

Introduction

A report published in 2000 in the UK exploring the spirituality of people who do not go to church said that “the two most important observations we can make about our society and people's attitudes to the Bible's message are:

1. Church attendances are continuing to nose-dive, and
2. people increasingly see themselves as 'spiritual but not religious' Putting these two observations together, it appears that the Churches are failing to touch people at the point of their self-perceived spirituality.”

“People are cynical about the church as a religious institution and do not attend. The church is seen as hierarchical, dogmatic, bogged down in empty ritualism. Churchgoers are seen as arrogant in their assumption that they alone are the bearers of the truth. References in the research to hypocrisy, bigotry, being out of touch and other critical clichés were boringly repetitious. The church's primary function - if it has one at all - was seen as offering comfort in times of trouble or support to the inadequate, which most normal people do not need. Even where people (often older people) are still 'believers', they are no longer 'belongers'. This may reflect a general move in our culture, where people resist being committed to anything, and are increasingly cynical about all institutions, not just the church.

A student wrote, “The Church is beyond hypocrisy for me. I see it as dull, irrelevant, afraid of life, betraying God and trying to save its own skin. The Church for me is dead. God is very much alive, but God doesn't need the Church.”

POEM

Dear Mr. Church: I wanted to formally let you know that I Don't Want To Go To Your Church.

I don't really understand the God thing and your rules make it even more difficult to understand.

I know you say come as you are, but let's not go too far because you really don't mean that. Don't you really mean come as everyone else in your building is?

Mr. Church: I really don't understand this God thing and when I come through your doors and try to sing, for some reason the elevator just doesn't go “ding” because I just don't get this whole God thing.

I am out here doing my thing, you know all the stuff you church folks call sin...
No matter what I do I just can't seem to win.

I'm out here doing my own thing and wished I knew of the God whose praises
so many people sing; but in my mind the elevator just doesn't go "ding."

Dear Mr. Church: I want to find God, but I don't know where to search, to the
best of my knowledge I can find him at your church.

Mr. Church, I know that your people will look at me funny and simply just
want my money. They expect me to dress and act a certain way and they will
keep me in your service all day. They will make a scene if I'm new, and beat
me up with all the rules until I'm black and blue.

Dear Mr. Church: I Want To Know God, but I Don't Want To Go To Your
Church!

Sincerely,

Non Church Attending Searching Lost Hungry Far From God Guy

Two weeks ago many churches were involved in what they called "Back to
Church Sunday".

Back to Church Sunday 21st Sept. The Rt Revd Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of
Reading, has spoken about the need for the Church to be truly welcoming:
"Even today I meet people who think you have to be highly educated or suited
and booted to be a person who goes to church. That's so frustrating. How did
it come to this, that we have become known as just the Marks and Spencer
option when in our heart of hearts we know that Jesus would just as likely be
in the queue at Asda or Aldi?"

"Jesus got us started with church simply. Like this: sitting us down in groups
on the grass and telling simple stories. Not simplistic. But certainly not
complicated. All his first disciples were down-to-earth people who wanted to
know what life was all about.

'Church: it's definitely not about how you look, what you do, how you sound,
how well you sing. Just come as you are. Come with a friend. All are welcome.
Churches are still where best friends are made. And where people can be just
as they are.'"

A 40-second commercial radio advert promoting Back to Church Sunday
features a variety of voices reading a rap-style poem that tells listeners "You
might have left for so many reasons, but am I wrong to sense that now's the
season, to stop, turn around, walk back? Don't look to make no airs and

graces. Faked up smiles and masked up faces. No need to make no innovation. Please accept this as your invitation.”

On TV Tuesday night we saw Jamie Oliver attending a very lively and inspiring black church in the Deep South of the US and he commented that if churches were like this in the UK, he would go every Sunday.

We might protest, ABC is nothing like this common perception of church in this country. But as we are looking at the whole matter of evaluating where we are, I wonder what our ‘report card’ would say? “Room for improvement?”

People are hungry for God but find it hard to imagine that they might possible find God in a church, including ABC. They are repelled by religious moralists, trying to save themselves by being good, but are attracted by genuine spiritual vitality. What would they find if they came in here on a Sunday morning or were to come to one of our small groups mid-week?

1. We come together on Sundays at 10.30 am

The word Church - ekklesia (out-called) was used in NT times for any gathering summoning together specific people such a meeting of a city council or other commercial or religious body. In the GkOT ekklesia was the community of Israelites wandering through the wilderness. In the NT it is believers in Christ summoned together as his body.

*To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--their Lord and ours: **1Cor 1:2,***

Ekklesia never means a building - it always means people, a gathering of believers. We are summoned together by the Lord each Sunday, the first day of the week, called away from everything else that demands our attention to fix our gaze on the One who has drank the cup of God’s anger and had every drop of his life drained from him so that we might be forgiven and cleansed and have life in all its fullness so that we might intimately know him, ‘the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he himself will come to have first place in everything’. How can we grow and improve in coming together? We can improve in having a sense of occasion, an expectation of meeting with the Lord, which will affect our preparedness and punctuality.

2. We sing songs.

A major purpose of gathering is to praise the Lord.

Ps 149 1. Praise the LORD. Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the gathering of the saints. 2 Let God's nation rejoice in their Maker; let the people of Zion be glad in their King. 3 Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with tambourine and harp. 4 For the LORD takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with salvation. 5 Let the saints rejoice in this honour and sing for joy on their beds.

Ps 150

1. Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens.
2 Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness.
3 Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre,
4 praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute,
5 praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals.
6 Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.

These psalms describe OT praise. I'd expect NT praise to be even more upbeat, given all that the Lord has done for us and the fact we have the Spirit inside us. We come to adore the Lord and lift him up on our highest praise. This is not about feelings. It's an act of faith and determination. Improvements? We could be far more expressive. Why should praise be so static? It is nothing to do with British culture, we can all dance at a disco and jump up and down at a sports event. So why not express our delight, love and joy to the Lord who has forgiven all our sins and turned our misery into dancing? We can involve our children in worship, dance with them, hold them as we praise, let them experience our praise as we glory in the one who has poured out such grace upon us.

3. We have open participation.

"When you come together each one has a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done to build up others." When we meet together with the Lord, he wants to talk to us and through us. We look for lots of us to express our praise vocally and to receive communication from God in the form of visions, prophecies and teachings. Improvements? Let us more eagerly desire the manifestations of the Spirit

especially prophecy, but also others such as, tongues and interpretation, gifts of healing, words of knowledge. Wouldn't it be great if every time we meet with the Lord, visitors might fall down on the faces saying, 'truly God is amongst you.'

5. We have Preaching

(f20's London) "I don't like this sermon thing because it's one person's idea of what he reads. Not group discussion, it's just him telling you." The rabbinic style of teaching in Jesus' time included questions and answers and dialogue and you know that I would value this and am happy to be interrupted when I'm speaking. It is about hearing and responding to what God is telling us. We want revelation from the Lord. Jesus told leaders to teach "them to obey all that I have commanded you." So it is not about interpretation or personal opinion, but looking at what God says and sharing how it impacts us, how we have found it working in our experience, difficulties and how we may be doers of the word and not hearers only. Improvements? A greater awareness of God speaking and determination on the part of everyone to action what is taught. We also meet in our mid-week groups to help firm up the Sunday messages.

We are God's called-out-ones and this is why we gather on Sundays and also midweek. We gather to our Father who loves us and to Jesus who gave himself for us. This is the passion of Christ-followers. **We don't go to Church, we don't do Church WE ARE CHURCH.** We are privileged to belong to God's own household, called to a weekly family gathering to praise him, to pray, to build one another up and to hear what God has to say to us.

While personal growth and change depends on just one person - me - aided and abetted by my brothers and sisters who I need to help and encourage me, change in a local church needs every single one of us to make our contribution to any improvement. If only one person becomes more punctual, the church still lacks punctuality, if one person dances with their kids, there are still lots of disengaged kids, if one person participates, we still need more - it needs everyone to make an adjustment in all these areas. So please talk in your groups about what every one of us can do to make improvements and pray for one another.

Questions for Groups

In what ways can we conspire together to see significant improvement in our Sunday meetings?

1. We can improve by having: a sense of occasion, an expectation of meeting with the Lord, which will affect our preparedness and punctuality.
2. We could improve by being far more expressive. Why should praise be so static? It is nothing to do with British culture, we can all dance at a disco and jump up and down at a sports event. So why not express our delight, love and joy to the Lord who has forgiven all our sins and turned our misery into dancing? We could also involve our children in worship, dance with them, hold them as we praise, let them experience our praise as we glory in the one who has poured out such grace upon us.
3. We can improve by more eagerly desiring the manifestations of the Spirit especially prophecy, but also others such as, tongues and interpretation, gifts of healing, words of knowledge. Wouldn't it be great if every time we meet with the Lord, visitors might fall down on the faces saying, 'truly God is amongst you.'
4. We can improve by cultivating a greater awareness of God speaking to us and by a determination on the part of everyone to action what is taught.
5. Does what we do in our mid-week groups to help firm up the Sunday messages?