

Church Involvement

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If anyone can take a realistic view of church life, it's married couples. That's because being married and being part of a congregation spring from the same idea. Paul said so in Ephesians 5:25: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her." More than once the Bible pictures the church as Christ's wife.

So if anyone can appreciate the need for closeness and fellowship, it's we who are married. We can also understand that some sermons are better than others, just like some suppers. We can understand tensions over money, both at home and at church. We can understand when hurtful words fly. We can appreciate the hard work of nurturing the young. That's how it goes in family life, whether our own or the Family of God.

So how do we settle into a congregation and make the most of our time there?

1. *Always remember that there's no perfect church.* Even the spectacularly successful Jerusalem church in the Book of Acts had occasional problems (lying, disorganization), and yours won't do better than that. Young congregations have certain kinds of weaknesses that older, more established groups don't—and vice versa.

There's no point wasting a decade or two looking for perfection. Better to use that time contributing to, helping, and improving an imperfect church. However—

2. *Distinguish the important flaws from the casual ones.* The previous point is not meant to say that anything goes. The Apostle Jude felt strongly that

he should "write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (v. 3). If a church is not solidly based on the Bible, it really is a hopeless case. Human beings simply aren't wise enough to concoct their own answers in the spiritual realm. God's written Word must be embraced as the authority.

On the other hand, you can afford to be flexible about musical style, size of Sunday School classes, form of government, and age mix. Just because a church isn't like "back home" doesn't mean it's wrong.

3. *Settle your allegiance early, especially before your children start to wonder.* Don't "shop" indefinitely. Some shopping is necessary every time you move, of course. But get the matter settled as quickly as you can, in order to stop analyzing and start participating.

By the time children reach third or fourth grade, they really need the security of being able to say "my church." It's especially dangerous to be floundering from place to place during their teenage years, when friendships with Christian peers are so important and larger questions about the Christian walk are sprouting.

4. *Stick with the rhythm: go to give as well as receive.* The household that has a weekly debate over "Shall we go or not?" is asking for trouble. Church is, in one sense, a family meal. As at home, some menus are more popular than others. But most parents insist that kids come to the table whether they're thrilled about asparagus or not. The same holds true for weekly worship.

5. *Try to find at least one opportuni-*

ty where you can serve together. Too many Christian couples arrive at church and head in separate directions while still in the parking lot—she to teach the five-year-olds, he to check on the heating or air conditioning; later on she sings in the choir while he ushers. This pattern continues throughout the week and the year. How much better to team-teach a class, sing together in the choir, or codirect a nursing-home outreach! With a little planning, it's possible to be drawn closer together at church rather than separated.

6. *Don't bad-mouth your church, or anyone else's.* As we already said, the church is not perfect and never will be. You don't need to announce the fact. You don't even need to point out all the flaws to one another. The flat sopranos

who ruined the morning anthem for you may have gone unnoticed by your spouse. If so, why spoil a good thing?

Make it a standard practice to discuss problems only with those who can make a difference, and even then to speak kindly and lovingly. Assume your fellow members and leaders are well meaning, if not always well prepared. Along with your pinpointing of weaknesses, be sure to include what you'd be willing to do to help improve the situation.

And remember: it's Christ's church, not yours, or your spouse's, or the pastor's, or the denomination's. If Christ can stand it and love it, so can you.