually having to speak to someone. Of course, smaller auditoriums accentuated this problem because they afford less concealment and fewer avenues of escape.

We sensed in this experience the vast advantage enjoyed by larger churches. Visitors are simply more comfortable in cavernous auditoriums. We also concluded that the conventional theory that newcomers have an unspoken need to be recognized and rewarded (usually with a handsome plastic pen) is simply false. They want to be left alone to observe, defining their own level of participation rather than having the church define it for them.

Fortunately, most of the people we met obliged our desire for anonymity. Though friendly, they seemed to feel as awkward about talking to us as we were in meeting them. Usually neither of us knew what to say after exchanging names and hometowns.

While training my people I had always seen such encounters as failures, but now on the receiving end we realize that new people are often not interested in or prepared for much more than this. A brief, friendly greeting seemed to do just fine.

I had always thought that church hoppers arrived on Sunday with a checklist of criteria for evaluating our ministry. Doubtless some do, but we have stumbled onto another common trait: We wanted to be welcomed but not noticed, reached out to but not touched, warmly received but not required to speak. For example, we were disappointed when there was no usher around to give bulletins to late-comers (visitors love paperwork), yet we were also glad that we could slip into service without having to confront anyone. Seeing a greeter maneuvering toward us for the obligatory "welcome to our church" handshake reminded us of watching a car salesperson seeking us out when visiting a dealership. We wanted to be left alone--but not too much.

We have concluded that many migratory folk are in a double bind, their agendas loaded with conflicting items. They expect things to happen for them magically. The congregations that made us the most comfortable were those that allowed us to have a public experience privately. Only later, after several visits, did we feel like we were ready to get to know someone.

All of this proved to be a relief in an odd way. Perhaps in our outreach to visitors, it was not I who was confused. Maybe we were doing something right, and most of the hoppers were befuddled. This issue made me face the fact that I had been very quick to blame myself for everything and everyone in my ministry. I had taken on too much responsibility and paid the price in guilt. It is refreshing and liberating to see things from a broader, more realistic point of view.

- *Our biggest surprise was that nothing is obvious to a new person.*

Out of necessity we structure congregational life into patterns. Those who have been around awhile forget that what is childishly obvious to them is utterly alien to strangers. As we moved from one Sunday to the next, it became apparent that some of the mild anxiety we felt in each new setting stemmed from uncertainty over what was expected of us. Were we to be seated or to seat ourselves? Were we to hug or just shake hands? Were we to call people "brother" and "sister" or use first names? Were we to dress formally or casually?

Such questions came to a head during the altar service. Since we were seated in the back (the worst seats in the house) going forward for prayer meant climbing over three or four people to get to the aisle so that we could walk what seemed like half a mile to the front in full view of everyone. Once there, we were unsure what would be done to us and for how long.

We had never realized just how much courage a participatory-style service really takes. As church hoppers we began to understand why we had not seen more people coming forward in our own ministry. In their minds the risks sometimes outweighed the benefits.

The principle here seemed to be that the more participatory the service (e.g., clapping, prayer requests, laying on of hands), the longer it takes a new person to feel comfortable enough to enter in. Perhaps some of the visitors' behavior we had attributed to our own failings might have been quite normal. People need time. And the more that is asked of them, the more time they need. Given this grace period, the great mysteries of church life can become plain to all.

- *Our biggest conclusion: We do not like church hopping.*

We were glad to see our experiment end. Flitting from one place to the next is vastly inferior to having a permanent church home. Church hopping puts a family on a spiritual starvation diet because it tends to mean much less overall involvement in a congregation's ministry. Moreover, the hopper has little support and fewer connections with other believers, thus missing one of the great benefits of bonding with one group.

Sitting in someone else's pew for a while is a tremendous learning experience. It has opened our eyes in a whole new way. It has taught us to love and appreciate God's people more than ever and has shown us that although some things will have to change in our next ministry, perhaps we were more successful than we ever knew. More than anything else, we have learned that strangers must be welcomed without conditions, just as God in Christ has welcomed us.