

The poured-out church: Leaving church on a regular basis

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [May 29, 2007](#) issue

There is nothing like writing a book called *Leaving Church* for discovering how many things people can make of a title like that. The church of the title is Grace-Calvary Church in Clarkesville, Georgia. Leaving is what I did in 1997 when I resigned from parish ministry. In the year since the book came out, I have received thousands of letters, most so poignant that I have to hold my heart while I read them.

What I read above all is a rich mix of love and grief: love for the mainline churches that have formed the faithful, and grief that so many of those churches have run out of holy steam. The love part makes the grief part hard to articulate. With Mother Church in such fragile shape, who will complain about her cooking? Better to learn to live with hunger than to say something that may come across as ungrateful or disloyal.

This tender protectiveness is so understandable that congregations may not notice how it turns in on itself. Placing oxygen masks over their own faces before they hold one out to anyone else, churches can decide that buying a new sound system is a higher priority than getting a new freezer for the community kitchen. Finding a new youth minister can take precedence over finding a home for a new family from Sudan. When the body is hemorrhaging members, self-preservation trumps all other concerns.

At least one reason for the urgency is that the church is held to be the place of divine transformation. The church is where people say yes both to God and to one another. The church is where Christ turns our water into wine. The church is where people come to die and rise again in new life. These powerful warrants become even stronger when the church is set against "the world." The world is where prodigals squander their inheritance in loose living. The world is where the rich get richer while the poor get poorer. The world is where Pilate decides who lives and who dies.

At a more contemporary level, the world is where people lie in bed on Sunday mornings reading the *New York Times* or catch a late brunch with their children after soccer practice. The world is where teenagers meet their friends at the mall instead of at Wednesday night prayer service and where couples are wed at ski resorts by friends licensed for the occasion instead of at churches by ministers who have known them all their lives. It is also where mothers sit in crowded emergency rooms with their feverish babies because they have no coverage to go anywhere else and workers work double shifts for less than a living wage.

And yet when I consider my life of faith, this world is clearly where my transformation has taken place. It is in the world that I have met the people who have changed me—some of them believers, but far more of them not—people who have loved me, fought me, shamed me, forgiven me, sanding down my edges on one side while they broke whole ragged chunks of me off the other. The world is where I have been struck dumb by beauty, by cruelty, by human invention and greed. The world is where my notions of God have been destroyed, reformed, chastened, redeemed. The world is where I have occasionally been good for something and where I have done irreparable harm.

The reason I know this, however, is that the church has given me the eyes with which I see, as well as the words with which I speak. The church has given me a community in which to figure out what has happened to me in the world. It has given me a place to love and grieve, within a tradition far older and wiser than I. It is the church that has poured me into the world, in other words—which is counterintuitive. How can a church survive that keeps pouring itself into the world? I cannot possibly say. All I know is the gospel truth: those willing to give everything away are the ones with anything worth keeping; those willing to look death full in the face are the ones with the most abundant lives. Go figure.

All I can figure is that any body of believers whose faith is funded by a giving God will find their lives by giving too—not reasonably, so that there is plenty left for sheet music and utility bills, but lavishly, so that the survival of the institution is always and blessedly in question.

What I *cannot* figure is how any church organized around the self-donation of Jesus can stay invested in self-preservation. What would it look like for a church to lay down its life for its friends? If Philippians 2:5-8 were rewritten for the congregation, how might it sound?

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus—
you who, though called to be God's body in this world
did not regard your dearness to God as something to be
exploited,
but emptied yourselves,
taking the form of slaves,
being born in the likeness of Christ himself.
And being found in human form like him,
you humbled yourselves
and became obedient to the point of your own
dissolution—
even death before your time.

Leaving church, I believe, is what church is for—leaving on a regular basis, leaving to see what God is up to in the world and joining God there, delivering all the riches of the institution to those who need them most, in full trust that God will never leave the church without all that it needs to live.