

Ask the vicar: Why to belong

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 12, 2003](#) issue

Dear Chad: Your recent e-mail brought back rich memories of the long-ago days when you were my confirmand and I was your catechist. Your self-description and question moved me: "Does it take formal attendance at worship services to be religious?" You describe yourself as having paid your dues, as it were, by congregational membership, including in leadership roles. Now you are wearied by "the politics, the facades, the bickering, etc." Spiritually drained. Not looking "for an indulgence or a Pass Go, Collect \$200 salving of conscience." But looking. Good!

The simple answer to your question is no. It's hard to put into and get out of Christian faith all you can without attending worship. (You figured I'd say that, didn't you?) For me it cannot be that one attends by force of command, God saying "you gotta" so "we gotta." Rather, God says "you get to," so "we get to."

The God I know does not coerce love but attracts it. I cite an elusive parable from (I'm told) the St. Bernard tradition. Someone sees a woman carrying a torch and a pitcher. She explains, "I am going to torch the pleasures of heaven and quench the flames of hell, so people will start loving God for God's sake." In these terms, worship is responding to and freely loving God. That, and not massaging God's ego, is what praise must be about.

Attendance? That brings in the "together" dimension. Not good at private prayer, I hitchhike through communal prayer and praise with fellow strugglers, apathetes and indifferentists who sing out even when we are not naturally on a high. Baron von Huegel said he kissed his daughter not always because he loved her but in order to love her. So it is with praise of God within a community.

My reasons for attendance may not match your reasons for potentially returning. I've lucked out through 40 years of membership in a small parish where worship inspires, but sometimes, on the road as a guest, I have to engage in various acts of empathy and imagination to endure.

I've heard of people who outlasted bad homilies or sermons—something I seldom have to do—by doing their own concurrent mental run on the text: “How would I have preached it?” “What does it say to me?” A friend tells me that she pictures worship as what Tillich called a “revelatory constellation,” where something might occur: an encounter with the presence of God.

You speak of your recent counseling as part of an aging crisis. I once read of a pastor who tried to get seniors involved in ministering to a nearby Native American reservation. No luck. “What do you want out of life?” he asked a senior woman. She looked up from her shuffleboard and said, “Just to keep the ever-livin' juices flowing.” Worship when poorly executed and membership when blah can get our ever-living juices flowing through the rage they induce; when effective, through the ecstasy they promise.

What you write should strike terror in all pastors, lay leaders, musicians and worship committees who are casual about worship and membership. They turn high-risk adventures into low-risk investments of our time, energy and attention. They need you and your kind. The empirical situation of church, nation and world would strike (and sometimes does strike) deep pessimism in me these days. The only counterweight for me comes in group worship and communal activity. These often fail me—but, then, I often fail them. In sum: I cannot address your conscience issue, but can only give my witness, for what it's worth.

Sincerely,

“Vicar Marty”