

BY LAWRENCE A. PILE

GETTING OVER A BAD CHURCH EXPERIENCE

Twenty-eight years ago I left what had been a warm, exciting Christian fellowship which had become an authoritarian, restrictive organization. I reached the difficult decision to leave after months of wrenching deliberation and several talks with the group's leaders about my concerns at the direction the fellowship was taking. I had joined the movement five and a half years earlier in another city, had served as one of four leaders of a church-planting team that brought the movement to Columbus, Ohio, and had led Bible studies and held other positions of responsibility in the church. I literally had expected to remain with the movement the rest of my life. To see it degenerate was, to say the least, a disillusioning experience.

I found myself saying goodbye to men and women I had considered my brothers and sisters. I felt like a part of my soul was being cut out of me. What was I going to do now? I had developed no contingency plans to fall back on in such an unforeseen situation.

My immediate decision was to return to my parents' home in the Cleveland area, and to the church in which I had grown up. I rejoiced to find a warm welcome and, what was especially important to me, new opportunities to minister after having been increasingly restricted in Columbus.

However, this was, in my mind, only a temporary solution. I still needed a new full-time job and my own place to live. What was I to do for the long term?

After a summer in Cleveland, I decided to move to the San Francisco Bay area to spend some time with a more balanced church, acquiring experience and knowledge that would be useful in later church service. The membership of this new church spanned all ages, economic strata, races and many nationalities. There was a multiplicity of opportunities to minister for those who desired, and a collective leadership who exercised sincere pastoral care without abusing their authority.

Four cities and churches after leaving Columbus, and after 17 years of helping cult survivors, I offer several suggestions for those who currently may be in the process of looking for a new church after a painful experience. These suggestions should help you in your

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search. Let me add here that you need not think you should quickly jump right back into another church, and that if you don't there's something wrong with you. I have talked with enough spiritual abuse survivors to know that it often takes some time to rebuild trust and comfort sufficient to consider regular church attendance. At Wellspring, we often recommend that victims take a sabbatical from church for a while until their spiritual wounds have healed a bit.

What are some things to keep in mind or look for when you do decide to choose a new church? First of all, most people who have had *bad* experiences with churches or other types of organizations know several things they *don't* want:

- They don't want a church with a lot of rules, or whose pastor thinks he's God's gift to mankind, God's mouthpiece on earth.

- They don't want a church in which normal, legitimate pastoral care has been replaced by meddling in the members' day-to-day lives.

- They don't want a church in which the opportunities to serve God or others are restricted to just a few officially sanctioned activities, or in which they are considered "unspiritual" or "carnal" if they choose to limit their involvement in the church.

But what should you do when going about the usually tentative and confusing task of finding a new church home after months or years of enduring spiritual abuse? Initially, you may wish to do what I did: return to the church of your *pre-cult* life, if you had one. You may find it is just what you are looking for, or at least that it provides a comfortable temporary spiritual oasis.

Beyond that, some of the things I would suggest are:

1. Take an inventory of why you want to join another church, and what you want in a church.

In his book *How to Find Your Church*, Christian researcher George Barna asserts that "it is important to be completely honest with your-

self. Identify exactly why you want to be involved with a church, and your expectations of the church. If you do not know why you are pursuing a church, or what specific characteristics and qualities you are looking for, the chances are great that you will not find your 'ideal' church."

If you are looking for another church because you believe you can't really be "spiritual" without one, or because you feel God won't love you as much (or at all) unless you are attending church, then you need to re-examine what it really means to be spiritual, and you need to (re)acquaint yourself with the concept of the grace of God.

If, however, you want another church because you long for warm, accepting fellowship, spiritual encouragement and/or opportunities to serve others, then you are on the right track.

2. Make a list of the things you want in a church.

These things will differ from person to person, depending on what he or she considers important. However, writing as an evangelical Christian, some of the things I would look for are:

- a. *A sound biblical footing.* A church that teaches anything and everything but the Bible seems to me not to be a church at all. When I was employed as a printer in Kent, Ohio, prior to joining the staff of Wellspring, I used to drive past one particular church on my way home. Out of curiosity I always read the sign in front as I drove by. Invariably it advertised the next Sunday's sermon as "Slides of So-and-So's trip to Russia," "Book Reviews," "Buddhism's Contribution to Christianity" or just "Picnic in the Park." It struck me that this was more of a social club or a cultural society than a church. That's fine—if you want to join a social club, join one. But call it that, not a *church*.

While living in California, my wife, Linda, and I became acquainted with a family who attended another church and were part of a Bible study group made up of members of that church. Eventually the

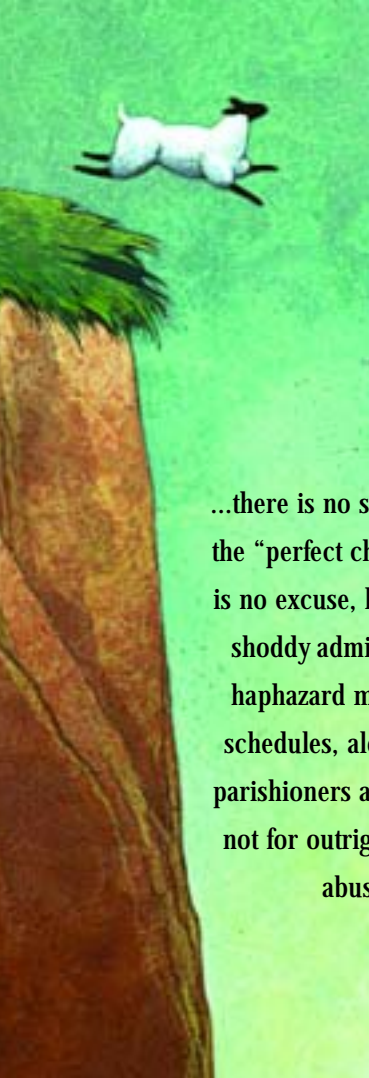
pastor decided he should attend it in order to ensure that everything was in order, but he admitted he didn't really know the Bible—all he knew was the official prayer book of the denomination, since that was what was taught in seminary. I thought to myself, "What business is this man in?"

Further, I would look for a church that not only teaches the Bible, but also takes it seriously. By that I mean, the pastor(s) and Bible teachers don't attempt to make the Bible say things it clearly doesn't, either by reading into it what is *not*

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there, explaining away what *is* there or *spiritualizing* everything. There is no need to read the Bible any differently from the way we normally read anything else, whether the daily newspaper, the novels of Mark Twain or the poetry of William Shakespeare. Whatever we read, we need to adhere to a minimum of commonly accepted principles of interpretation. One of the most basic is simply that if the text does not *explicitly* say something, we must not insist it does. For example, there is no verse in the Bible that *explicitly* says, "Thou shalt not smoke." Now, for health and cleanliness reasons it is a good idea not to smoke, but it is absolutely wrong to say the Bible forbids it. You can probably think of numerous similar examples.

- b. *A welcome that is warm and accepting without smothering.* If you can walk in the front door of the church without anyone noticing or greeting you, that certainly should be a red flag. On the other hand, if you are immediately mobbed by members effusively welcoming you, that also should be red flag.



...there is no such thing as the “perfect church.” That is no excuse, however, for shoddy administration, haphazard meetings or schedules, aloof or cold parishioners and certainly not for outright spiritual abuse.

c. A congregation size that is comfortable to you. Many people who have had unpleasant experiences in churches often prefer large churches, a few hundred or more, so they can melt into the congregation without feeling like an obvious newcomer. They want to just sit in the pew and be a spectator for a while until their comfort level rises. There is nothing wrong or unspiritual about this. Others are eager to find new opportunities to serve, and it is often easier to find these in small churches, which frequently have difficulty finding enough people to teach Sunday school, help out in the nursery or serve in other ways.

d. A pastor who is a “gentle shepherd,” not a “lord over the flock.” Pastors ideally should be models, examples and mentors, not dictators or despots. An ex-elder in my former abusive movement stated that the leaders of the move-

ment were not shepherds out in front leading the flock but were “cowboys riding herd.” Is the pastor open to questions, or does he demand unquestioning obedience? Does he permit diversity and freedom within the church, or does he expect and require conformity and uniformity (even though he calls it “unity”)?

One of the characteristics of a healthy church offered by Rev. Richard Dowhower writing in the spring 1994 issue of *FOCUS News* is apropos here. He wrote, “Healthy congregations do not play ‘bait and switch’ games with God’s grace, but treat it with utmost respect. To offer divine and unconditional acceptance (God’s grace), and then to make additional conditions of conformity to the organization necessary to continue receiving that grace, is to compromise the unconditional in a most reprehensible manner. Healthy congregations strive to keep the experience of divine unconditional acceptance from being qualified, compromised and contaminated by organizational expectations.”

e. Encouragement to find God’s will for your life independent of the control of the leader(s). It is normal and natural to be concerned about what God desires one to do with one’s life. However, one must be permitted the freedom to seek that will on one’s own, without interference by anyone else, including one’s pastor. Most Christians will voluntarily seek out advice and counsel to help them in this endeavor, but they must be permitted to reach their own conclusions. Any advice offered must *remain* advice and not metamorphose overnight into directives. One man who was a member of my former movement asked a leader for advice on purchasing a particular car. The leader advised him against buying it. The member went ahead and bought it anyway, and then was disciplined by the leader for disobedience. The member headed for the door.

f. Adequate child-care, Sunday school and other activities for children, if you are a parent.

Couples with young children will want to ensure their kids will not be neglected if they decide to join the church. They will be concerned that their children are well cared for and taught, not just entertained. Does the church take the care and teaching of children seriously, devoting prime facilities and teachers to their care?

g. Openness about how the money is spent. Any church that is not open and aboveboard about its use of funds should be avoided at all costs (no pun intended!). Regular accounting should be given to the members, preferably in writing, and the books should always be available for inspection by any member. After all, most of the funds are contributed by the membership—therefore, they have a right to know how funds are being used. They also have the right to *approve* of such use through secret ballot at regular church business meetings (at least annually). In Acts 6, the *church members*, not the apostles, chose the men they wanted to oversee the distribution of food to their widows.

3. Visit numerous churches in your area that seem like they might offer what you’re looking for.

Names of churches can be found in the *Yellow Pages*, usually listed according to denomination. Visit each church several times—a one-time visit might catch the church on an off day. Further, don’t confine your visits to Sunday morning worship services only—those are usually the most benign meetings of the average church.

Attend also on Sunday and Wednesday evenings (and adult Sunday school if offered), when the congregation is usually smaller and more committed to the church. It is often during these meetings that you can really sense the spirit of a church—and pick up on any red flags.

4. Talk to church members.

Ask them how long they’ve been attending, what attracted them to the church, what they like the most about the church, what they like the *least* about the church.

Make an appointment with the pastor to ask him about his philosophy of ministry, what his goals for the church are, what *he* likes most and least about the church. Ask for a printed “statement of faith,” a list of the church’s doctrinal beliefs. See if it conforms to your own religious beliefs, or if you can at least live with it.

5. Call the local ministerial fellowship.

Most cities of any size have an association of ministers of the area who meet on a regular basis to share their church experiences, including trials and successes, as peers. If a church in the area has acquired a reputation as one with problems (legalism, authoritarianism, exclusivism, isolationism, etc.) these ministers will usually know it and should be willing to tell you. You could also talk to the minister of the church down the road from the church you’re checking out.

These few steps should prove useful in finding a new church home. If you see *any* red flags at all, one additional step might help to confirm whether those things are true indicators of problems. This last suggestion occurred to me as I was responding to a letter from a woman who was a member of the church in Columbus I had left several years earlier. She wrote that the description Paul Martin, Well-spring’s founder and director, gave in his book *Cult Proofing Your Kids* of his experiences in other churches of the same movement were totally unlike anything she had so far experienced in the Columbus church. She wrote that before she decided to join the church, she attended

many meetings, talked with many members, including the pastors, and studied the church’s statement of faith. She found nothing out of order. She seemed to imply that Paul must simply be a “disgruntled ex-member” or be making mountains out of molehills. In my reply to her I told her that she had done many of the things I would recommend people do when they are looking for a new church. However, there was one thing she didn’t do that I would also recommend. And that was:

6. Talk to ex-members of the church you’re considering.

Ask the pastor for the names and phone numbers of *former* members of the church who still live in the area so you can call them and ask them why they left. This might seem awfully bold, maybe even brash, and perhaps it is. But any good pastor should be glad to give you such names and numbers. If the pastor declines your request, *that* should be taken as a red flag.

There are legitimate reasons for leaving a church that would not necessarily indicate the church is unhealthy. Some of these might be: inadequate services for children, music style one does not prefer, inconvenient meeting schedule, etc. But other reasons for leaving *would* indicate problems:

“I’ve been a Christian for many years, but I always felt condemned by the pastor.”

“I never felt accepted by the other members because I’ve been divorced.”

“I felt like unless I participated in all the meetings and activities of the church I would never really fit in.”

“The pastor seemed to promote the attitude that only *his* church was where God was.”

“All the women [or men, or members] looked and talked alike—it seemed like *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers!*”

Finally, a few reminders. The cult or abusive church you fled may still color



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your thinking regarding what a healthy church should look and feel like. If your former group was characterized by enthusiastic meetings with energetic singing, dynamic preaching or teaching and open displays of emotion, you may find groups or churches that are more contemplative dull and boring—or conversely, spirited churches may feel too similar to your old group to be comfortable. The opposite may also be true. If your former group was sedate and meditative, more demonstrative churches may seem frothy and superficial. But, again, groups too similar to your former group may make you uneasy. Neither upbeat nor laid back meetings are necessarily bad, however. Time and patience (on your part) will usually alleviate this type of difficulty.

Keep in mind that the purpose of the church is not to entertain an audience, but to help believers in their worship of God, teach them God’s Word and stimulate them to live godly lives. George Barna



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says, "That does not mean church should be boring. Any place that helps us to understand the God of creation, the Savior of mankind and provides an outlet for the use of our talents and skills, should be exciting." He goes on to caution against "evaluating [a] church on the quality or entertainment value of a religious performance—how perfectly the choir sang, or how eloquently the preacher spoke. Instead, think about what impact the sermon had upon your life, or how well the singing led you to worship God."

Above all, don't forget that there is no such thing as the "perfect church." That is no excuse, however, for shoddy administration, haphazard meetings or schedules, aloof or cold parishioners and certainly not for outright spiritual abuse.

Barna concludes his remarks by reminding us "that as with any family, there will be a time of transition. In a way, you become like an adopted child. Despite the family's happiness to have you, they will have to change some of their ways to accommodate your needs and you will have to do the same, to become an accepted part of the family. A church, like an individual, cannot be all things to all people. But it can become a loving and caring unit that makes your life better."

Though that last sentence may seem remote or dubious to you at this time of grieving what you lost in your former group or church, it is true and can be your experience as you follow these suggestions and trust your God-given ability to discern, on the basis of your *painful* experience, the elements that make for a *healthy and rewarding* one. □

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- "... 20 years in this manipulative..."
- "...don't associate with 'other' C..."
- "...so tired and burned out by th...
- "...desperately trying to break d...
- "Be at church every time the de..."
- "...so quick to feed on the goss...
- "My friend is involved in a cult..."
- "...we were raised by a very bit...
- "...it is refreshing - almost like i...
- "...we were *Stepford Wives* in training!"
- "You have helped me to understand what legalism is..."
- "We tried to earn our salvation by doing good deeds endlessly..."
- "...trying to measure up to the 'standard' that was spouted from the pulpit."
- "So I went online, looked up legalism and found PTM's website."
- "I struggle with even being able to read a Bible since leaving the group..."
- "...barking like dogs wasn't in the Bible I was reading"
- "...God's love is not dependent upon our works and deeds!"
- "...reprimanded for not speaking in tongues enough..."
- "...I was rebuked for being seduced by demons."
- "We look back on a lot of the ridiculous things we did and laugh."
- "I'm a legalist and didn't know it."
- "...it is hard to support a church that promotes a mixed gospel."
- "...makes me jump ten feet into the air each time I read it!"
- "...my web members seemed so gossipy and upset."