

THE BENEFITS OF SPENDING DECADES IN ONE CHURCH

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The biblical metaphors used to describe the church teach us that long-term membership in a local congregation ought to be the norm. Yet many strands of contemporary life work against that norm—against putting down roots in one church for decades. The independent, consumer-driven culture we inhabit pulls us away from the kind of “staying” which in turn makes for healthy Christians and healthy churches.

Restless for something new, we leave one church to attend another down the road. Or, drawn by a range of programs better suited to meet our needs, we leave a good church and dear friends, to go where the perceived benefits are greater. Or, experiencing relational difficulties, we uproot ourselves from a faithful church to start over again in a place where we are relatively unknown, where little is expected of us, and where church life is, frankly, easier.

Christians and churches are worse-off whenever a casual, impermanent, transitory approach to local church life prevails. Believers benefit from maintaining a long-term church identity and local churches benefit from having long-term members. The fact is, “There’s always a core group of faithful people at the heart of every healthy congregation. Our lives and our churches are better because of them.”⁸⁷

The metaphors the Bible uses to describe the church and illustrate church life make the case that we should aspire to be among that core of faithful saints who remain in one church for a long time. For example, the “body” metaphor (1 Cor. 12:27) assumes continuity of local church membership—hands and feet don’t jump from one body to another.

The “living stones” metaphor likewise suggests immovability. Once built-together by God (1 Pet. 2:5), the living stones stay put. The “family” metaphor implies continuity of both relationship and identity. In healthy families, one’s family members don’t change even as the family grows.

⁸⁷ Karl Vaters, 2018, “7 Advantages of Long-Term Church Membership.” *Christianity Today*, accessed January 6, 2023. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/karl-vaters/2018/november/7-advantages-of-long-term-church-membership.html>

The “planting of the Lord” metaphor (Isa. 61:3) suggests that putting down roots in God’s house leads to a lifetime of flourishing and fruitfulness. A plant must stay rooted to thrive. Constant transplanting stifles growth.

[The righteous] are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of our God. They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green to declare that the LORD is upright. (Ps. 92:13-14).

Those metaphors leave us not with legalistic rules about remaining in one church under all circumstances but with consciences sensitized to the normative ideal—that of a deep-rooted staying.

What are the benefits of spending years, even decades, in one local church?

Relational Continuity

Chicago pastor Nathan Carter says,

In my experience, it usually takes about three to four years to really start to get to know people. Then they leave the church. They move away or have a disenchantment of some kind and are gone. We are still Facebook friends. We may text from time to time, but we are not in each other’s lives anymore. And so, they must reset the relationship clock at a new church.⁸⁸

“Resetting the relational clock” again and again forfeits the kind of deep, meaningful relationships which, by God’s design, can make all the difference in our walk with the Lord. Tim and Cindy Campbell helped plant our church nearly four decades ago, and they remain here today. They rejoice in “the grace of knowing and being known; the blessing of sojourning with beloved friends through the good years and the bad years.”

Dan and Jeanne Welch, dear long-time members of our local church, put it this way, “We have deep, long-lasting relationships with brothers and sisters we have known for decades, who have walked with us through so many joys and trials.” Those relationships have been a critical means of grace and encouragement to them.

Karl Vaters, touting the benefits of long-term church membership says,

There’s nothing like knowing and growing with a group of people over a lifetime, or a major segment of your lifetime. There are so many life lessons that simply take time to learn. No matter

⁸⁸ Nathan Carter, 2018, “Why staying in your church longterm is good for you.” ERLC, accessed January 6, 2023. <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/why-staying-in-your-church-longterm-is-good-for-you/>

how smart we are or how hard we work, nothing can replace living life with people who know, love and watch out for each other year after year and decade after decade. There are no shortcuts to deep relationships. You have to put in the time.⁸⁹

Fruitful Service

Discovering where we can best serve the cause of Christ is a process of trial and error for most of us. We join a church and begin serving wherever there are needs. But then over time, we find one or two avenues of service where we are most effective and most satisfied. We then settle into that work, using the gifts God has given in ways that make a real difference. But if we change churches again and again, that process cannot play out, causing wonderful talents to remain inadvertently buried in the ground (Matt. 25:18).

Thus another benefit of staying in a church for decades is that it affords the time required to find and be faithful in avenues of service, for which we are promised an eternal reward. Fruitful service is at stake as we remain in one place.

Witnessing God's Slow Work

Another benefit of staying is the joy of watching God's unfolding faithfulness—often in ways we never expected. The Campbells say, “We have watched what God accomplished from the church's infancy to maturing adulthood. We have witnessed God's faithfulness through difficult seasons. We would never have imagined 38 years ago all the wonderful things God would do.”

The Welches say, “We have a wonderful historical perspective which causes us to thank and praise the Lord. We can testify, that in every situation, Jesus has never failed us!” They add, “Because we know our history, our pastors, and the people of the church, we have been able to discern and stand against unfounded attacks. We have seen the Lord's hand actively at work for decades and what he has done...is amazing.”

Only those who stay experience the joy of watching a local church grow, endure, and mature.

Building a Legacy

Staying in one church for decades also enables us to build a tangible legacy. Tim and Cindy speak of the deep joy of watching the passing of the baton to the next generation and even to the generation following them: “It's wonderful to see so many children grow to embrace the faith, then come into the callings that God has for them.”

⁸⁹ Karl Vaters, *Ibid.*

Dan and Jeanne reflect on the satisfaction they have of knowing they will leave behind a healthy church, and an enduring legacy, for posterity. Dan says, "When a man or woman commits to being a faithful member of a church, and does so for decades, they leave future generations an inheritance."

Conclusion

There are, of course, good reasons to leave a church. If you've left for good reasons, you ought to feel no shame. But staying and serving in one local church for decades seems to be the biblical norm. Let's not underestimate the downside of leaving only to find ourselves in the future, yearning intensely for the kind of local church experience we once enjoyed. Brothers and sisters, the gospel has the power not only to bring us together but to keep us together.