

Keep swinging for the fences

My decades of church life have been full of the stuff one might expect from a place that promises God and only sometimes delivers.

by [Jonathan Tran](#) in the [December 2024](#) issue

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(Century illustration)

People keep pooh-poohing the church, but I think it's the best thing since sliced bread. People talk about the church with this great sense of disappointment, as if it has dropped the ball in some unforgivable way. But if you're disappointed, what were you expecting? The church is made up of people, people doing their best to be better together than they would on their own. Sometimes it works. Often it doesn't.

When it works, no one does it better. When it doesn't, when the church fails to do what it says, the results are as bad as you'd expect when people swing for the fences.

I might ask, what's the alternative? When my family came to America, it was the church that took us in, just like it did for tens of thousands of other Vietnamese war refugees. No one else was doing this, not at that scale and scope. When my six-year-old brother was killed in a car accident, it was the church that wrapped its arms around my family. Neither I nor my family stuck around for long, and the church never once complained, never kept receipts when we left without so much as saying goodbye.

Years later a different part of the church—this time, the Chinese Baptist Church of Orange County—took me in as a young adult looking for meaning and community. CBCOC welcomed me with open arms. It gave me a place to belong and offered me, through pastor William Eng, a picture of what it looked like be an Asian American man who led and loved. Growing up without a father, I had never seen that before.

Joining the church as a young adult, I never expected it to be more than what it is. I had lived enough life by then to know that people are, well, people, capable of so much and so little, often at the same time. And so the highlights and lowlights that I came to experience over the next three decades of church life are the stuff one might expect from a place that promises God and only sometimes delivers. Sure, God makes Godself part of that mix, but God being part of the mix is never more, or less, than God being part of the human mix.

One might think of church as humanity trying its hardest, with all the good and bad that comes with people trying their hardest. The church feels itself called to impossible things by God as the only one capable of making the impossible possible. It keeps faith with this God, and with the insane idea that someone not us matters more than any of us, and the equally insane idea that only through this someone not us can we become something most fully us.

We are told that people are leaving the church in droves. Pews are empty, denominations are dying. We hear more about exvangelicals and nones than we do about converts and the catechized. People no longer find meaning or community in church, and so why waste your time—better to keep Sundays free for football. Young people feel called to anything and everything but church. Old people talk fondly

about what church used to be, not what it is. And the church's awful history of scandal and abuse certainly doesn't help.

I want to say, if people want to leave the church, let them go. If they think they've found greener pastures, why keep them from them? They will have left the church for what the church should have been. And if they want to leave because they lack hope, we've already lost them. What we in the church can't do is change what we are called to in order to keep people from leaving. The goal of church has never been getting people to stay; it's getting people to come. We believe the best way to get people to come is by being who we are called to be, holding fast to the hope that if we do, they will come.

And to all of you who have not found something else—who have stayed, sticking it out and believing hope against hope that the church can be the church—I want to say, keep doing your thing. This hardly means being perfect, and it might even mean being honest with folks that, while perfection is the goal, it's hardly the point.

After all, if everyone leaves, who's gonna swing for the fences? Who else is going to offer, as secular political theorist Sheldon Wolin observed of the early church, “a new and powerful ideal of community which recalled people to a life of meaningful participation”? Who else is going to keep saying that the world will be saved by beauty, that forgiveness is better than vengeance, that peace and not war names the order of things, that sabbath and therefore worship is the whole form of the Christian life? Who else is going to make it their responsibility to take in refugees, to wrap their arms around grieving families, to be a place of belonging—for everyone? Not only does the church feel called to these things, but it keeps trying even as it keeps failing. Who else does that?

We can keep pooh-poohing the church and its all-too-human failures. But we also have to admit that the church swinging for the fences is a sight to behold. When it does that, when it leans into God's promise to make the church an emblem of creation redeemed, of all things made new, we catch a glimpse of the eternal. For its misses, we can quit and give up on the church, but that feels to me like giving up the game. I'd rather keep swinging. I hope you will too.

*This is Jonathan Tran's final essay as a regular columnist in the Voices section. We're grateful for his contributions. —Eds.*