

## Why belong to a Church? Doug Hayhoe, rev. May 2024

*There are many reasons for not attending a local church. But the time when you feel least like doing it, may be the time when you need it the most. Especially if you find a church that reflects the Biblical profile of a true community of faith.*

I had an interesting talk with Jim recently, my neighbour from one street over. We were out on our morning walks, and our paths crossed as they often do. Usually we just greet each other with a few words, but this time was different. As our conversation developed, I asked him which church he attends. Jim mentioned that he was Roman Catholic. “But I don’t attend anymore,” he said, “ever since I learned about the widespread abuse in the Church.” He then added, “I’m still very much a Roman Catholic, however. I still agree with all their basic tenets.”



[Church at roadside, Nova Scotia](#)

A week later, I ran into Greg in a medical clinic. He had grown up in a Christian family and had made a decision early in life to follow the Lord. This time he asked *me* which church I attend. After I answered the question, I returned the favour. He looked at me a little sadly and replied, “I feel lost right now. I don’t have a church.” It turned out that Greg and his wife were part of a large church where the senior pastor, a popular teacher and leader, had recently been accused of sexual abuse against a female staff under his authority. The church was now disintegrating.

Exiting church has become endemic. Jeffrey Jones shares the [results of a Gallup poll](#) on what percent of people in the U.S. say they’re a member of a church, synagogue or mosque. The number stayed at 70% or slightly above for sixty years, from 1940 to 2000. In the following twenty years, however, it plunged from 70% down to 47%. Less than half of Americans belong to any church. Things in Canada are only slightly better. These are alarming statistics!

Abuse by church leaders is only one of the reasons people leave church, although it may be one of the biggest right now. Others include the hypocrisy people see in the lives of other church members, the lack of community involvement by the church, or the loss of relevance of the church to the world we live in today. People also leave church burned out because of the focus on works and sick of the guilt and “to do list.” What they need is a church that focuses on our relationship with God and what He has done for us, rather than what we have to do for Him.

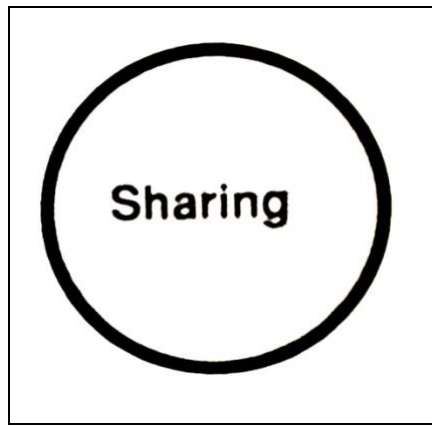
A few years ago, a *Christianity Today* article called “[Exit Stage Left](#)” proposed another reason seldom mentioned. People may be leaving the church because of the particular phase of life they’re in. They made a decision to follow Christ, went through the steps of discipleship, and got busy in Christian service. But after some years, they arrived at a stage of inward reflection and questioning. They may have become worn out in serving, and became disillusioned. Or perhaps they found it necessary to “redefine [their] expressions of the faith and to some degree even [their] theology.” They were now ready to “check out.” But it is “at this moment in our journey,” the article concludes, “when we need the church most.”

Yes, the local church is very important for Christians: it's essential for our survival. It's also absolutely necessary for Christianity to be effective in our neighbourhoods, cities, and countries. Even more than this, it's the place where God receives worship from His people. These things are only true, however, if the church functions as it is supposed to, according to God's Word.

### **The five functions of a local church**

Many years ago, I came across a series of five diagrams that illustrate how the church should function, according to the New Testament. The diagrams are so simple and logical I never forgot them (although I haven't been able to find out where they came from). Furthermore, my years of involvement with the church never made them obsolete.

#### ***The church is a community of believers***

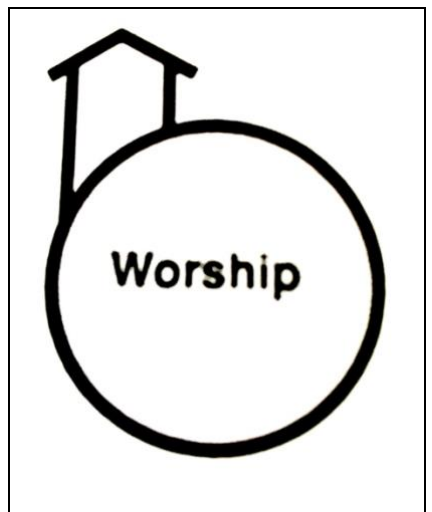


The first Christian church is described as people who “had everything in common” ([Acts 2:44](#)). The first thing they had in common was their faith in Christ. That led to a new love for each other. Over and over in the New Testament we are told to love one another ([John 13:34-45](#)). We are also told to accept one another, serve one another, share one another's burdens, pray for one another, and encourage one another.

One of the best ways to experience this is to join a small group at the church you attend. In this “house church,” you can live out your faith, hope, and love on a regular basis. Then, this will naturally extend itself to the entire church you belong to.

What a community this can make! It's like a close family; in fact, it's called the *family of God*. The older ones help the younger ones, as they live together like brothers and sisters.

#### ***The church is a holy temple***



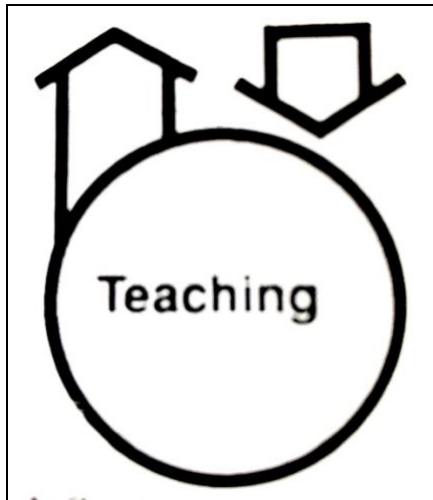
The church is not just a horizontal fellowship, a warm club to belong to. The Bible also describes it as “a holy temple” where Christians offer up worship and prayers to God ([Ephesians 2:21](#)). The first Christians devoted themselves to prayer and praise ([Acts 2:42, 47](#)). The arrow going up from the circle illustrates collective worship coming from the church.

The God of the universe doesn't “need” our worship. But in His wisdom, He knows that it elevates us to worship. Made in God's image, we are only truly fulfilled when we worship – in holiness and love – the infinite personal God who made us.

It's true we can worship God by ourselves, out in nature or just in our house. There are examples of this in the Bible. But it's also true that worship is primarily seen as a collective act in the

Bible. One verse from the Psalms has always struck me: “I rejoiced with those who said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord” ([Psalm 122:1](#)). Not that we have to worship in a physical temple, as the Jews did. But we are happy, even excited, at the thought of worshipping God together with others. Like the child who said to her stay-at-home parents, “Let's go to church!”

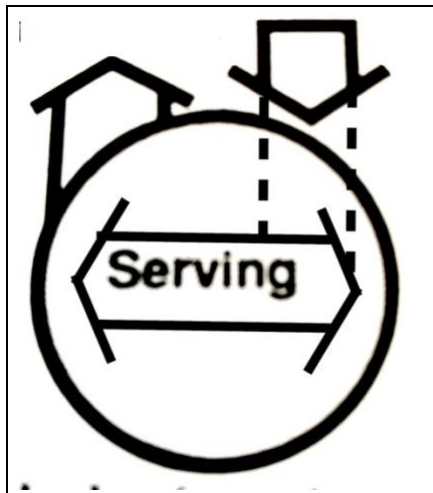
### ***The church is a flock or congregation***



The Bible often refers to people as sheep. Christians, like sheep, often lose their way and need to be cared for. The apostle Peter refers to the church as a flock led by shepherds, who guide and love them ([1 Peter 5:1-2](#)). The arrow coming back down on the right illustrates pastors and leaders gifted by God to teach Biblical truths and care for the local church.

Leaders have a special responsibility to maintain their integrity. Some “celebrity” pastors have turned out to be secret abusers, instead of transparent leaders. The apostle Paul exhorted Timothy to “hold on to faith and a good conscience” ([1 Timothy 1:19](#)). Billy Graham often said that Christian leaders need to surround themselves with other believers gifted and ready to help them maintain personal integrity.

### ***The church is a body of members***



One of the striking images of the church in the Bible is that of a human body, where each part has a function to do to benefit the whole ([1 Corinthians 12:13-26](#)). If even a small part of our body is hurt, a toe for example, the whole body suffers. Similarly, the church needs the healthy involvement of every true believer to function properly.

The horizontal arrow inside the circle illustrates every member serving others. The dotted vertical lines at the right represent the “pastors and teachers ... preparing God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and ... knowledge of the Son of God” ([Ephesians 4:11-13](#)). What a blessing when a church is like this!

### ***The church is a city on a hill***



One time in Colombia, S. A., I was driving along a dark valley at night and suddenly saw the lights of the town Anserma on a hill high above. I remembered Jesus’ word, “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden” ([Matthew 5:14](#)). In this last image, the church breaks out of its community into the wider neighbourhood, by acts of service and testimony on the part of each member. The horizontal arrow going beyond the circle illustrates this. The Bible describes the first church thus: “they ... enjoyed the favour of all

the people, and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” ([Acts 2:47](#)). This will be the result of a church that is functioning as it should. And you’ll want to be part of it!

## **Addendum**

As I revised this paper, which I first wrote many years ago, I realized again how far short I have come as a member and elder of several local churches. Who am I to teach these truths, when I am only too conscious of my own limitations? Indeed, the New Testament warns us teachers of this danger: “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways” (James 3:1-2). Nevertheless, this model of the church has been so crucial in helping me participate in the churches I have belonged to, that I wanted to share it with others. I especially want to invite those not associated with any local church to consider if it isn’t just what you need at this moment!