

Another thought that has come to mind, emerging from the time when Jesus was throwing out the money-changers from the temple: "Take these things out of here! Stop making my father's house a market-place!". This could be taken as a significant symbol for Christians, it is suggested, since perhaps our market places could be more important to us than our worship? We all have to review our financial priorities from time to time. Where are the genuine riches that we are seeking? Are we prepared to sell all that we have and give to the poor? One can only conclude that we all fall short of these high ideals, and it is apparent that we could improve significantly on our commitments, our loyalties to Christ and to the church.

Moving Church – A Guide for Christians on the Move

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Choosing a church is one of the most important decisions that a Christian can take. In an age where the exercise of choice can be seen in selecting a school for our children or a hospital for our treatment, notwithstanding the vast array of goods and services that are available at our local supermarket, Christians are able to choose from a diverse range of churches. Making choices is an essential element of the Christian faith - for instance, we are to choose light rather than darkness and to make choices which are consistent with Christian values as we live out our lives. In this context, therefore, the choice of church is not just one more consumer choice of a commodity. As Christians we should not be selecting a church for our own benefit, rather we are called to find a place in which to worship God and to develop as disciples, and from which to serve our communities.

The exercise of choice

Choice is not a primary value, but rather a derivative one, stemming from and enabling the realisation of other important ideals and goals we pursue individually or as a society. Choice cannot be assumed to be a good without any indication of its

background and content. Everyday choice presupposes that people are self-ruling and able to develop their own conception of the good. The strongest conceptualisation of autonomy is possibly Joseph Raz's, who stresses that "the ruling idea behind the ideal of personal autonomy is that people should make their own lives. The autonomous person is a (part) author of his own life. The ideal of personal autonomy is the vision of people controlling, to some degree, their own destiny, fashioning it through successive decisions throughout their lives." ⁴²

Learning to think about ourselves as capable or incapable of doing certain things, as excelling or limited in certain areas, can affect the choices we make. Respect for individuals is expressed by refraining from intervening in the processes and outcomes of their choices. Decisions taken through proper choice processes are deemed justified and legitimate. Regulated behaviours which leave room for choice are perceived as more desirable than ones which direct individuals toward a specified option.

Inherent in the exercise of choice is the assumption that choice is both desirable and powerful. Psychological theory and research have similarly entailed the presumption that choice is invariably beneficial by increasing an individual's sense of personal control over their external environments and feelings of intrinsic motivation to control their own outcomes, and to determine their own fate. Such personal control and intrinsic motivation, in turn, have been associated with numerous physical and psychological benefits.

This individualistic approach is found wanting when compared to the exercise of choice within a Christian context. As citizens of the Kingdom of God, we put ourselves under God's rule and, as a result, we are motivated by Kingdom values which inform a life of faith. By putting ourselves under God's rule, we find true freedom. In the matter of choosing a church, we are not seeking to please ourselves, but seeking to understand where God is leading us. Making choices may be viewed as a mode of life rather than as a moment or a single act; within the Christian faith decisions based on choice are made continuously. Choosing a church would be one

⁴² Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*(Oxford Clarendon Press 1986) 369.

of the choices exercised as a mode of life; such choice would not be taken exercised by an individual in isolation. By entering into a dialogue with those who are already in a particular church, a Christian would place her/himself in a relationship of trust and honesty as information is shared.

Questions may be raised about the centrality of rationality in the choice of one's life. Many individuals do not reflect and rationally weigh their options when they decide on their career, their life partner, and other decisions which are critical for the path their lives would take. Inertia, temperament and other factors are at least as influential as rational decision making in these choices. All the more reason that, when making a choice about church membership, a person should be open to God's Spirit. This should help a Christian to determine how far choice of a church will best meet her/his needs whilst at the same time providing a setting in which s/he can actively engage with and contribute to the life of a church.

Practical matters

Choosing a church can be influenced by how much freedom a person has to select a church within a geographical area, and by how much time can be expended on the choice before the move to a new home is finalised. In a pastoral setting advice is sometimes given that the selection of a church should be made before a decision is taken to purchase or rent accommodation in a different area. However, not all potential members have the same opportunities to express choice of church. The affluent can buy choice by purchasing houses near to successful churches; however, for some others, choice of church may be limited because of their personal circumstances or background.

At a time when people expect to choose a church in which to worship and serve rather than automatically transfer to the nearest church within a particular tradition, the process can be more complicated than was the case in the past. The websites of churches can be used as an initial filter to seek out information about possible churches, to be followed up by visits to a shortlist. The selection process requires a person to decide on the criteria by which to make a judgement on what might be her/his suitable spiritual home. The following questions might inform these criteria.

- a. Is the church committed to fulfilling Jesus' command to make disciples? In this respect is the church providing an effective teaching ministry?
- b. Is Jesus the focus of worship? How important is the detailed organisation and structure of worship?
- c. Is the church welcoming? Is the church providing a friendly welcome at an initial visit? Is this welcome continued into subsequent visits? How far is one of the leaders of the church prepared to meet with the visitor(s) soon after the visitor's initial visits?
- d. Does the church have a vision and the means to implement this?
- e. Is the church committed to providing outreach in terms of evangelism and social action to the local community?
- f. How much emphasis is given to prayer within the life of the church?
- g. Are there opportunities for meeting in small groups to study, pray and receive pastoral support?
- h. Is the church's mission concentrating on particular groups e.g. one or two age groups or people from a specific cultural background, or is the church seeking to meet the needs of all ages and backgrounds?
- i. How far do the views and outlook of the people attending the church need to be similar to those of the person seeking a church?
- j. How close is the church to the new home to make it convenient to serve within the community and to meet members of the congregation at times other than Sunday worship?
- k. How does the church see itself in relation to other local churches, regional and national bodies and international mission?
- l. How far is the person prepared to be challenged and to go outside her/his comfort zone?

These questions can be overlaid with a further set of questions if those seeking a church have family members who have diverse needs for instance, according to age and gender.

Another important issue is that of how far is the person open to trusting God and to the leading of the Holy Spirit when answers to

these questions may not be patently obvious, or when there is tension between the responses?

These are big questions and it is unlikely that these and other questions will be answered on one visit, or indeed four or five visits on Sundays. In fact, it is possible that an appreciation of a church can only be gained by attending a small group or other weekday organisation for several weeks. However, during this time, it may become increasingly difficult to withdraw from the relationships that a seeker has begun to build up.

Role of the local church

Although the above are some of the questions that a seeker might wish to ask, there is another set of questions which individual churches need to ask which relate to the arrangements they think should be in place for meeting the individual needs and views of people who might be seeking a church. For example: how far are churches dynamic and innovative to respond to the needs of potential members?

Another question for the local church is that of what information should a church put on its website? A recent report by DigMission (www.churchinsight.com) outlines some good practice:

- a) Identify the audience of the website - how far should it be tailored to the reached or the unreached?
- b) Try to be more interactive - let visitors sign up for events to enable them to engage with a church.
- c) Multiple contacts by different means is important - there is no substitute for personal contact.
- d) Think about the image that is being communicated - what does the site say about a church?
- e) The Gospel should be put on the website - it should explain the Gospel simply to someone who has never heard it before.

The web is a major means of communication accessed by hundreds of millions of people every day.

More questions:

- If a church markets itself is this consistent with the example of Jesus who provided an amazing experience of the grace of God and left people to explore it personally?

- How can churches, together with a range of agencies and institutions which provide services, allow for the development of a reasonable, acceptable range of choices through which Christians can begin to envision their future, as individuals, as members of their communities and as members of their local church/faith community?

Conclusion

This has been written by someone for whom the transfer from one church to another has been relatively straightforward. The God-given opportunity to exercise choice was grasped with both hands. The receiving church, as a community of Christians, was true to its calling and provided the environment within which an informed decision was taken.

Three Funeral Addresses

Paul Beasley-Murray

Within a fortnight three key members of my church died. In the hope that readers of *Ministry Today* might find them helpful, I offer the following three outlines of the three addresses I prepared.

Death is Nothing at All

“I’ve packed my bags and am ready to go” said Pope John XXVI shortly before his death. Mary too was ready to go. She had thought about her funeral service and wanted us to read Henry Scott Holland’s poem: “Death is nothing at all”.

I was unhappy with Mary’s choice of the poem, because it goes against the biblical description of death as the “king of terrors” (Job 18.14), and the “last enemy” (1 Cor 15.26). However, I’ve discovered that Scott Holland was not describing how death actually is, but rather we wish it to be. The poem comes from a sermon preached at St Paul’s Cathedral on Sunday 15 May 1910, shortly after the death of King Edward VII. Entitled *King of Terrors*, Scott Holland’s text was 1 John 3.2,3: “Beloved, we are God’s children now: what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” [NRSV]. He said: