

## **How I Would Choose a Church...**

I got a few request over the last few weeks from friends who have been transferred to other locations and wanted my advice about what church they should attend.

I cannot presume to tell anyone how to make a decision such as that, but I can certainly tell my friends how I would go about doing it. So I did, I shared with them how I would look for a church.

It was then, that I thought I should share it with members of the Vestry Committee as well.

The following would be the points that I would consider when choosing a church to worship in regularly.

I would not hold out until I find a church that got a perfect score, because there probably is no such church, also my criteria might be flawed. Nevertheless, if I were looking for a church, I would select one that scores high against these criteria.

### **The Pastoral Staff**

The priest and any other ordained ministers on the pastoral staff received their ordination from someone outside their own congregation by the laying of hands by a Bishop who himself was ordained in the tradition of laying of hands.

The priest and any other ordained ministers on the pastoral staff have education degrees from accredited seminaries whose degrees are acceptable to more than one denomination.

The priest and any other ordained ministers on the pastoral staff answer to some kind of higher authority outside the local congregation to maintain their ministerial credentials.

Lay members on the pastoral staff have formal training in their areas of responsibility.

The priest is not a bossy, know-it-all individual. He is the servant, not the master, of the congregation. His work does not end on Sunday afternoon, and he is not stuck in his study all week. For example, when people go to the hospital, he is the first to visits them.

Sermons are not tirades against sinners who are not in the church, which would be demagoguery. The sermons are biblical and they meet the congregation's pastoral needs. Sermons rise above current events; they are not tangled up in them. Sermons edify, uplift, and teach; they should not primarily be lectures. The sermons should not be overly doctrinaire, theological, or intellectual.

### **Money Matters**

Most denominations require these standards or something very close to them, so in most cases we are just verifying that the congregation is obeying its own rules:

The priests do not have their signatures on the church's accounts.

The priests cannot write checks or withdraw money from the church's accounts.

The offering is counted by two unrelated congregation members, who sign a statement citing the total amount.

Different people handle income and disbursements. Usually the person who handles the disbursements is called the Treasurer, and the person who handles income is called the Assistant Treasurer.

The person who handles the church's income is also responsible for tracking donations and pledges and for sending out receipts to individuals for tax purposes. This is the only person in the church who knows how much each individual donates to the church.

The person who handles the church's disbursements (the treasurer) only writes checks for preauthorized expenditures that are in the budget. If a check would take a line item over its budget, the treasurer must escalate the issue to the authority that set the budget (either a body duly elected by the congregation or the congregation itself). If the treasurer writes checks in excess of the budget without approval, they must be prepared to reimburse the church out of pocket if the expenditure is not approved.

The finances of the church are public. The congregation knows the total amount of donations, and possibly also statistical information about donations, such as average giving per household, but the congregation never learns which person gave how much.

The priest do not know how much money any given person donates to the church.

There is a financial report at least annually to the congregation.

Once a year the books of accounts, of the church, are audited by a qualified chartered accountant, who is not a member of the church.

### **The Congregation**

The congregation is neither too friendly (which means it has factions looking out for fresh meat) nor is it too cold (which means it is dead).

The congregation does not have a survivor mentality; that is, they aren't obsessed with whether or not they will continue to exist.

The congregation has good demographics that reflect its neighbourhood. For example, it has people various communities and all strata of its neighbourhood, it means the church did adapt as the neighbourhood changed. If most of the members have to drive long distances to get to that Church; the church's days are numbered. Most churches are top-heavy with older people, but there should be people in all age groups, which will show its longevity.

Any size is okay. If it is a Anglican church, I would prefer to see attendance average about fifty in Sunday morning worship. Catholic churches are larger because they are centrally planned.

The congregation does not have a bunker mentality.

The congregation is not obsessed about the end of the world or with political or social issues. It should be concerned about these issues, but not obsessed with them.

The congregation serves their community in some way.

The church has some kind of working relationship with local churches of other denominations.

### **The Power Structure**

The priest does not hog all the power and the members of the pastoral staff are not all related to each other.

There are a large number of lay leaders at all different levels.

The lay leaders reflect the diversity of the congregation (age, ethnicity, sex, different families, and so on).

One family does not hold all the power, either officially or unofficially.

Their Attitude toward you as a Newcomer

The church gives you the space and freedom to decide your own level of commitment and participation.

The church tries to persuade you to make commitments and to participate, but they do not pressure you.

If the church asks you for commitment or participation, and you turn them down, they accept your decision gracefully and they do not hold it against you.

The church gives you the freedom to grow spiritually without pressure and without guilt-trips.

### **Programs**

If a church has about fifty members or more, it might have informal organizations that address the needs of the community or the congregation. These are called programs, and they are the church's way of putting hands and feet on their faith. Give the church bonus points if it has programs that you would like to get involved in, such as a choir, Sunday School, out reach programmes etc.

### **Worship**

The congregation is not passive all the time. It actively participates in worship with hymns, responses, and so forth.

Lay people read Lessons of the day at worship service that do not require clergy.

The worship is ecumenical and is founded on historic Christian worship.

The worship is not dry and mechanical on the one hand, nor jocular on the other.

The worship is reverent and there is a sense of the holiness as prescribed in the scriptures.

Objects used in worship are handled respectfully and in reverence to Almighty God.

Communion is frequent; certainly is every Sunday.

The church observes Christian holydays, such as Christmas, Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost, and so forth. (This tells you they are not making things up as they go along.)

### **Affiliation**

The church belongs to a denomination or some sort of equivalent fellowship of congregations. This gives the congregation resources that an independent church cannot have. Denominations set standards for handling money and conducting the business of the church. Denominations also police their clergy. All these things are advantageous to you.

The denomination sets standards for ordination and provides guidance and resources to individual congregations.

Give the church bonus points if it belongs to a major brand-name denomination.

The denomination must have some sort of working relationship with other mainline denominations whose names you recognize.

If it is an Anglican church, it should be affiliated to a Diocese and its Synod, one is local and the other is national.

You notice that I care that the congregation is affiliated with a denomination. That is because denominational affiliation brings accountability and discipline; but just knowing a congregation's denomination doesn't tell you much about its character. Congregations within the same denomination can be very different, while congregations in different denominations can be very similar.

This is what I would look for in a church. Perhaps this can help you develop your own set of criteria for choosing a church home for yourself.

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