

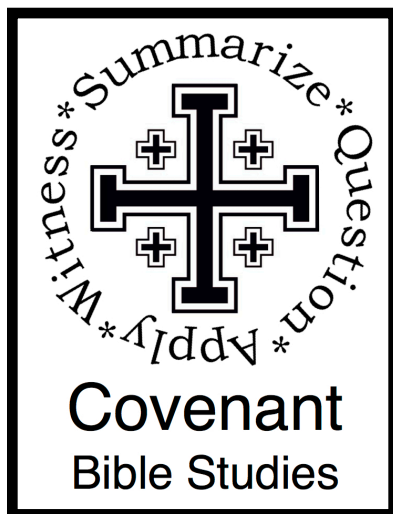
James Reuteler, Ph.D. ∞ Church Shopping



*Nine Questions Every
Shopper Should Ask*

Dedicated to My God-Daughter in Christ

Laura Jacobson Botich



*The Churches will grow, shrink,
be filled with saints,
and overflow with sinners.*

Augustine

Rev. Dr. James T. Reuteler, Ph.D.

Covenant Bible Studies

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Why ask These Questions?

*We ask them because we desire
that spring of water
gushing up to eternal life.*

John 14:14

And the one who was seated on the throne said,
See, I am making all things new.

Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.

*It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega,
the beginning and the end.*

*To the thirsty I will give water
as a gift from the spring of the water of life.*

Then the angel showed me
the river of the water of life,
bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God
and of the Lamb.

Revelation 21:5-6 and 22:1



Let's go Shopping!

PREFACE

My wife and I are church shopping. Being an ordained pastor for many years, I have been appointed to churches, and my wife has followed me around. We have seldom shopped for a church, so church shopping is new to us.

We always thought that we would attend and join the nearest church to where we live. That would be the church, down the street, but we're Methodists. There are five United Methodist Churches within twelve miles of where we live. We have visited all of them, and we still don't know which one to join.

What are we looking for in a church? Maybe we're too fussy. We know personally three of the pastors, and we still can't make up our minds. Since my work as a pastor determined where we worshiped in the past, I suggested to my wife that she choose our next church home. I think she likes the idea, but she's having as much difficulty as I am in choosing a church home.

I find strengths and weaknesses in every church we have visited. How does one make a choice? I don't have *the* answer, but I do have a number of questions, which I hope will help us to choose a church home, They are as follows:

1. **What's in the name?** What does the name mean, and who decided to name the congregation? Is it important and does it reflect anything about the congregation?
2. **Is the building friendly?** I don't mean is it a beautiful building? Is it friendly, or is it difficult to find your way around? Is it friendly to the disabled? We took our disabled son to a church, where he had difficulty in using the restroom, not to mention the stairs. That limited him to the sanctuary.
3. **Are the members friendly?** They may be friendly to one another, but are they friendly to visitors? Does anyone recognize us as visitors?

4. **Is the pastor open?** The pastor has a unique role. He or she preaches a monologue every week. How does the pastor hear the people? Don't we believe in the priesthood of all believers? We may not all be pastors, but we all are ministers. We are a priesthood of believers.
5. **Is the worship meaningful?** Is it inspirational or prophetic? Does it follow the theology of the tradition? Is worship the work of the people, or the work of the staff? What is the purpose of worship, and how do we fit in? How do children fit in?
6. **Is there a Sunday School or a Small Group ministry?** Assuming a Sunday School, or a Small Group ministry exists, what is its purpose? Are children involved in both worship and Sunday School?
7. **Did anyone visit, or at least send a letter?** Were any of the high tech methods used to contact me, such as email or texting?
8. **Does this church love missions?** Does their mission outreach include the people around the Church, and does it include people in the State, the Nation, and in the World? How are mission funds raised?
9. **What am I really joining?** Am I joining a local group of likeminded people, or am I joining a denomination? What does it mean to join a Church

I'm sure that there are more questions that we could ask but these are the nine questions we asked ourselves as we went church shopping

I'm writing this as we go church shopping, so up to this point, I don't know which church we will choose. I hope this book will be helpful to other church shoppers. I doubt that everyone who reads this book, will make the same choice. A lot depends upon our background and our maturing faith and beliefs. I will not name the churches we visited, nor will we only visit in our neighborhood. I intend to use any insights, having to do with church shopping, regardless of where I

found them. We visited churches of all denominations, so anyone should be able to use these questions in shopping for a church.

*Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom
that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks,
by which we offer to God
an acceptable worship
with reverence and awe...*

Hebrews 12:28



Church of St. Peter in Antioch

1. WHAT'S IN THE NAME?

*And it was in Antioch that the disciples,
were first called "Christians."*

Acts 11:26

As we began our church shopping, we drove around the community looking at churches. For the most part we knew what to expect by the name on the sign, but that was not always the case. Occasionally we saw initials, with which we were unfamiliar. If we hesitated to visit that church, I can understand why the unchurched would hesitate to enter a church with an unfamiliar name. I'm familiar with most denominations, but I've never attended worship in a Church of the Latter Day Saints. Of course, I can go to the internet to familiarize myself with a church, and if I want to know what the initials mean, I can find out. Thus far, I haven't bothered to take the time, nor have I visited the church with initials on the sign. I assume that the initials mean something to the members of that congregation. I don't know if it is one of the Churches of the Latter Day Saints or not.

Names of Saints

Roman Catholic Churches are easy to spot. Most, but not all, are named after a Saint. I suppose that those who named the church hoped that the congregation might take on the characteristics of such Saints as St. Mary, St. Joseph, or one of the apostles, or even a modern day Saint, such as Mother Teresa, who has been declared a Saint in our time. Anglican or Episcopal Churches are frequently named after Saints as well, but most Protestant Churches are not named after Saints. There are two United Methodist Churches in our community named after St. Luke and St. Andrew. This is easy to understand in that Methodism separated from the Anglican Church and considers the Episcopal Church a Sister Church. Both denominations came out of the Anglican Church, which leans towards the Roman Catholic Church in its liturgy. The beliefs in the Articles of Religion are the same, except for the number of Articles. In the Episcopal Church they number 39, and in the United Methodist Church they number 25. Why a Presbyterian

Church should be named after a Saint is more difficult to understand, but there are some.

Theological Names.

Most Protestant Churches bear a theological name, such as Trinity, or Faith or Grace. I recently came across a church named, *The Church of the Warm Heart*. It was a United Methodist Church, which is trying to express Methodism's doctrine of religious experience with a practical application. My wife and I worshipped with this congregation for two months while our son was hospitalized nearby. We indeed did experience the compassionate warm heart of this congregation. Protestants are more likely to give their churches theological names than to name them after Saints. Sometimes those theological names are buried in place names, where significant events occurred, such as Epworth or Aldersgate in the Wesleyan tradition. If personal names are used, they would be the names of the leaders, without Sainthood being attached. Rarely would one find a Protestant Church being named after a contemporary person, although I know of two such churches.

Location Names.

Another method of naming churches is the practice of naming them according to their location. Among the mainline churches, the first church to be located in a city would be named First Church. Each Denomination would name their own First Church. Examples of this are First Baptist Church, First Methodist Church, and First Presbyterian Church. Occasionally, there would be a Second Church, after which succeeding churches would use theological or place names.

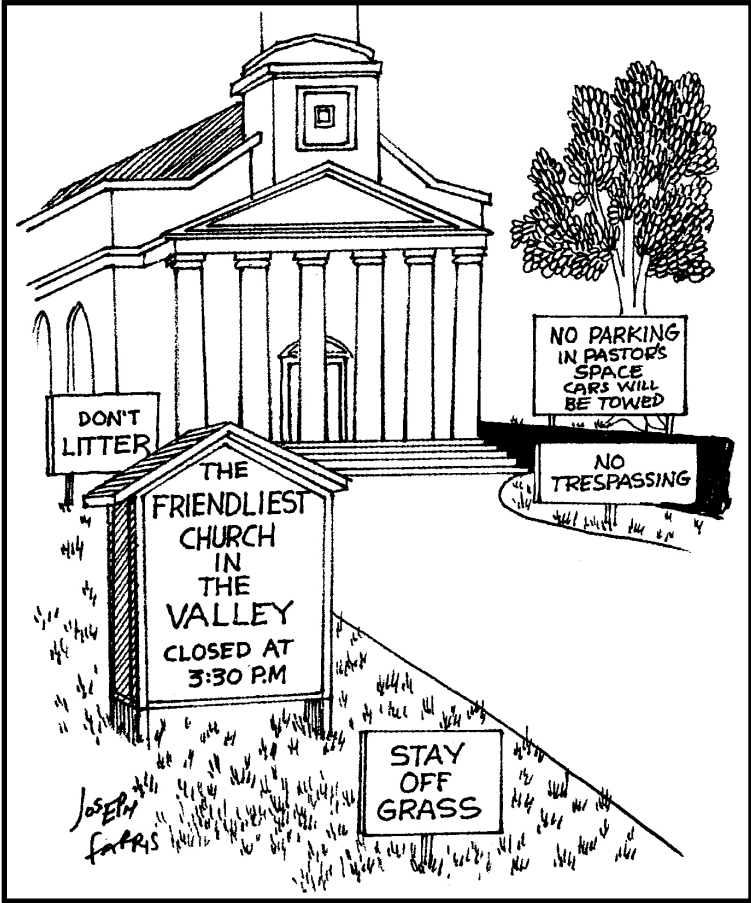
In recent years, it has become a common practice to hide denominational affiliations by using location names, and at the same time, hiding the denominational affiliation altogether. One of the fastest growing movements is that group of churches who call themselves Community Churches. Community means something to these churches. They refer to themselves as a Community of Faith or Grace and they are located in a specific location. Since a multitude of denominations have taken on a negative connotation, these

churches are thriving and may be some of the largest churches in the community. They frequently promote themselves as Bible Churches. One can see how what's on the sign says something about the church itself. Some of the Mainline Churches have tried to imitate them by printing their denominational affiliation in small letters below the name they have chosen for themselves; or sometimes, they leave out the denominational affiliation altogether. The name, however, could take on the location, or it could take on a theological name.

My wife and I once belonged to a congregation that named themselves after an early trail that led pioneers into the Denver area. They don't hide their denominational affiliation; instead, they emphasize their early tradition with the symbol of a covered wagon. Not everything can be on the sign, but the name and logo on the sign reveals something of the congregation inside. It would be a mistake to join a church in order to change it into something else. The sign is only the first step in church shopping, but it is an important step. One thing that ought to be on the sign is the time of all public worship services. One should not have to go to the web site to find the times of worship; however, if one does go to the web site to find the times of worship, this information should be on the first page of the web site. The mission statement should also be on that first page.

*Keep these words that I am commanding you today
in your heart...and write them on the doorposts
of your house and on your gates.*

Deuteronomy 6:6 and 9



2. IS THIS BUILDING FRIENDLY?

*I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”*

Psalm 122:1-2

The Front Door and the Sanctuary

The front door, or main entrance, should be easy to identify. Once you walk through the entrance, you should be able to find your way into the sanctuary.

The Nursery and the Fellowship Hall

Second to the sanctuary is the nursery and the fellowship hall. You shouldn't have to ask someone, "Where's the nursery or fellowship hall?" They should be obvious. One should be able to see the fellowship hall upon leaving the sanctuary. If the nursery and fellowship hall are out of sight, there should be plenty of signs directing visitors to them.

The Classrooms

Classrooms for children and adults should have signs indicating the names of the classes that meet there. Adult classes should have at least one wall of glass so that children can see that Sunday School is not only for children. Classrooms should be easy to find. The same could be said for the Sunday School Office and the Church Office.

The Disabled.

Is the entire building friendly and accessible to persons with handicapping conditions? We visited one church which was a nightmare to anyone with disabilities. It was easy to write that church off, and continue our church shopping elsewhere.

The Grounds.

Don't forget the grounds and the grass! I have never seen a Mormon church without a perfect yard, and one can distinguish a Mormon church a mile away. The same can be said for the fast growing Community Churches. Most of them

look more like an office building than a traditional church building.

I don't want to imply that a church needs to have a perfect building, but it does need to work on its shortcomings. Earlier, I mentioned the *Church of the Warm Heart*. Its fellowship hall is in another building, but they made sure that visitors knew where it was, and they found ways to make them feel welcome.

*The gifts he gave were that
some would be apostles, some prophets,
some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,
to equip the saints for the work of ministry,
for building up the body of Christ,
until all of us come to the unity of the faith
and of the knowledge of the Son of God,
to maturity, to the measure
of the full stature of Christ.*

Ephesians 4:11-13

3. ARE THE MEMBERS FRIENDLY?

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,
for by doing that
some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

Hebrews 13:2

I Served one congregation that had name tags for everyone, but they only wore them on special occasions. One of those special occasions was the Sunday to meet the new pastor and his family. Everything went fine until the next Sunday arrived, and no one wore their name tag. One of the women approached my wife and said, “Don’t you know my name yet. If you can’t remember it by next Sunday, I might as well find another church.” The average person can only remember three to five hundred names. Pastors are expected to know everyone in their congregation, no matter the size.

Do they wear name tags?

Name tags do help in spite of those who reject them on the basis that they already know who they are. The purpose of name tags is to help us remember who the other person is. They also help us to recognize visitors. It would be even more helpful if visitors wore a special name tag signifying them as visitors. I’ve seen such name tags in the pews or at a welcome table. We need to be able to distinguish between members and visitors if we are going to avoid the embarrassment of welcoming someone to our congregation, who has been a member for twenty five years, or more. Name tags help us to be friendly without embarrassment.

Do they call you by name?

In our search for a church home, one congregation stands out for us as being friendly. It was a small congregation in a large building. They needed us more than we needed them. Our return was not sequential. In between visiting that congregation, we visited other churches; but, every time we visited that congregation, there were always several people who called us by name. It was among the friendliest congregations we encountered, so, why haven’t we joined it?

Our answer would be, “There is more to joining a church than finding a group of friendly people.” Nevertheless, friendliness is important, and we all expect it, or we move on with our church shopping.

Do they reach out to you?

It has been said that we don’t make friends, we discover them; but how do we discover friends? First, reach out; second, notice the reaction; third, move forward, stop, or back up, depending on the signals you receive. I know of a family who attended worship on a regular basis, but they never joined the church. They said that it was because they would be moving again soon and it would be too painful to say, “Goodbye.” To prevent the pain of saying goodbye, we no longer say, “Hello.” It’s important to discover friends. A friend’s relation to a friend,” says Martin Buber, “is a simile of the relation to God.” If you can’t discover friends in a church, go somewhere else.

*Not many of you should become teachers,
my brothers and sisters,
for you know that we who **teach**
will be judged with greater strictness.*

James 3:1

4. IS THE PASTOR OPEN?

*As for you, always be sober, endure suffering,
do the work of an evangelist,
carry out your ministry fully.*

2 Timothy 4:5

I've read somewhere that only about five percent of the congregation join because they like the pastor. If this is true, then we can expect about five percent will leave, and about the same percentage will join. They follow the pastor. My pastoral experience confirms the above; although, I cannot say that it will always hover around five percent. Augustine estimated that about half of his congregation were non members. What I can say is that when there is a pastoral change, some people will leave and other people will join. Some will never join, even if they like the pastor.

A Message I Can Understand and Apply To My Life.

What do we want in a pastor? My wife says, "All I want from my pastor is a message that I can understand and apply to my daily life." That's probably what most people want from their pastor.

A Dialogical Bible Study.

I have a different need. I want my pastor to be open. He or she does not have to agree with me, but I expect to be heard. Most pastors give a monologue in their sermon. No one can give the other side of an issue. There has to be some place in the life of the church where members can speak and the pastor has to listen without being defensive. How can the pastor open himself or herself up to hear what the members of the church have to say or believe?

As we have done our church shopping, I have looked at the weekly activities to see what the pastor does during the week. Very few engage in a weekly Bible Study with their members. In one church, which we visited, they announced that the senior pastor was starting a Bible Study on Wednesday evenings. I signed up, thinking that this would be a great opportunity to engage in dialogue with the pastor. I

was disappointed. The pastor welcomed us and turned on a video for us to watch. After the video was over, we were divided into groups to share with one another. During the time of sharing, the pastor wasn't even in the room. At the end the pastor returned to thank people for coming and gave the closing benediction. This illustrates what I do not want in a pastor.

What do I want? I want a pastor who is open to genuine dialogue, who will allow communication to move in two or more directions. I want a pastor who will be involved in the whole life of the church and not only in delivering a sermon or monologue on Sunday morning. I want a pastor who takes seriously a Bible Study in dialogue with all the members of the church. He or she is the pastor, but all of us are ministers. I want my pastor to believe in and practice the priesthood of all believers.

A Pastor Who Celebrates and Mourns

In addition to preaching and teaching, I expect my pastor to be there to rejoice with those who celebrate in a wedding or special event and weep with those who mourn in the loss of a loved one. I want a pastor who will be there when I need him or her.

A Pastor Who Loves Mercy and Justice

If all this isn't enough, there is more. I want a pastor who loves mercy and justice, who will lead the way unafraid, to house the homeless and provide a way to give integrity to the hungry. I want a pastor who will advocate primarily for jobs, not merely for charity.

A Pastor Who Loves The *Children*

Am I asking too much of my pastor? No! I may be asking too little. The pastor is the leader. This means that the pastor has to have some kind of involvement in the whole church, including with the children and youth.

A Pastor Who Invites People To Become *Disciples*

Perhaps this work of ministry belongs at the top of our list. In The United Methodist Church the overall mission is declared as “Making Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the world.” The pastor can’t do it alone. We are all ministers and the task of making disciples is too important to leave it to the pastor. It’s the task of the whole congregation.

No pastor can fulfill all of the above. Every pastor will have to decide what his or her special spiritual gifts are and focus on them. Every member will also have to decide what special spiritual gifts they want in a pastor.

*And he said to them, “**Follow me,**
and I will make you fish for people.”*

Matthew 4:19

WORSHIP THE LORD

*Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.
Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.*

*Know that the LORD is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.*

*For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.*

5. IS THE WORSHIP MEANINGFUL?

*And let us consider how to provoke one another
to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together,
as is the habit of some,
but encouraging one another,
and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

Hebrews 10:24-25

Worship is the work of the people. In Old Testament times, the work of the people was to present a tenth of their crops as an offering to God, or a lamb from their flock. These sacrifices were to be the best they had to offer, not what was left over or spoiled or in poor health. This all changed with the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Jesus didn't offer a lamb; he was the Lamb of God. He wasn't forced on the cross. He willingly gave himself up, as the Lamb of God, for the sins of the whole world. Jesus teaches us what a true sacrifice is. It has nothing to do with crops, animals, or even money. It has to do with giving ourselves to God. This is the true worship of the Church. This is the work of the people. Jesus compared this work to taking up a cross.

Paul understood Jesus and transformed the work of worship from giving a sacrifice, to giving ourselves as the sacrifice. He put it clearly in Romans 12:1, his letter to the Christians in Rome:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercy of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

If this is the work of worship, how does authentic worship take place today, and how do we choose a church that makes us want to sit on the front row? When you find people arriving early to sit in the front, take a good look at their worship. It will be either authentic worship or cheap entertainment. What is the difference? Authentic worship proceeds with a profession of Faith (Deuteronomy 6:4), the singing of Hymns (150 Psalms), and the interpretation of Scripture. This was no monologue from the pulpit. Anyone could speak, who had

something significant to say. Authentic worship contains at least these three characteristics, and these are the questions we must ask.

Does the worship begin with Praise?

The opening hymn should be a hymn of Praise. The *United Methodist Hymnal* begins with hymns of Praise and the Glory of the Triune God. There are enough hymns in this section of the hymnal to have a different hymn every week for more than a year. By opening our worship with a hymn of praise, we are professing our faith in the Triune God, who alone is worthy of our worship. The finest example of a hymn of praise is the first hymn in the hymnal:

*O for a thousand tongues to sing
my great Redeemer's praise,
the glories of my God and King,
the triumphs of his grace!¹*

The hymn goes on with eighteen more verses, nineteen in all. Most hymnals include only six verses.

Singing the hymn of praise is the privilege of the congregation. This may take some preparation. In one of the churches we visited, the song leader told the story of the hymn and explained some of the imagery ahead of time. The hymn of Praise for that Sunday was, *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. When the congregation began to sing, I didn't know if I was in heaven, or still on earth. This wasn't entertainment. This was a spiritual experience.

Does the Sermon contain Good News?

The pulpit is not the place to deal with controversial issues. Such issues are better dealt with in a study where participants can talk back. People don't attend worship to be scolded. They attend worship for many reasons, such as comfort, forgiveness, inspiration, and to be challenged. Moses was challenged by God, and Moses challenged the whole congregation. In Leviticus 19:2, and 1 Peter 1:16 we read:

¹ Charles Wesley, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (The United Methodist Publishing House: Nashville, 1989), #57.

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.
Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel
and say to them:
You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.*

Here is Good News which inspires and challenges us, even in the Old Testament. It is in the Old Testament that we discover the oneness of God, and we are challenged to love Him with all our heart, our soul and our strength. In addition to loving God, we must be challenged to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.¹ Similar challenges exist in the New Testament. When Jesus is asked to name the greatest of the commandments he goes to the Old Testament and names these two commandments. Challenging people to live up to loving God and the neighbor lies at the center of the Good News. This is what holiness is. It has been said

*Happiness is the fruit of holiness.
Holiness is the search for love and righteousness.*

If holiness brings happiness, that is both Good News, and a challenge. The greater Good News is that God revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, and when they crucified him, on the third day he rose from the dead. The essence of the Good News is, "He is Risen!" That's our message and hymns back it up. Charles Wesley wrote more hymns than any other hymn writer, but in addition to praise hymns, he also wrote hymns that proclaim the Good News. These hymns should surround the pastor's sermon. Two such hymns express the Good News. First the hymn of holiness.

*Love Divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven, to earth come down;
fix in us thy humber dwelling;
all thy faithful mercies crown!
Jesus, thou art all compassion;
pure unbounded love thou art;*

¹ Leviticus 19:8

*visit us with thy salvation;
enter every trembling heart.¹*

The second hymn is about conquering death. What greater Good News could be preached?

*Christ the Lord is risen today. Alleluiah!
Earth and heaven in chorus say, Alleluiah!
Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluiah!
Sing, ye heavens and earth reply, Alleluiah!²*

Why would we want the choir to have all the fun? If there is a choir, the leader should invite the congregation to join in. The sermon and the music should join together to proclaim the Good News. We should cease to call it the sermon or the message.; and we should call it, and name it, what it's supposed to be—the Good News.

Is there an Invitation to Discipleship?

How could one proclaim such Good News and want to keep it to him or herself? I can understand the problem of an Invitation to Discipleship, if one is preaching on one of the controversial issues. I know of one church that invites people who are celebrating a birthday or anniversary to gather around the altar for prayer. People gladly respond and are not self-conscious about going down the aisle to celebrate.

We visited another church in which the pastor was preaching on Jesus' baptism and what it meant to her. At the close of the service she invited people to come forward and to receive a little water on their hands to commemorate their own baptism. Then she asked the following three questions, asking people to respond, and they did:

Therefore, in the Spirit of baptism I ask each of you:

¹ Charles Wesley, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (The United Methodist Publishing House: Nashville, 1989), #384.

² Charles Wesley, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (The United Methodist Publishing House: Nashville, 1989), #302.

1. Do you believe your life is a blessing and gift of God? (The people replied, “I do.”)
2. Will you do all in your power to create a life filled with love and acceptance for yourself and others? (The people replied, “I will”)
3. Will you make every effort possible to continue the journey of Discipleship with Jesus Christ? (The people replied, “I Will”)

Let us pray.

No one seemed embarrassed. There were a couple of people who did not go forward, but there was an overwhelming response to her invitation.

Following the murder of nine members of an AME¹ church, my wife and I decided to show our support by attending the local AME church. I knew that the service would be, long. I used to take our confirmation classes to an AME church, and the service always lasted at least two hours. The service began at 10:00 a.m. and we had an appointment at 12:30 on the other side of the city. I assumed that we could keep our appointment. Just as I thought, the service was over, about 12:00 Noon, but the Invitation to Discipleship was just beginning. We were embarrassed because we had to leave. No one else left. We found ourselves apologizing to the ushers for leaving before the the most important part of the service even started. The Invitation went on for another half hour, but we had to leave.

Billy Graham is known for his Invitations to Discipleship. I know quite a few people who walked down the aisle at a Billy Graham Crusade to accept Christ into their life. Billy Graham made it easy by calling for a simple decision and using the same hymn at the end of every crusade.

*Just as I am, without one plea,
but that thy blood was shed for me;*

¹ AME means African Methodist Episcopal.

*and that thou bidst me come to thee,
O Lamb of God; I come, I come.*

*Just as I am, thy love unknown
hath broken every barrier down;
now, to be thine; yea thine alone,
O Lamb of God; I come, I come.¹*

In a Billy Graham crusade every verse was sung. Not every pastor can get away with using the same hymn for the Invitation to Discipleship, but every pastor should include an Invitation to Discipleship. They may have to be a little creative, but it should be included. Those who respond should be offered the Good News.

I haven't even mentioned the Lord's Supper, which ends with an Invitation to Discipleship, not to the righteous, but to sinners. Charles Wesley put it well in one of his many hymns:

*Come, sinners, to the gospel feast,
let every soul be Jesus' guest.
Ye need not one be left behind,
for God hath bid all human kind.²*

His brother, John, called the Lord's Supper a converting ordinance. I wouldn't join a church that would turn anyone away from the Lord's Supper. Leave it to God to do the converting. Our task is to do the inviting. Both John and Charles Wesley advocated giving this invitation as frequently as possible, and certainly it should be offered every Sunday.

Is there a call to Missions?

True worship may begin inside the sanctuary, but it doesn't end there. True worshippers must be sent into the fields to share the Good News to everyone who will listen, and even to those who refuse to listen. Charles Wesley had a great closing

Charlotte Elliott, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (The United Methodist Publishing House: Nashville, 1989), #357.

² Charles Wesley, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (The United Methodist Publishing House: Nashville, 1989), #339 or 616.

hymn that sent worshipers out to everyone, to those who would listen and to those who refused to listen.

*Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go,
my daily labor to pursue;
thee, only thee, resolved to know
in all I think or speak or do.¹*

A quick look at the weekly church bulletin or monthly newsletter will reveal how the church understands its mission. Why didn't I say, look at the congregational mission statement? Look at what they do, not what they say. Whether we look at the mission statement or the church activities, one more thing needs to be said. Do those activities focus on charity or justice? When they focus on charity, you will always have the poor with you, but when they focus on justice, the poor will overcome their poverty. Churches should be involved in both charity and justice, but they should spend more money and time on justice than on charity.

Allow me to share an example. When I see someone on the street begging for money, I gladly give a dollar, even if I think that dollar will be used to purchase alcohol or drugs. This is a charitable donation to respond to someone in need. My gift of a dollar will not lift that person out of poverty or help to heal an addiction to alcohol or drugs. That's the task of justice. I would rather contribute money for a person's education or housing. The difficulty is that justice costs a whole lot more money than charity; and yet, we don't want it to be charity. That's why I would rather contribute to Habitat for Humanity, which enables people to purchase affordable housing. If people can afford their housing, they can purchase their own food and clothing. They won't need charity. I have seen people transformed as they fulfilled the requirements for purchasing their home. Habitat for Humanity's requirements are as follows:

1. To work for 200 hours of sweat equity
2. To take classes on home ownership

¹ Charles Wesley. *The United Methodist Hymnal* (The United Methodist Publishing House: Nashville, 1989), #438.

3. To pay for the home with 25 to 28% of their salary

Many of the poor are paying 50 to 75 percent of their income on rent, and by purchasing a Habitat home, they are getting a substantial raise and they no longer need charity. I call this justice. I realize that there are other ways of helping people climb out of poverty, but this is one way churches can participate in justice.



*Do your best to present yourself to God
as one approved by him,
a worker who has no need to be ashamed,
rightly explaining the word of truth.*

2 Timothy 2:15

6. IS THERE A SUNDAY SCHOOL OR A SMALL GROUP MINISTRY?

They devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching.

Acts 4:42

Sunday School. Is there a Sunday School and where is it positioned? Does it meet during worship, between worship or before or after worship? Another option is for the children to worship through a children's story time, and then leave for children's worship in another space. The big question is, "Shall children worship with adults?" The second big questions is, "Shall adults attend Sunday School?" My answer to both questions is, "YES."

Those who don't want the children in worship give as their reasons: "The children can't sit that long and the sermon is over their heads. It's better to have them in Sunday School, where the content is on their level, while the adults are in worship." That, however, makes it difficult for adults to participate in Sunday School; unless of course, they teach the children.

We have different opinions on whether children should experience worship and whether adults should attend Sunday School. If we want children in worship and adults in Sunday School, then adults need to demonstrate this to the children. I visited one church where all the adult classrooms had glass walls on one side, so that the children could see their parents in Sunday School. Another alternative is to send the children to Sunday School, while the parents go to Starbucks, which means that adults are using the Sunday School for child care.

Small Group Ministries. An alternative to Sunday School is a Small Group, which doesn't have to meet on Sunday morning, although it could. Most Small Groups are Study Groups. They may study the Bible together, or they may choose a book to read and share their insights in the Small Group. These are the most common Small Groups, but there are many other kinds of Small Groups.

Sunday School Classes frequently grow large, but Small Groups remain small. How small? It has been said that the best size for a Small Group is 5 to 7 members. I have led Small Groups that grew to 35 members. That's way too big. When the group is that large, certain persons begin to dominate, while others remain silent. Because we are a mobile society, I would aim at 6 to 12 members. That way if a couple of members are absent, there are still enough present for some good sharing. If attendance was going to be less than 4 members, I would call off the meeting. Rather than adding to a group of 12, members, I would divide the group in half.

How long should a group meet? That depends on the group. If they are sharing insights from a book, the number of chapters might determine how long the group would meet. Bible Study Groups are different, mainly because there is so much content. The Bible is a library with many books. To cover the entire Bible, it would take six years. I have gone through the Bible, writing my own commentary, and each time I did this, it took six years. I did it four times. I think the pastor should do this with members of the congregation. Most Small Groups will meet less than 12 times. Although I met with a group of pastors for 14 years, and a group of lay persons for close to 15 years, I would approach such groups differently today. First, we would covenant to meet from September through May; then, we would take June through August off. We would also take off all of the Holidays.

In looking for a church we have to decide what kind of groups or classes we want to attend. If the church doesn't offer what we desire, we can join a class in another church without leaving the church to which we belong. I've always been welcomed when I did this, and I always welcomed nonmembers who came to our Bible Study. The local Catholic priest stopped by one time to see what we were doing. About five of his members were attending our Bible Study. He started his own Bible Study, and the five members of his congregation started attending both. The discussion from both Bible Studies was enriched.

7. DID ANYONE VISIT YOU OR AT LEAST SEND YOU A LETTER?

*I was a stranger and you did not welcome me,
naked and you did not give me clothing,
sick and in prison and you did not visit me.*

Matthew 25:43

After retiring, my wife and I began looking for a church in which we could worship. We visited five churches in a little over one month. Each one of the five churches had a visitor card in the pew, which said, "Request a visit from the pastor." Wanting to talk with the pastor, I checked the box next to "Request a visit from the pastor." None of the pastors visited us, nor did they call us on the phone.

We did receive one visit from a lay person, who brought us a fresh baked apple pie. We weren't home, so we found the pie by the front door. It was sealed and we ate it. There was no followup. In another community, where we visited five of the closest churches, we did not find the "Request a visit from the pastor" in the visitor card, so we only shared our name, address phone numbers, and emails. One pastor was on vacation at the time and wrote a letter to us. The letter was hand written, unlike the standard letter sent out by the church office. He promised to pay us a visit, but never did.

I recently read a paragraph on the internet about why pastors don't have time for making visits. Throughout my ministry I visited both the members of the church I served and those who visited us for the first time. I would try to visit the first time visitors sometime during that first week. I would try to make appointments, but if I had difficulty making an appointment, I would drop by at a reasonable time of day. I decided that most people wouldn't want a visit after 8:00 p.m., so that was my cutoff time. I would never drop by after 8:00 p.m., and usually visits without an appointment were done on Saturday afternoon.

Only on one occasion did I not follow my 8:00 p.m. curfew. I had only one more visit to make and I wanted to make it. It was a snowy cold winter night. It was a blizzard and the temperature was way below zero. I didn't stay long, but the person I visited that night told everyone that the Methodist preacher visited her family in a blizzard. It has been said that on cold winter nights there's nothing out there but crows and Methodist preachers. Which one am I?

I wasn't asking for a visit from those five pastors in a winter storm, but I expected my request to be fulfilled. After all, they put the cards in the pews, and I took them seriously. If the church and the pastor didn't mean it, then "Request a visit from the pastor" should not appear in their pew cards.

*They devoted themselves to the apostles'
teaching and fellowship,
to the breaking of bread and the prayers.
Awe came upon everyone,
because many wonders and signs
were being done by the apostles.
All who believed were together
and had all things in common;
they would sell their possessions and goods
and distribute the proceeds to all,
as any had need.*

Acts 2:42-45

8. DOES THIS CHURCH LOVE MISSIONS

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit,
and teaching them to obey everything
that I have commanded you. And remember,
I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

Matthew 28:19-20

Some of the churches we visited had a missions corner, or a missions desk to promote their mission projects. Some churches had nothing at all. If they had any mission projects they were well kept secrets. Churches that love missions, display them.

Missions include evangelism and social justice. Missions include local and foreign projects. Most Committees on Missions seek a balance in their mission projects. They will select local, national, and international projects. Many projects do all three at the same time.

We do not get involved in Missions in order to get more members into our Churches. That's the task of Evangelism. Evangelism, however, has a close relationship to Missions. The Apostle Paul could be called both a missionary and an evangelist. His task was clear. His mission was evangelistic. He was out there to win people to Jesus Christ. We don't, however, feed the hungry through Heifer Project, or build Habitat homes with the expectation that the recipients of our compassion will join our church. I mention Heifer Project and Habitat for Humanity because these two projects claim to give people a hand up, not a hand out. At the same time, they are local, national and international, and they are considered acts of justice, not simply acts of compassion.

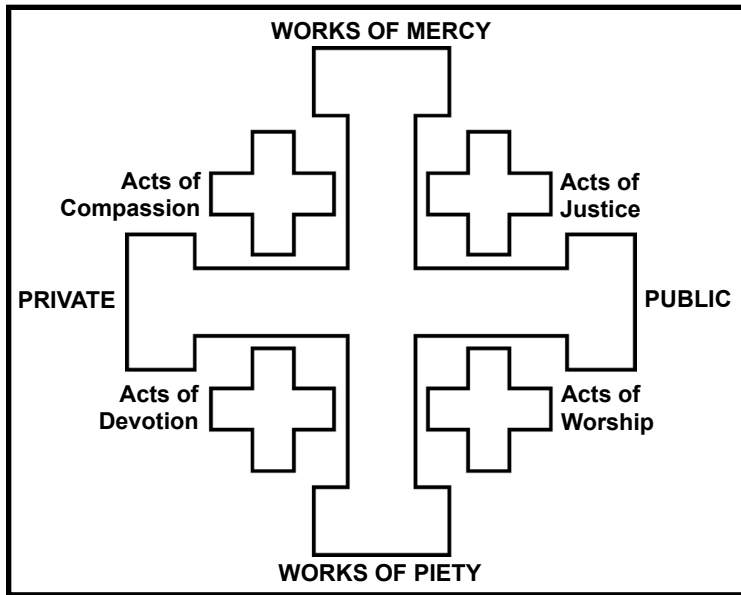
1. There are Acts of Compassion and Acts of Justice. We call both of these Works of Mercy. Acts of Compassion are private Works of Mercy and Acts of Justice are Public Works of Mercy.

2. There are also Acts of Devotion and Acts of Worship. We call both of these Works of Piety. Acts of Devotion are private Works of Piety and Acts of Worship are Public works of Piety.

David Watson ties these altogether in the Jerusalem cross and calls them the General Rule of Christian Discipleship, which is:

to witness to Jesus Christ in the world,
and to follow his teachings through
acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion.
under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps it is easier to understand the above if we study Watson's diagram of the Jerusalem cross.¹



The Jerusalem Cross

If any of the above has priority, it would be the Works of Mercy. Compassion and Justice always take priority over

¹ David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship* (Discipleship Resources: Nashville, 1998), p. 78.

Devotion and Worship. This is the message of the Parable of the Good Samaritan.¹ The priest walked by the injured man. The Good Samaritan stopped to help him. Mercy is always more important than Piety, and Justice is more important than Compassion or Charity.,

*But you will receive power
when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,
in all Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth.*

Acts 1:8



¹ See Luke 10:25-37.



The Body of Christ

And God has appointed in the church
first apostles,
second prophets,
third teachers;
then deeds of power,
then gifts of healing,
forms of assistance,
forms of leadership,
various kinds of tongues.
strive for the greater gifts.
And I will show you a still more excellent way.

1 Corinthians 12:28-31

9. WHAT AM I REALLY JOINING?

*Now you are the body of Christ
and individually members of it.*

1 Corinthians 12:27

Now we come to my final question. What are we really joining? We talk about going to church, when we should say, “we are going to worship God.” The church is a building. We call it the house of God, but God doesn’t need a building in which to live. John closes his vision of the New Jerusalem, in Revelation 21:5 by saying, “I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord the God the Almighty and the Lamb.” As the Body of Christ, we are part of that Temple, but Jesus Christ is our living Head.

There is nothing new about this. The Apostle Paul taught it to the churches. The best example of what this means was described by Kathleen Norris in her wonderful book, called *Amazing Grace*.

It was January, bitterly cold and windy, on the day that I joined the church, and I found that the sub-zero chill perfectly matched my mood. As I walked to church, into the face of that wind, I was thoroughly depressed. I didn’t feel much like a Christian and wondered if I was making a serious mistake. I still felt like an outsider in the church and wondered if I always would. Yet I knew that somehow, in ways I did not yet understand, making this commitment was something I needed to do.

Before the service, the new members gathered with some of the elders. One was a man I’d never liked much. I’ll call him Ed. He’d always seemed ill-tempered to me, and also a terrible gossip, epitomizing the small mindedness that can make small-town life such a trial. The minister had asked him to formally greet the new members. Standing awkwardly before our small group, Ed cleared his throat and mumbled, “I’d like to welcome you to the body of Christ.” The minister’s mouth dropped open, as did mine—Neither

of us had ever heard words remotely like this coming from Ed's mouth. Like distant thunder, the words made me more alert, attuned to further disruptions in the atmosphere. What had I gotten myself into? I was astonished to realize, as that service began, that while I may never like Ed very much, I had just been commanded to love him. My own small mind had just been jolted, and the world seemed larger, opened in a new way.

Ed's words, those few, simple words of welcome, had power. Like the sacrament of baptism, they seemed to have made an indelible mark on my soul. And they had real import for me during the service. As I went forward on shaky legs to the front of the church, to join the others who were becoming members that day, my eye happened to catch the disbelieving and most unwelcoming expression on the face of a younger woman, an extremely conservative member of the congregation. I felt a twinge for her, for both of us, as I didn't want to be there, doing this, any more than she wanted me to be invading her sacred turf with my doubts, my suspect Christianity, so unlike her own. I nearly turned around. But I couldn't because I had just been welcomed into the body of Christ.¹

How does one know if a church takes seriously its relationship to the Body of Christ? One doesn't have to be in a church very long before Spiritual Gifts are mentioned. Some churches use a Spiritual Gifts Inventory to help new members discover their Spiritual Gifts. The Bible doesn't name all the Spiritual Gifts, so there's room for discovering new ones, as long as we follow the Holy Spirit towards that more excellent way. According to 1 Corinthians 13:13, "faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace* (Penguin Publishing Group), pp. 141-143.

THE BIG DECISION

*Then Jesus told his disciples,
“If any want to become my followers,
let them deny themselves
and take up their cross and follow me.”*

Matthew 16:24

We were church shopping for about a year, and we really were not making much progress. We could identify some of the reasons for joining a church and we could identify some reasons for not joining a church. Both reasons are numerous, and in the end, not very helpful. It seems to me that this book might be more helpful to pastors than to those who sit in the pew.

We could not find a perfect church because there aren't any. Even when we recognize ourselves as members of the Body of Christ, we find it difficult to imitate our Living Head and Heart. Christ may be perfect, but the members of his Body are still striving to catch up with him.

It happened on our third visit. We had attended the church twice before, but this time things were different. As we drove home, my wife said to me, “This is the one. I know it.” I replied, “I’ve been praying that this would be your choice.” We were in perfect agreement.

What is it about this church that attracted us? Let me name some of the positive things that attracted us. The members seemed genuinely friendly. We walked into an enlarged Narthex where people were sitting around talking. There was room for visitors to sit and join in the conversation. They all wore name tags. The sermon was Biblical, clear and practical. The pastor ended the sermon with a very creative Invitation to Discipleship, and they seemed to love Missions.

Not everything was perfect. I didn't know they had an elevator until our third visit. The outside sign didn't say very much, but it did contain the time of worship. The church does not have a very good location. It is located in an out of the way

residential area. If you are unfamiliar with the area, it's difficult to find.

Knowing that my wife had some difficulty with the location and the distance from our home, I asked, "What made you say, 'This is the one?'" She replied, "The Holy Spirit and their love of missions." "Maybe," I thought to myself, "We like this church because the people are friendly, just like us." One thing this congregation recognizes is that people are different, and they have different Spiritual Gifts. On the wall of the enlarged narthex, they displayed a huge illustration of the church as the Body of Christ in need of many Spiritual Gifts. Not everyone has the same Spiritual Gift, so the church needs all kinds of people. I truly think that we followed the Holy Spirit into worship with these people, who are part of the Body of Christ and love Missions.

In addition to their Spiritual Gifts, we noticed the Fruit of the Spirit active in this congregation. According to Galatians 5:2, the Fruit of the Spirit is:

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,

Galatians 5:22

Quite a number of churches ended their service with the same Hymn or Chorus Sunday after Sunday. If I were to choose a closing hymn, it would be the last verse of *When I Survey the Wondrous cross*:

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were an offering far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.¹*

AMEN

¹ Isaac Watts. *The United Methodist Hymnal* (The United Methodist Publishing House: Nashville, 1989), #298.

SCORING YOUR VISITS

1. WHAT'S IN THE NAME?

Named after a Saint

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Theological Name

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Named after a Location

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. IS THIS BUILDING FRIENDLY?

Front Door or Entrance

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Sanctuary

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Nursery

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Fellowship Hall

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Classrooms

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Office

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Handicap Accessible?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Grounds and Grass

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. ARE THE MEMBERS FRIENDLY?

Do the People wear Name Tags

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Do They call You by Name?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Do They reach Out to You?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. IS THE PASTOR OPEN?

A Message I can Understand and Apply

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

A Dialogical Bible Study

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

A Pastor who Celebrates and Mourns

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

A Pastor who loves the Children

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

A Pastor who invites People to become Disciples

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5. IS THE WORSHIP MEANINGFUL?

Does the Worship begin with Praise?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Does the Sermon contain Good News?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Is there an Invitation to Discipleship?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Is there a call to Missions

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6. IS THERE A SUNDAY SCHOOL?

Is there a Sunday School?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

For Adults?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Do Children stay in Worship?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Are there Small Groups?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

7. DID ANYONE VISIT YOU?

Did the Pastor visit You?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Did the Pastor call You on the Phone?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Did anyone visit You?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Did anyone call You on the Phone?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Did you get a Personal Letter or an E-mail?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8. DOES THIS CHURCH LOVE MISSIONS?

Are the Mission Projects Displayed?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Are the mission projects balanced

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

9. WHAT AM I REALLY JOINING?

The Church as a Building?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

The Church as a Social Organization?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

The Church as a Denomination?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

The Church as the Body of Christ?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

The Church as a Spiritual Temple?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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Dr. James T. Reuteler
Jim@Reuteler.org
Jim.Reuteler.org

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