

# CHURCH SHOPPING

by Ron Benson

**F**or the first time in my life I'm looking for a church home. Actually, it's not just me. If it were just me, I think I'd have found one by now. But I have a family.

It's not a typical, two-kids-two-parents-and-a-dog family. I have four kids, ranging from 10-20 years old. My parents moved in with us two months ago. They're 84. My wife and I are in our late forties. My dog is seven, in dog years. I resigned my last pastorate a year ago. We're all looking for a church home.

I grew up a PK, as did my wife, and then I went on to be a pastor myself for over 20 years. My father and I share a certain "preacher's sensibility." Our wives share a certain "pastor's wife's sensibility." My wife and kids and I share a certain "preacher's kids sensibility." My dog shares a kind of "clergy-canine sensibility." In short, we're all jaded.

How do we go about finding a church home? It's not easy.

First, we established some parameters: *No megachurches.* We're just not interested in places with Starbucks in the foyer and movie clips for sermons.

*No stairs.* My parents are unable to get up them. Dad uses a walker or wheelchair.

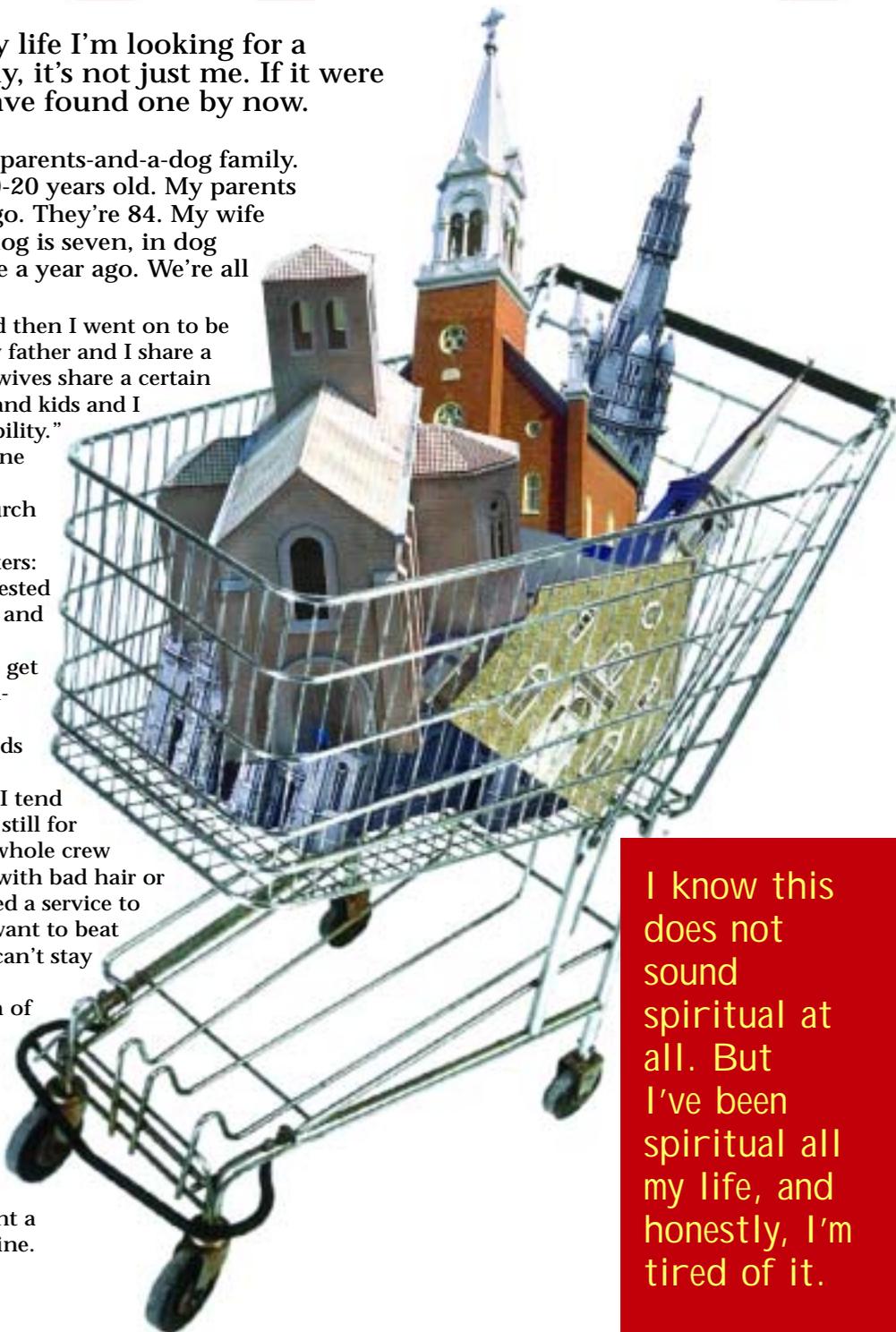
*No basement restrooms.* My dad needs to urinate frequently.

*No odd worship times.* My wife and I tend to fall asleep after 5:01 p.m. if we sit still for more than 28.5 seconds. To get the whole crew awake enough to not embarrass me with bad hair or bad breath or slept-in clothes, we need a service to start no earlier than 10:00 a.m. We want to beat the Presbyterians to Denny's, so we can't stay at church beyond noon.

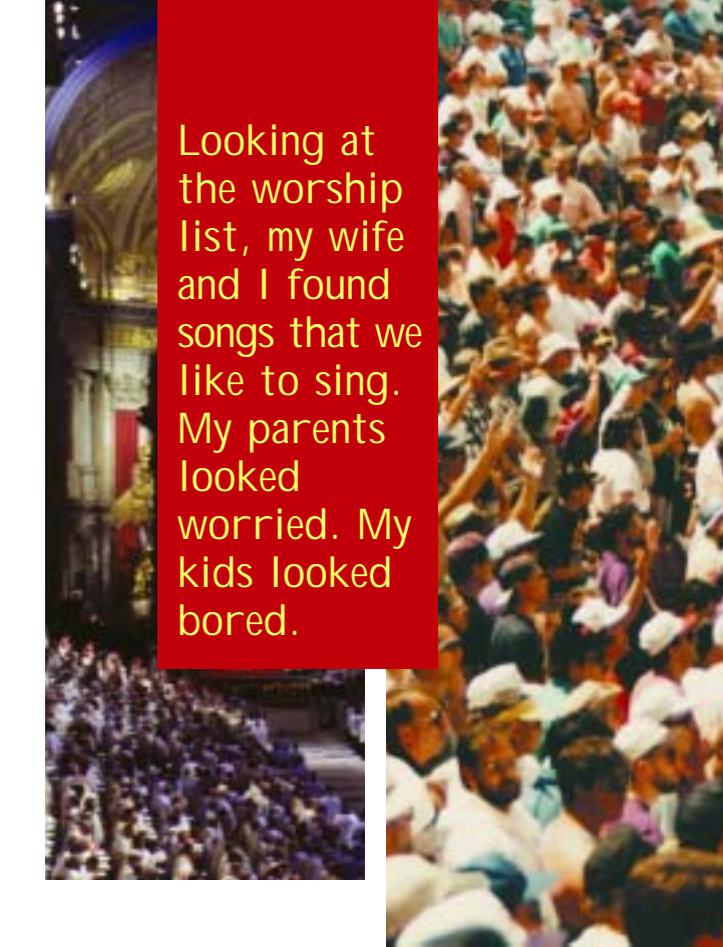
So we've set out to find the church of our dreams.

## Our Church Search

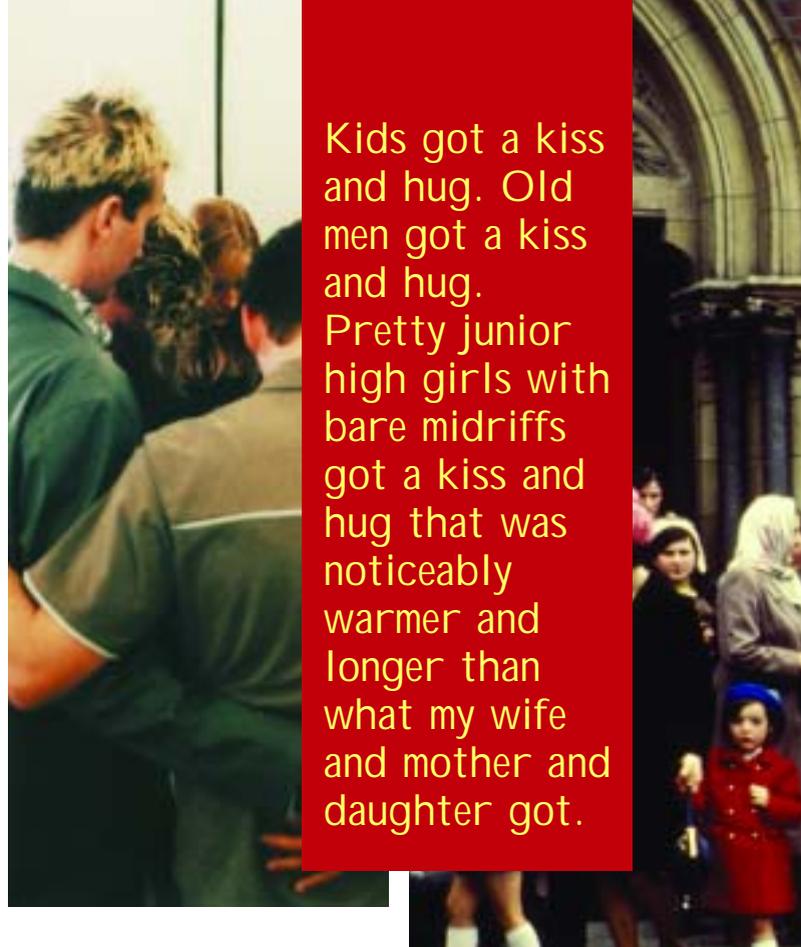
I know this does not sound spiritual at all. But I've been spiritual all my life, and honestly, I'm tired of it. So this search is pretty selfish. Fair, to call it petty and individualistic. I want a church that is perfect, for me and mine.



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Kids got a kiss and hug. Old men got a kiss and hug. Pretty junior high girls with bare midriffs got a kiss and hug that was noticeably warmer and longer than what my wife and mother and daughter got.

Gosh, it feels good to be a layman!

We visited a church for the first time. On the way in there was an usher posted at the only door to the sanctuary. A line had formed at this door because the usher, easily in his 70s, insisted on kissing and hugging every one who came through the doors. Kids got a kiss and hug. Old men got a kiss and hug. Pretty junior high girls with bare midriffs got a kiss and hug that was noticeably warmer and longer than what my wife and mother and daughter got. What they got was not appreciated in the least.

*This church became known as the old-man-kissing-church.* After four visits, his familiarity was no more welcome to any of us than the first time, so we quit. I drew a red line through “*Old-Man-Kissing-Church*” on my list.

The worship band was playing as we entered one church, nice Christian pop worship, John-Tesh-Meets-The Carpenters background. Looking at the worship list, my

wife and I found songs that we like to sing. My parents looked worried. My kids looked bored.

We sat behind a little old lady with white hair who urgently turned around and said, “Hi. There’s usually more people here, but lots of folks have left and gone over to the Baptists on Greenfield because of the loud karaoke music they’re doing here now.” And the guitar offered a familiar lick, and the band cranked out “Come, Now Is the Time to Worship.”

The little old lady in front of us refused to sing. So did my parents. I put a red question mark next to “*Karaoke Church.*”

We drove up to a church at the time worship was about to start. We tried the door closest to the parking lot. Locked.

We went to another door where we saw somebody enter. I opened it wide and discovered the trash cans. We never found the person we thought we saw go in there.

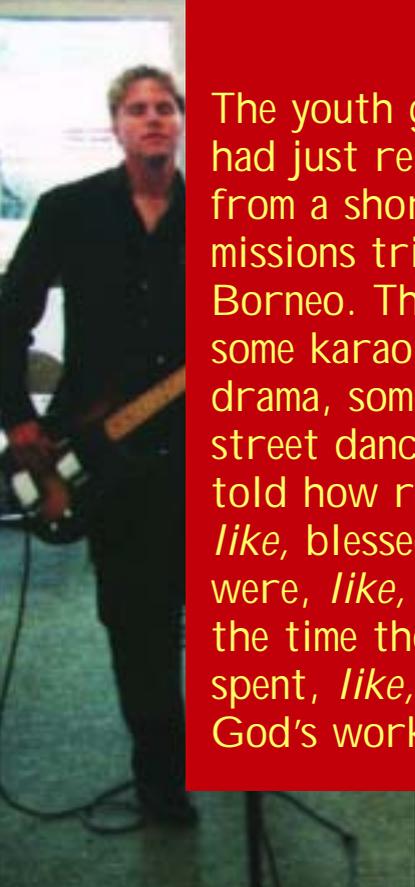
We went to another door and went in. It was dark. One of my kids led the way, and I heard them

trip over some object, “Ouch!” and a door opened illuminating a kitchen. We walked through the kitchen, using the light of the open door to guide us until we got into the hallway.

Eventually we got close enough to the sanctuary to find an usher. He greeted us with concern, looking at the wheelchair. “We’d better go another route,” he said. He escorted us away from the main doors at the rear to a small door down a side hallway. While the pastor gave announcements, we were ushered in just behind the organ at the immediate stage right of the platform. I felt like turning to the crowd and doing a queen’s wave as we marched single file behind the usher to our designated, hand-picked pew three rows from the back of the church. I wrote, “arrive early” on the chart where “*No-Door Church*” was listed.

Women’s Restroom Stalkers Are Always Seated in the Front Row

After that, I started visiting churches during the week, so I could map out



The youth group had just returned from a short-term missions trip to Borneo. They did some karaoke drama, some street dancing and told how really, *like*, blessed they were, *like*, from the time they spent, *like*, doing God's work.



our entry strategy and find the bathrooms. I stopped by a charismatic church one Friday. The secretary didn't speak in tongues and was kind enough to point out the bathrooms. We headed there on Sunday.

We were running late. Surprise! As the rest of the family got into the building and ready to enter the sanctuary, I made a beeline for the bathrooms; I'd not taken the time to empty my bladder of a gallon of caffeine ingested earlier.

Remembering where the pleasant secretary had pointed her charismatic finger, I hurried for the door. As I entered, a female voice in the hall said "Wait...!" But I went in anyway. As soon as I was in, in a flash of a simultaneous second, I noticed: 1) The pretty decorating. 2) The scent of perfume and hair-spray. 3) A woman exiting a stall looking startled and afraid, with wide eyes pointed at me.

"Whoa!" I said, backing out the women's bathroom. A small group of ladies were grouping up at the door, ready to charge in and rescue their colleague, and I had to excuse

my way out of the little lynch mob gathering there. Awkward.

*After finding and using the correct restroom, I joined my family in the foyer and we went in.* The place was packed, and as the charismatic praise band played a quiet number to help us prepare our hearts for the Spirit's work, a young usher led us down the aisle from the back of the church to the very front row. *I felt the stares of all the women in the church, and I thought I heard someone whisper, "Pervert!"* as we took our place just under the pastor's nose and within feet of the elements for communion, being that it was the first Sunday of the month. For some reason the message that day started out headed for The Lord's Supper, but ended up somewhere in Leviticus in a chapter on sex sins of the law.

I couldn't help feeling that I was eating this bread and taking this cup unworthily. "Women's Restroom Stalker" didn't use to be listed in Leviticus, did it? Later at home I erased "Charismatic" from the church list.

The second time we attended, they featured their youth group who had just returned from a short-term missions trip to Borneo. They did some karaoke drama, some street dancing and told how really, *like*, blessed they were, *like*, from the time they spent, *like*, doing God's work. The pastor did not, *like*, speak that week.

On our third visit, the pastor was absent due to a death in the family, so they pulled in a last-minute Lutheran pulpit filler. *He spoke about the trees and the bees and the flowers, and he let us out fifteen minutes early.* We ordered our Grand Slam Breakfasts before the Presbyterians could even park their cars.

On the fourth visit *the pastor spoke.* We longed for a missionary from Borneo, or a, *like*, youth group or at least a Lutheran. We understood why the congregation encouraged the pastor to let others do the speaking.

I swear that most of this is pretty much true; I've consolidated some of our experiences for brevity and made some stuff up to be funny. It's been nine months. We haven't found a church yet. I'm thinking of home-churching my family, maybe throwing in some Sunday A.M. cable worship; Crystal Cathedral, or Jerry Falwell or the infomercial for Wowie Worship XII.

At least I'd know how to get around the building. Bathrooms wouldn't be a problem. Hugs and kisses only when we're in the mood. And, if I stayed in my own bedroom, I could go to church naked.

Gosh, it feels good to be a layman! □

*Ron Benson lives in an undisclosed location, and his family would have dearly wished to remain anonymous. You'll be glad to know that since the article was written, the Bensons have settled on a church home where Ron has learned the proper locations of all the restrooms. Ron has offered his consulting services to various denominations as a "secret church shopper." As yet, no takers. Feel free to contact Ron with your own church shopping secrets at ronbenson@ronbenson.net.*