



How To Find A New Church Home

When you're new in town, how can you find a church that's right for you?

[Feature Article](#)

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"There's not a single Bible-believing church in all of southern California!" the voice on the telephone complained.

"You've only been living in Los Angeles for three weeks," I said. "Give it some time." That turned out to be bad advice.

Rob grew up in a small evangelical denomination. On moving to a Los Angeles suburb, he discovered that the only church of his denomination was fifty miles away—fifty California freeway miles. So he set out to find a new church home. The huge, granite Lutheran church . . . First Methodist . . . First Presbyterian . . . the Korean-speaking Assembly of God . . . the tiny storefront Church of the Nazarene — he visited a different church every Sunday. One church was too unemotional, one too politically-oriented, one in a dangerous neighborhood. And on and on.

"When I spoke to him three months later, he was spending his Sundays sleeping late and reading the newspaper.

Every year, thousands of Christians relocate because of new jobs, graduation from school, or some other reason, and set out to find a new church home. And every year thousands give up. Neglecting to attend church, even for a few Sundays, is a harrowing, dangerous experience. The longer the search goes on, the easier it gets to turn off the alarm clock and mutter, "I'll find a nice church to go to next Sunday."

The Goldilocks Syndrome

Most Christians who look for a new church home visit first one church and then another, searching for one that "feels comfortable." This method rarely works. Did you feel comfortable on your first day of high school? How about the day you met your future in-laws for the first time? Most new experiences are a little frightening. If you run from church to church trying to replicate one you've attended for the last five years, you'll eventually get used to being a visitor who occupies a pew with strangers for an hour or two every Sunday morning. You might as well watch the Church of the Week broadcast on TV.

If you were going to apply to college or graduate school, you would consult directories and send away for catalogs. Perhaps you would even call the registrar's office with questions before you actually visited the campus.

Finding a new church home requires just as much advance planning and careful research. It's important to do as much research as possible in advance, because you don't have much time. Under no circumstances should you spend more than two months away from active participation in a church. The longer you do this, the more tempted you'll be to stay an outsider permanently. So where do you begin?

First, pray for guidance. Ask God to lead you to the church where you can grow spiritually as well as serve.

Next, check the telephone directory to see what denominations are represented in your area. Many people who grow up or find Christ in a particular denomination don't want to go anywhere else. While each church is unique, worship styles within a denomination tend to be similar. Considering whether you prefer a liturgical, free-form, or middle-of-the-road type of service will help you narrow your choice. For the most part, differences in worship styles have nothing to do with a church's commitment to teaching the Scriptures.

If you're not familiar with a particular denomination, consult the *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (9th edition, Abingdon Press, 1990), or call the denominational headquarters for information.

Most cities have interdenominational and nondenominational churches. Some of these are Bible-believing, energetic, and vigorous, but others need closer scrutiny. Check with friends in the Christian community before you consider attending them.

When you've narrowed down the number of denominations you'd like to consider, make a list of ten or so churches within easy reach of your home. Easy reach may mean two miles or twenty, depending on how far you'll be able to drive after a busy day to make the Tuesday-night prayer meeting, or through a December snowfall to chair the newsletter committee.

Now it's time for field work. Drive past each of the churches on your list on a weekday or Saturday afternoon. Check the size of the building: Do you prefer a huge congregation with a pastoral staff in the dozens and enough weekly activities to keep a medium-sized city happy? Or do you prefer a small congregation where everyone has to pitch in to do everything, from mopping the floors to sewing new choir robes?

Look at the way the building and grounds are maintained. What image does the announcement board out front convey? Even the presence or absence of Sunday school buses in the parking lot can tell you something about the priorities of the congregation. After you've narrowed your list down to no more than four churches, you're ready to visit.

Finding Your Church Family

Many people make the mistake of judging a church by a first impression. When I first moved to California, I walked into a nearby evangelical church on the last day of a district retreat, and virtually the entire congregation was absent. A sub-assistant pastor was preaching a makeshift sermon to a

congregation of three. If you find a congregation cool or a sermon uninspired on your first visit, the congregation or the pastor may just be having a bad day. Or you may be having a bad day. Try to make your judgment on the basis of at least two consecutive Sunday morning services, if not more.

Avoid visiting during Christmas and Easter. Most churches schedule special programs on those days, and you won't get an adequate idea of everyday congregational life. Also, try to avoid visiting during three-day holiday weekends such as Labor Day and Memorial Day when decreased attendance will result in a more "laid-back" atmosphere than usual.

When you walk into the church for the first time, don't look for an "at-home" feeling or a sense of being welcomed by the congregation. Few people feel at home in strange places, or particularly welcomed by a group of strangers. Instead, observe the service, the church, and the congregation. Afterwards attend the fellowship hour if one is offered. Pick up any bulletins, newsletters, and denominational publications, and read them carefully when you get home. Base your judgment of a particular church on two objective factors: your opportunity to grow in Christ and your opportunity to serve.

Your Growth Potential

Does the congregation occupy most of the sanctuary, or do the members seem lost in a sea of empty pews? Is there a mix of ages, or a predominance of older (or younger) people? Is there a mix of ethnic groups? Is child care available?

Is the service well organized, or do the participants not seem to know what they're doing? If there is a choir, how happy do they seem to be in front of the congregation? For that matter, how happy does the congregation seem to be?

Is the sermon thoughtful and well-presented? Is it biblically based and theologically sound? Does it stress the lordship of Christ? How does the congregation respond to the sermon?

Opportunity to Serve

What activities are available beyond the Sunday morning worship service? I think it's important to have some basic offerings, such as Sunday school, prayer meetings, Bible studies, and perhaps a Sunday evening or midweek service. If you are single, is there a singles' group? If you're interested in social action or personal evangelism, find out if members of the congregation have similar interests. Are there clubs and activities for your children?

How could you use your talents at this church? Does the sanctuary need painting? Could you help the church present its newsletter or other printed materials in a more professional way? Does the choir ache for your participation? Will your tithe help pay for some much-needed repairs? After visiting for two or more consecutive Sundays and prayerfully reflecting on what you've observed, you should have a good idea whether or not this church is for you. If it isn't, go on to the next church on your list.

If you go through all of the churches on your list and find that you don't particularly like any of them, don't go through the entire process again. Subconsciously, you're probably not going to be satisfied with any church that isn't a clone of the one back home. So choose one of the churches on your list and give it six months. It's better to attend a church where you don't feel completely comfortable than not to attend at

all.

Once you get involved, make a few commitments, and develop some friendships, you'll almost certainly find that your walk with Christ is deepening week by week.



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