

Positive ThinkersTM

C L U B

Why Go to Church?

June 2014

Dear Friends,

June is here, and in my church at the beginning of summer we are used to saying good-bye to some folks until the fall. Some go away to vacation homes, some travel — but others simply take a vacation from church. I don't want to be judgmental, but I would like to make a gentle case for faithful year-round church attendance. Here are some of the reasons why.

Church gives us a sacred pause. Most of us lead such busy lives that we can lose touch with our spiritual selves. Weekly Sabbath time, centered on a worship service, gives us a chance to "be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

But we need to be careful that our hurried habits, our weekday multi-tasking tendencies, our worries and preoccupations, don't carry over to Sunday and block the blessings. My father, in an article entitled "How to Go to Church," advised: "Get a good Saturday night's sleep. Have morning arrangements made. Be unhurried. Go in a relaxed state of body and mind. Absence of tension is a requisite to successful worship. Don't bring a 'problem' to church. Think hard during the week, then check the problem at the church door. God's peace brings creative energy to help the intellectual process." When experienced this way, church can be, as my father said, "one of the delightful periods of the whole week — with deep enjoyment and benefit."

Church connects us to a network of caring. Brigitte Weeks, Guideposts Senior Editor, once struggled with a debilitating depression. She told herself to snap out of it and pull herself together — to no avail. Then at a church service, during the Prayers of the People, the minister mentioned her name as someone for the congregation to pray for. As she wrote in *Daily Guideposts*, it had a surprising effect on her:

We hear so much about the power of prayer. Now I felt it wrapping around me, easing the stress in my shoulders, unclenching my hands. The depression wasn't gone — there was

no miracle cure — but a day that before had been cold and gray was now soft and warm.

A church community binds us to people who are trying hard to live out Christ's commandment to "love one another." Through praying for fellow members, supporting one another in times of illness or grief, offering material assistance with meals, transportation, companionship or financial help, our church friends can become like a large, caring family.

Church gives us opportunities to serve. Many of us want to feel useful and to help others. Church offers a way to do so that is especially meaningful because it is rooted in our deepest faith. Participating in or leading a committee, going on a mission trip, singing in the choir, teaching Sunday School, leading a small group, organizing or helping out with hospitality events — these are just some of the possible ways to serve in my church, and probably in most others. As a minister friend of mine observed, "It's possible to have a completely full, active and fulfilling life within your church."

Within the familiar and safe environment of our faith community, we may gain the courage to try new roles. That's what happened with my sister Maggie and her husband, Paul. When in 2006 our church sent a mission team to New Orleans to help with rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina, Maggie and Paul went — not without some apprehension, since both of them were in their seventies and not used to heavy physical work. The experience was life-changing for them.

At first, however, they were not so sure. As Maggie wrote in an article for *PLUS*, on the first morning in New Orleans,

When we looked inside the house, we were confronted by a mountain of debris: waterlogged couches on top of each other, chests, scatter rugs, tables piled high, and beneath it all, mud — some still oozing — some caked eight inches thick.

Our team leader, seeing the consternation on our faces, quickly said, "Don't worry. Take it one step at a time." Just start, he urged us. Set small goals — like, get to the other side of the living room some 15 feet away. Deal with the now. Don't project — how hot it is, how long it will take. Just start plugging away. Break the job up into manageable segments.

Sure enough, by the end of Day One we could see the floor in that house. We went back to [our home base] filthy, exhausted — and exhilarated.

That was the first of the lessons I learned in New Orleans, lessons that I will return to any time in the future that I face a seemingly insurmountable obstacle.

The greatest lesson, however, was that, as Maggie put it, "I have more strength than I ever dreamed I possessed, and that if I falter there will be strong hands, human and divine, to help me out." Having discovered through

this church mission trip the joy of helping people in a hands-on way, Maggie went back to New Orleans two more times and has remained active in our congregation's Outreach committee.

Church inspires and instructs us in how to get through life's hard times. I have learned so much from seeing how my fellow church members have coped with the blows that, sooner or later, life deals to all of us. Witnessing their courage, their patience, and their steadfast faith has given me a model for enduring my own trials.

The same was true for Ruth Heaney of Wenonah, New Jersey. One Sunday she just felt out of sorts and incapable of "making a joyful noise" to the Lord. But she forced herself to go to church, and found herself seated behind the Schubert family. As she related in *Guideposts*, she watched with sorrow as little Jeanne Schubert, once a lively and outgoing child, leaned against her father. Jeanne was partially paralyzed from recent brain surgery. How, Ruth wondered, could such suffering come to a wonderful Christian family like theirs? How could they bear it? But when, during the Doxology, Dot Schubert stood with her husband and children and sang strongly, "Praise God from Whom all blessings flow," Ruth had a revelation: "This was not tragedy I was witnessing. This was triumph. Their God — and mine — was with them. They knew it and they were grateful. But I, on the other hand, who had so many blessings in life, could only express gratitude when things went well. The minute things went wrong I started questioning God." Ruth realized that by going to church that morning, "I not only heard a beautiful sermon from the pulpit; I saw one in a pew."

Church brings us closer to God. There's a cute story I read, about a little boy who was sick and had to miss church on Palm Sunday. His older sister came home with her palm fronds and he asked her about them. "We waved them as we walked around the church," she said, "and then we spread them on the ground for Jesus to walk on." The little boy began to wail, saying, "No fair! The one Sunday I miss, Jesus shows up!"

The fact is, God always shows up in church. Sure, He shows up everyplace if we look for Him, but it's easier to find Him in the sacred stillness of church, apart from life's hustle and hurry. We find God in the beautiful music, the inspiring artwork, the peaceful environment whether soaring and grand, or simple and sincere. We find Him in the Scriptural readings and in the minister's message. We find him in the shared worship and generous fellowship with other people of faith.

Calvin Whitbeck of Albion, Michigan, had been active in church with his wife, but after the couple moved to a house on a lake they found it hard to leave that beautiful spot on Sunday mornings, and their church attendance fell off. "I rationalized this," he wrote in *Guideposts*, "by saying that in effect I was worshiping God by viewing the glory of His creation."

But when his wife was nearing the end of her life with terminal cancer and his grown children were living away from home, Calvin felt a longing to draw closer to God.

The scenic lake could not fill this void. Yet I felt ashamed to go to church. I felt that God and His people would think, "Look at

him. When things were good he ignored God. Now he wants our comfort."

After my wife died, I felt alone and desolate. The longing to come closer to God had become overpowering. So in spite of my shame I went to church. To my surprise, the minister and several church members went out of their way to make me feel welcome. I felt God reaching out to me through these people. My feeling of shame vanished. I felt that God had forgiven me for my neglect.

* * *

Do yourself a favor and don't take a vacation from church this summer. In fact, why not think of church itself as a vacation — offering a break from everyday stresses, a chance to get to know good people, a place to be inspired by beauty, a place to experience the adventure of drawing closer to God.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Peale Allen

Outreach Update

My minister was very pleased when I mentioned the receipt of Guideposts and asked me to share the good news with our congregation. We will begin to distribute the magazines soon to the area hospital, nursing homes and hospice facilities. We are again going to support the Fuller Center volunteers this summer so I know they will enjoy Guideposts also. Just know that you and your staff have certainly made the lives of those receiving Guideposts more fulfilled. - Faye

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