

Viewpoint: JAV404

HOW TO REVIVE A “DEAD” CHURCH

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This article first appeared in the Viewpoint column of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 40, number 04 (2017). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

Popular songs come and go, but the one most appropriate for many Americans would be the old hit by singer Dion DiMucci: “The Wanderer.” As the Pew Research Center found in a recent survey,¹ about half the adult population has, at one time or another, gone looking for a new place of worship.

Those who engage in such a search aren’t much guided by denominational categories, or the theological distinctions those imply. What they prioritize are high-quality preaching and the style of worship they prefer. They also expect a warm welcome, and don’t want a long drive to get there.

In other words, they choose a church much as they would choose a restaurant. They think like consumers and seek an experience that is enjoyable, edifying, and convenient. They have little reason to stick around when a church fails the audition; there’s always another church, just a block away.

Most of us know people who hopped in this way from one church to another, never quite satisfied. Sadly, some of them stop hopping only to stay home instead.

But that’s not the only alternative; sometimes staying put and making an investment can turn things around. Consider the case of a church that seems “dead.” On your first visit, something feels “off.” There’s a lack of energy in the congregation. Something about it feels empty and drained.

One could rebuke the critical visitor by saying, “That shouldn’t make any difference to you. Focus on your own prayer life.” But the truth is, a negative quality or atmosphere like that truly is discouraging. This hard-to-define quality is dismaying, and you want the service to end so you can get out of there.

When you visit such a church, your impulse is to leave and find another one that’s more alive. But there’s another possibility: a “dead” church can be revived. There are things you can do to bring a church to life.

Go back to that moment when you were looking around and feeling dismayed. It’s been said that 20 percent of the people in a church do 80 percent of the work. When you first visit a church, the majority of what you see will be, naturally, that 80 percent.

They're people who seem, you think, not really engaged with worship. Maybe, you think, they're there for social reasons or just out of a habit.

But the 20 percent whose faith is strong, the ones who pray and read Scriptures, who sincerely seek the Lord — they're there, too; they're just not as visible. In every congregation, there is a hidden "starter set" of committed people. Your task is to find them, band together with them, and begin to fan the flame.

You'll be likely to find that the pastor is firmly on your side. A pastor's life isn't easy, and it doesn't pay well, either. People take up the calling despite this because they sincerely want to help others deepen and strengthen their faith. If things feel off in church, if there's a vacant feeling, it's not because that's how the pastor likes it. So, if you want to understand this church, listen to him. He knows the people in the congregation better than anyone else does, and he knows what prayer groups, programs, or book studies have been effective — or ineffective — in the past.

Now, where are you going to find these more-committed people? One place is midweek services. People who take the trouble to go to church when it isn't Sunday probably have a motivation similar to yours.

Say you notice somebody who comes regularly to midweek services, or arrives early on Sundays and stays late, or carries a well-worn bible — any kind of tip-off. Take the initiative and make contact. Look around for them during coffee hour and go over and start a conversation. Find out if you are reading the same books, or mention something that you found meaningful in worship. Build bridges.

This next part might be shocking, so brace yourself: these people might not be the same age you are. They might not dress in ways you find attractive. They might not read as much as you do, or not read the same things. If you walk with them to their car, you might see a bumper sticker you don't like.

Don't let these things throw you off. As you become fond of someone, the very things that were initially off-putting can transform and become endearing.

It's likely that some of these people will be, literally, little old ladies. That's OK. Someone who's had decades of experience with prayer might be just what you need in your life right now. Also, old ladies sometimes turn out to be very interesting. I know because I am one.

If you attend a liturgical church, you also can remind yourself that, even if the atmosphere isn't all you'd like, you are nevertheless receiving communion. The prophet Elijah, alone in the wilderness, was sustained by ravens that brought him bread. In the Eucharist, the Holy Spirit gives you the Bread of Life, and that's enough for the journey.

Recall also that bitter, discouraged Elijah thought he was far more alone than he was. He complained to God that he was the only faithful person remaining in Israel — and then the Lord informed him that he had another seven thousand who had never abandoned the faith.

Here's another practical suggestion: pray through the church directory, a page or two every day. When you get to the end, start over. Invite your church friends to do the same, praying for each person by name. Don't pray for God to change these fellow-worshippers; just call them to mind, remembering them, as St. Paul did ("I remember

you constantly in my prayers" [2 Tim. 1:3]; "I remember you in my prayers" [Philem. 1:4]). Lift up their names to the Lord, who knows better than you do what they need.

If you know of particular reasons for prayer, such as healing, of course you can include those requests. Let the pastor know that he can give you and your friends any prayer needs he thinks it right to share.

This habit of praying through the directory has the practical benefit of teaching you the names of everyone in the church. It will help you remember who's married to whom, which kids go with which families, and so on.

Continue praying through the parish directory, lifting up each person by name, and in the process, you'll find that something inside you has changed. In time, your fellow-worshippers will stop seeming to you like a mass of indistinguishable faces. They will be revealed instead as what they always were: unique individuals, each of whom is thoroughly known and loved by Christ. The congregation is not a block of stone but a mosaic composed of countless faces.

That's so often the way with spiritual growth: you realize something that was true all the time. Christ was *already* present, already working in these lives, before you walked in the door. He was already loving each of them, calling them into a closer relationship with Himself. And, fortunately, these are people who are already in the habit of coming to church. A line in a hymn, a Scripture reading, or a sermon illustration may be just the spark they need. Your role is to pray.

As time passes, you'll also notice other prayerful and faithful people in the congregation whom you'd previously overlooked. Superficial factors, like clothing and age, may have initially made them invisible to you.

In C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, a senior devil teaches a young devil how to corrupt his "patient." He tells him that, even though the young man has begun going to church, all is not lost:

When he gets to his pew and looks round him, he sees just that selection of his neighbors whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbors. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like "the body of Christ" and the actual faces in the next pew.

It matters very little, of course, what kind of people that next pew really contains. You may know one of them to be a great warrior on [God the Father's] side. No matter. Your patient, thanks to [the Devil], is a fool. Provided that any of those neighbors sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous.

As time passes, and church members who are prayerful and intentional find each other, a kind of chemical change takes place. They realize that they constitute a living community within the congregation. They sense that they are upheld by each other's prayers. When they come to worship, they do so prepared to love and serve God.

A quality of warmth and illumination accompanies them, and it begins to pervade worship. This is something others can sense — even those people you’d written off. Christ is life, and everyone seeks life. The warmth of faith is attractive in the sense that a magnet is attractive, and it draws people forward. You are moving toward a tipping point in which the light of Christ becomes so perceptible that the feeling of worship on Sunday morning is transformed.

Those who approach church like picky consumers may never be satisfied, but those who make a commitment and stay may well see a desert bloom. Where Christ is, there is resurrection. By finding and befriending other church members who are spiritually strong, by following the pastor’s vision and by supporting in prayer the work God is already doing, you can help bring a congregation to life. —*Frederica Mathewes-Green*

Frederica Mathewes-Green has written for hundreds of publications, both secular and Christian. She has been a commentator for National Public Radio (NPR) and a columnist for the Religion News Service, *World*, and *Christianity Today*. The author of ten books, her most recent is *Welcome to the Orthodox Church* (Parecte Press, 2015).

NOTES

- 1 “Choosing a New Church or House of Worship,” Pew Research Center, Washington D.C., August 24, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/08/23/choosing-a-new-church-orhouse-of-worship/>.