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Discernment in Finding a Church

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Discernment in Finding a Church

Discernment is hard work. Given the other stresses of transitions, we easily replace discernment with the more efficient church-shopping. If Amazon sold churches, we could just read customer reviews and select the one everybody likes best!

This is the tricky part—how to make wise decisions but not fall back into a consumerist mindset? How can we cultivate an openness to God’s leading?

What follows are some suggestions to help in making this decision.

1. View this season of discerning a church as an opportunity.

“I hate church shopping!” is a common complaint during seasons of transition. But what if we relished this season for the unique opportunity it affords us? You are free to experience the variety of ways Christians worship in your area. God will surprise you and convict you as you find faithful Christ followers in all sorts of churches, who all approach God in different ways. Once we commit to a particular family of Christians, we don’t often get to step back and experience the bigger picture of Christianity in our areas.

2. Go worship God with other Christians—don’t think of it as visiting or checking-out churches.

Our attitudes and expectations make all the difference. If you went on a first date clutching your spousal wish-list, not only would you get weird looks from your date, but you’d miss out on connecting with a person. Go for the purpose of worshipping God with others. Even if you won’t eventually commit to that particular church you can still worship God, be present to your fellow worshipers, and actively trust that God will lead you to a church family.

3. Be open to the new or unfamiliar.

Go with the attitude of a learner. Seek to understand how their particular forms of worship really allow them to worship. Expect to be surprised by beauty and significance in the unfamiliar.

4. Know yourself.

What strengths has God given you? How can you serve the Church? We can fight consumerist attitudes by embracing the opportunity and privilege to contribute to the life and service of that body. Relationships involve both people initiating and receiving, so part of discernment is understanding not just what you need from a church but what you can give as well.

5. Identify your speed bumps.

We should submit our non-essential (yet important) preferences about church to God. What, if anything, distracts you from worshipping God, whether theological, musical style, size, preaching, etc.? Talk to God and search scripture about what you've identified. As you listen to God speak through others, the Bible, or internally, ask yourself if you sense any of those preferences shifting. The fruit of this work will help you understand what preferences you should prioritize as you think about your compatibility with a particular church. Often times we see that in our friendships quirks that once annoyed us are endearing once we love a person. Other times however, differences actually hinder intimacy in which case, it is wise to not commit to that person any further.

6. Avoid debriefing.

The temptation is certainly there to walk out of a church service (really, whether we're in the discernment process or not!) and immediately begin debriefing what we liked or didn't like. When we talk about the service we should cultivate thankfulness instead of criticism. It might help our memories to record some of our observations, but it is more helpful to develop the habit of asking God to continue to bring that church to mind if He'd like us to worship there again.

7. Pursue spiritual growth during this discernment process.

It is easy for us to become apathetic about growing in our relationship with Jesus while we lack the stability of a primary spiritual community. But our sensitivity (developed through familiarity!) to God is the most important piece of the discernment process. So we should do whatever it takes to stay vibrantly connected to God during this time: devote time to being with God in prayer and scripture, meet or call mentors and friends, or take risks and ask for prayer, meet with church leaders, or attend mid-week events when you worship with different churches.