

Two tough questions at the coffee shop

Why are you still in the church? Why bother with Christianity at all?

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [March 9, 2022](#) issue



(Photo © anyaberkut / iStock / Getty)

When someone asks to come and see me to talk, I instinctively work out in my mind which of three categories they fall into. In my first 15 years in ministry, I would generally visit them in their home. These days I seldom do that; the distance from a Central London church and the time involved make the gesture so intimate and inconvenient that it tends now only to apply to the sick.

When all seems straightforward—the relationship established, the agenda clear—then we meet in my office. When the whole idea makes me nervous, and I suspect hostility or unpredictable interaction from a person whose mood I can't rely on, I propose the foyer of our church crypt, or occasionally the church itself, where support from colleagues isn't far away. If I just don't know what this is about, or I sense the person is asking more of me than a conventional pastoral relationship, I

suggest a coffee shop.

I'm pretty disciplined about my use of the word *busy*. Most requests to talk come with the almost obligatory preface, "I know you're busy, but . . ." In the Church of England, clergy are granted a stipend precisely to ensure that they're not busy: because they're not engaged in commercial business to earn a living, they have time to be a pastor. So my default response is to say, "Talking to people like you is the most important thing I do."

The sentence is constructed to dismantle the wall of pastoral unavailability—to name the suspicion that clergy, fearing ineffectuality and failure, make themselves busy in order to avoid the deep questions of life and death that they were ordained to address. But it's also constructed to name gently the fact that if I'm going to have time for *other* "people like you," my offer of a conversation isn't an open-ended promise to be available on demand. But let's get started, go deep, find truth together, and resolve to live in the power of the Spirit we've encountered in that dialogue.

Thus it was that I sat in a coffee shop with a person who was articulate, accomplished, stylish, and admired—but who seemed to be at a crossroads. I thought we were going to have the kind of conversation where we both displayed how knowledgeable, insightful, and yet humble we were and then afterward wondered why we couldn't have been a bit more real. But I misjudged the situation. It was a cry for help.

Mind you, we'd finished the coffee before we got there. "Why are you still in the church?" my conversation partner then asked, somehow naming in one question all the cascading anger, doubt, and exasperation expressed in the preceding 45 minutes. From your dentist or hairdresser, this would be simply an invitation to a lively, playful discussion. From this person, it was a howl of despair from the edge of the abyss.

I said, "How about another coffee?"

"It depends what you mean by church," I began, once the coffee arrived. "If you're saying the whole paraphernalia of synods and committees and buildings and disciplinary processes, then I'm not sure I ever have really involved myself with all that very much, and I think an excess of that isn't good for anyone's soul. But I see that as the backing vocals for the song. The song is our best effort to embody

together the way of Jesus, to be his body today. There's bound to be disagreements and failures and infuriating details in doing that, but I'm nowhere close to giving up on it."

My conversation partner replied, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." And then reeled off a pretty formidable list of church horror shows.

At that point I could have gone in two ways: tender and understanding ("It sounds like you're carrying a lot of pain and hurt, and also anger") or adult and businesslike. I did the latter. "I suspect you've spent rather too much time looking at the spaghetti round the back of the TV, and you need to start enjoying the screen again for a bit." Maybe I took the wrong option. Sometimes living with the church is choosing which bits to see; sometimes you can't forget what you've seen or prevent it from poisoning everything else.

A month later I sat eight feet away in the same coffee shop with a different conversation partner who also knew I was busy. This time there was no pretending life was tidy, sane, and successful. After some introductory reflections on COVID and the season, we got to the point. "Why do you still bother with Christianity?"

I paused. I actually looked over my left shoulder to see if my previous conversation partner was still sitting there with a raised eyebrow. I considered referring to my previous dialogue—"Would you believe someone else asked me a very similar question in here just the other day?"—but thought better of it. I sensed that this may have sounded like the same question but was in fact very different. It seemed a much bigger, harder, and more challenging question—after all, God, the Trinity, and the universe seem rather bigger than the church. Yet in another way it felt like a much simpler question—an easier, one-coffee question—mostly because the person really wanted a reply, rather than needing to voice a lament.

I settled on a straight answer. "Because the alternatives are too terrible to contemplate."

Ever since I've wondered whether or not the two questions were, at root, the same. And I've pondered: Why did I find the second so much simpler than the first?

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Taking questions."