

Mixed motives: Why people join a church

by [Michael L. Lindvall](#) in the [September 6, 2011](#) issue



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During the last of three classes for new members at the congregation I serve, we ask people to introduce themselves by briefly recounting their journey in the faith and how it led them to the third floor of the Old Parish House of the Brick Church. The process takes a while. Some of the narratives are compelling, others are banal. None of them is ever the whole truth.

I listen as a pregnant couple reflects on wanting a community of faith in which to raise their child. I'm sure that's true, but I would guess that in a few years they hope to apply to our very popular preschool, and they know their chances of admission are better if they're members of the congregation. I listen to the anxious mother of a 13-year-old boy, and I surmise that her son is being pulled into the Upper East Side fast lane by his private school peers; our confirmation program and youth group might be the needed antidote. A young single woman who just moved to New York from Charlotte remembers aloud how much her experience in her home church meant to her. She now lives in a two-room apartment in the forest of high-rises in upper Yorkville and works 60-hour weeks as an administrator at a hedge fund. It's not hard to guess that she's longing for friends like the ones she found at her home church.

Such mixed motives are not just a contemporary urban phenomenon. Western missionaries working in China in past centuries were often criticized for producing "rice Christians"—hungry converts attracted to mission stations and baptism by free food. A friend of my parents who was from a remote corner of Alaska would mock the various stripes of Protestant missionaries in Kotzebue for bidding against each other for native converts with free music lessons. If the Adventists offered electric keyboard tutorials, the Pentecostals would trump them with electric guitar courses.

For roughly 1,500 years, when Christianity was the established faith of the West, some measure of churchgoing was obligatory socially if not legally. This Christendom produced Christians with profoundly ambiguous motives and convictions. Indeed, there are still places in this country where local people ask newcomers, "What church do you go to?" The assumption is that everyone in the town goes to church.

Later, the ideal became one of association by pure conviction. You joined—or associated with—a particular congregation out of simple theological conviction. You signed up with a community because its members believed what you had come to believe. This was the putative ideal, the only pure motivation for church affiliation. It's a motivation I have seldom heard voiced at our third new members' class. And when I've heard it, I've suspected that it was spoken, at least in part, because it was thought to be the right answer.

Such simplicity as this—association by pure conviction—misunderstands human beings on at least two counts and underestimates God on one. First, faith, as I always remind the new members when they're standing before the congregation to declare their faith, is not an arrival; it is a journey. The faith questions put to them as part of the liturgy are radical but theologically minimal. They declare Jesus Christ to be their Lord and Savior and promise faithfulness to the church community. These most basic declarations are very much at odds with our culture of relativism and individualism, but they imply no complete Christian faith. Thus, I tell the new members, joining is not so much a faith arrival as it is a commitment to journey deeper into faith. The human fact is that we are in process—all of us all the time. We are never there, but always on the way. Luther, no slouch in matters of conviction, said as much: "We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it; the process is not yet finished, but is going on; this is not the end, but it is the road."

Second, humans are relational and congregations are communities of relationship. People become part of congregations not just for God, but also for other people. In

the February 2002 issue of *Atlantic*, Toby Lester explored why new religious movements succeed. In a later interview, Lester said the force of his conclusions was that "success [of these religious movements] is really about relationships. . . . After the fact people do think it's about faith. And they're not lying, by the way. They're just projecting backwards." His analysis is perhaps too monovalent, too dubious about theological conviction, but it reminds us that faith communities are just that: communities sought out and joined for the community as well as the faith.

Finally, to assume that people affiliate with churches only for the purest of motives is to underestimate God. God uses a young couple's zeal for their child's education, the anxiety of the mother of a rebellious adolescent and the loneliness of a young single woman. God uses fine church choirs, fancy organs and lovely church architecture. Perhaps God even uses free rice and complimentary guitar lessons. We are complex beings, multivalent, fallen, our every motivation mixed. In order to find us, God, as C. S. Lewis says, is not above the use of "fine nets and stratagems."