

Steve Tilley

GOD'S CHURCH MY PLACE

*What it means to belong to
a Christian community*

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Introduction

I have a vision of the best church for miles and miles.

A church where people drop in (parties of 50 or more needing to book) to observe examples of good practice and get a fine cup of free coffee (much improved since Costa got the post-church contract).

A church where the outstanding teaching, heart-lifting worship, dramatic supernatural interventions and free food have made it a place where not to belong to the Jesus-following community is slightly odd.

A church where the outstanding minds from a number of agencies who happen to live here get together over a drink regularly and put the world to rights, not just with words but with reality. Their conversation becomes action; fewer people are poor around the world because of the influence of this brainstorming community.

A church where the recent outpouring of generosity led to twice as much money as was necessary being promised towards the new building project, as a result of which two new churches were also built on less fortunate estates.

A church that provides the finances to improve local surgeries, attract new businesses to town and sponsor a football team now rising rapidly towards the higher leagues.

A church whose potential ministers are wooed by theological colleges, whose staff-in-training are expected to take substantial responsibility as soon as they move on and whose missionaries only have to set foot elsewhere to start major outpourings of grace and mercy.

I know, I know. Carlsberg (probably) don't do churches. But if they did. . .

If they did, they would be churches that were about the members, not the leaders.

What is this book *not* going to be about? Leadership, that's what. In fact, the aim will be to avoid all the suggestions included in the following comment, which I received when I asked around to see what people thought the book should cover:

I'm intrigued that, having been a leader in Christian ministry for over 25 years, you wish to write a book on 'what it is like to be led'. I've no doubt you would have many insightful comments born out of a wide range of experience:

Ten things not to say to your leader.

Joys and frustrations of parish life.

Great things about my job.

How to avoid being a heart-sink parishioner.

What I would like you to be like if I was leading you.

It was helpful to read this observation. It would be so easy to fall into the trap of writing from the frustrations of being a leader, but I will try not to. The comment was anonymous: I fear the commenter belongs to my church.

I have sat in meetings where two people were trying to lead at the same time. Truth be told, the rest of us may as well have worn helmets while the pair of them sorted out who was in charge. Two leaders in a meeting is one too many. Local churches can have different people heading up ministries but only one overall leader—which means that everyone else is a follower.

Can you recall ever reading a book on how to be a follower?

My wife works as an area manager in retail. One of the ways her company assesses its work is to send round mystery shoppers with hidden cameras. The DVDs of the ‘performance’ are then sent to the management team to critique. I have sat on the sofa next to her on many evenings as she has screamed at the screen in anguish at a lowly shop assistant’s failure to do the right thing—or observed her glowing sense of pride when someone did a great job. Those mystery shoppers are primed to ask very awkward questions.

OK, so it’s tough being the boss. But we don’t live in a world of bosses (thankfully). What should our attitude be if we are employees trying to please the boss, or trying to work round her?

Can you recall ever reading a book about how to get things done when you’re not the boss?

This is a question for the church, too, because when the mystery worshippers come round (and be sure, such people do exist and their reports can be read), it is not only the boss’s job to make sure they have a good experience but the employees’ job too. Not just the minister’s but the members’.

That is why I’ve written this book. What are the tricks of the trade in being a church member? How do you—as a member, not a leader—make sure any visitor to your church meeting, any newcomer to your local community, any enquirer into faith, gets the best possible experience of local Christianity?

Can you recall reading a book reminding leaders that they have nothing to do if there’s no one to lead?

Actually, if you've read the letter to the Ephesian Christians in the Bible, you may have done:

[God's] intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Ephesians 3:10–11)

Did you see that? 'Through the church', not 'through the leader of the church'.

Ephesians is going to figure heavily in our journey. You might like to read it first, but don't worry if you want to dive straight into this book. I'll try to keep you up to speed.

In all the many words written about belonging to a church, there is often an overemphasis on leadership. What about membership? What is required of someone who simply wants to learn what it means to be part of a church without any aspirations of leadership? If that's you, welcome aboard my hobby-horse. The metaphors may get a bit mixed but there's no need to strap yourself in. We will go slowly and tread carefully.



What is church anyway?

'And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...'

MATTHEW 16:18

The problem with Christianity in this country is that there are too many churches; the Gospel paradox is that the solution is to build more.

STEPHEN COTTRELL, BISHOP OF CHELMSFORD¹

Jesus changed the apostle Simon's name to Peter, which comes from the Greek word *petros*, meaning 'rock'. Matthew 16:18 contains the first reference to church in the Bible. In my Bible, church is not mentioned until page 1146. The word 'church' is not in any Gospel other than Matthew's.

Peter had just tumbled on to an important truth about Jesus. He had said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' (v. 16).

Peter had got it. Church is a collection of people who have got it. Not musicianship. Not preaching skills. Certainly not buildings. Not dress codes. Not Sunday ritual. Just truth—the truth about Jesus. That is the rock.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, the agreed word for a gathering of Christians soon became 'church': 'Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events' (Acts 5:11). 'I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cencrea... Greet Priscilla and

Aquila... Greet also the church that meets at their house' (Romans 16:1, 3, 5).

Thereafter, many of the letters in the New Testament are addressed to churches: 'To the church of God in Corinth...' (1 Corinthians 1:2). 'To the church of the Thessalonians...' (1 Thessalonians 1:1). 'To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home...' (Philemon 1-2).

Or they deal with specific problems in churches: 'Try to excel in gifts that build up the church' (1 Corinthians 14:12b). 'If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?' (1 Timothy 3:5). 'Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him' (James 5:14).

Soon after Peter got it, churches had appeared and started to have problems. If they hadn't had any difficulties, the New Testament may well have stopped at the book of Acts.

But Peter had got it. And the problem with that? There are many, but one is that we built buildings on real rock, not churches on the metaphor.

Bishop Stephen Cottrell was saying that many of our church buildings are in the wrong place. (Don't worry about what I was doing at a National Stewardship Advisers' Conference. It's a long story and really quite dull.)

I belong to the Church of England, a church which has left the evidence of its past scattered across the landscape of England, sometimes marking the way but often out of the way. Our buildings are, in many cases, in the wrong place but we have a duty to care for them.

Costs of repairs to ancient and heritage-rich church build-

ings are largely borne by the congregations who happen to meet there. Often, funds that could be better spent on talking of Jesus are used on repairs. Congregations that could leave their church buildings to fall into disrepair while meeting somewhere else usually choose not to—which is good of them. On one level, this impresses people. On another it is a real barrier to mission.

We do well to remind ourselves that Christianity has a nomadic heritage. God does not live in a building—any building. ‘The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands’ (Acts 17:24).

Note the language of my Licence (the permission I have to work in a particular place as a priest):

WE do hereby grant you our Licence and authority to serve during our pleasure at a Stipend in accordance with the Diocesan scale for an incumbent as Assistant Curate (having the status and title of Associate Vicar) of the Benefice of Nailsea Holy Trinity within our Diocese and Jurisdiction under the direction of the Reverend Kenneth John Boullier the Incumbent thereof and to perform all ecclesiastical duties belonging to that office with special responsibilities for the Trendlewood area AND ALSO Licence and Authority (so long as you are licensed to the said benefice) to minister in the Benefices of Nailsea Christ Church with Tickenham and Wraxall with Failand within our Diocese and Jurisdiction to perform ecclesiastical duties in these benefices in co-operation with the Ministers in charge thereof...

Below this is the seal of the Bishop of Bath and Wells.

We have buildings in the wrong place and words that no

one else uses. Yet churches are full of people fascinated by and in love with Jesus, seeking after the truth of what that means, still trying to care for and live with those who come to different conclusions, and feeling that there is as much wisdom in the journey as the destination.

The church I minister at is changing venue. We have no building of our own and have just stopped meeting in one local school to move to another. I am writing this before our first meeting in our new place. This week we are homeless. It is good to remind ourselves from time to time, as a Christian community, that we are on the move, responding to God's call not to stay put but to go:

'You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' (Acts 1:8)

When the New Testament was written down, it is likely that my current home was either under water or, at best, a tidal island. You can't get much more ends-of-the-earth than that. It wasn't even earth. The gospel reached Nailsea because faithful followers of the one who used to be dead brought it here. I think they might have been surprised at how quickly it settled down, built itself a home and put its feet up.

I'll let you know later in the book what happened at our first meeting of Trendlewood Church in Golden Valley school. At the moment, I'm in that zombie world between terrified and excited.

Buildings can confuse the call to be church. Being church means being ready to go.

Recently I had to tell a 9.00am congregation that someone had died. Since the person had died overnight, it was information that hadn't yet filtered through to most of those present. There was a bit of a gasp and some corporate shock.

It took me back to Wishaw, a little country parish in the Midlands, where I found myself officiating at an early Communion on the Sunday when Princess Diana had died (in the early hours of that morning, you may recall). Those who had come to church without switching on a radio or TV first were completely shaken.

But it also does us good to remember times before TV, radio, the internet and telephone—the times when most of our church buildings were constructed. I imagine that much news of the local community was passed on when people gathered, and they gathered at the church. News of recent deaths would have been the minister's task to communicate, and this in an age when the infant mortality rate was much higher than it is now.

Church is about gathered people. So it is about being ready to go and being prepared to stay and minister among a particular community.

Should I stay or should I go? Can't this God make his flipping mind up? As with much of our Bible, there are complementary truths to consider.

Those of us who have been part of the same Christian community in the same place for a long time need to remind ourselves that God calls people out and on. Those of us who have been on the move a lot need to heed the call to stay put and be part of the church planted in a particular place. Both groups of people should take time out to call to mind what it is like to be in the other group.

Church is about gathered people, and many of those gatherings take place in buildings that were designed for a different sort of life. In some of them you can also tell, from the size of the pews, that people used to be shorter.

Over the next couple of decades, what it means to be church is going to change dramatically. As it does, the best versions (franchises if you like) of the old way of doing church will thrive. Brian McLaren tells a story, in his book *A New Kind of Christian*, about transport. A character in the book asks, 'If you were going to buy the best possible mode of transport in 1910, what would you buy?'²

To paraphrase the answer, many would say that the age of the car was just beginning and they would buy a car. They'd be wrong. As the age of the car was just beginning, cars were incredibly unreliable and dangerous. If you wanted reliability you'd buy a buggy. Buggy technology had reached a pinnacle and only the very best buggy manufacturers remained in business. Horses were reliable.

As churches die out all over the place, they are like buggy manufacturers going out of business. Anyone wanting a church will go to a surviving one. The remaining ones will get bigger and better. There will be more and more attendees at fewer and fewer churches.

Have you seen the car coming? Many haven't. Meanwhile, buggy manufacturing churches will fall away because of:

- Buildings being in the wrong place.
- A treatment of women in leadership, or the gay and lesbian community, that our society and culture will not accept.
- Failure to attract younger members.
- Better and bigger churches being more attractive.

- Insistence on newcomers eventually ticking boxes to do with minor bits of doctrine.
- Failure to ditch the ‘Bible as history’ model and to embrace science.

And then the car will come...

I’m sure, from then on, the buggy preservation society will exist and will have an enthusiastic and active membership who get together, show off their polished buggies and talk about the old days. But everyone else will have moved on and, if truth be told, will have ceased being very interested in buggies. I wonder what the *car* church will look like.

Let’s see if we can do the world’s briefest history of the modern church.

After Jesus’ ministry, there was a group of followers. Soon they split into those who remained Jews and part of Judaism, and those who didn’t. Christianity survived in those who didn’t. Three centuries later, this one worldwide (therefore, catholic with a small ‘c’, from a Greek word meaning ‘universal’) church had a dispute over a couple of small but important words, and the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Church separated.

A thousand years or so passed until King Henry VIII of England required an annulment of his first marriage. When the Pope refused, Henry appointed himself Supreme Head of the English Church in 1534. This act is often seen as the key moment in a long process by which the church in England became reformed, but of course the Reformation (rediscovery of biblical truth and God’s grace) had begun in Europe and continued after Henry’s reign. Luther, Calvin and the like did their best work in the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

A person who accepts the system of faith and practice of the reformed church is a Protestant, from the Latin *protestari*, which means ‘to witness before’.

There are many reforming processes going on in Roman Catholicism and Protestantism today and, of course, there are also those who are part of the Church of England yet consider themselves Catholic. Down the ages, the terms have become symptomatic of community division. The troubles and struggles in Northern Ireland got short-handed as Catholic v. Protestant, but they were always about nationality and government, not religion. Hence the joke:

‘Are you a Catholic or a Protestant?’

‘I’m an atheist.’

‘Yes, but are you a Catholic atheist or a Protestant one?’

Methodism has its roots in John Wesley’s revival movement, set within Anglicanism. The Methodist Church did not become separate until after his death. Methodism and Anglicanism continue to take tentative steps towards agreement and merger.

In February 2010, the then Methodist President David Gamble, addressing the General Synod of the Church of England, said this:

Methodists approach the Covenant with the Church of England in the spirituality of the Covenant prayer, so when we say to God, ‘Let me have all things, let me have nothing’, we say it by extension to our partners in the Church of England as well. We are prepared to go out of existence not because we are declining or failing in mission, but for the sake of mission. In other words, we are prepared to be changed and even to cease having a separate existence as a Church if that will serve the needs of the kingdom.

It remains one of the most gloriously open, vulnerable, humble and risky statements I have ever heard from a church leader. Maximum respect.

Baptists trace their history to the early part of the 17th century. The roots of the movement are the belief that a correct reading of the New Testament is to practise only believer's baptism, not infant baptism, and to do so by immersion.

In recent times, the house church movement, free evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, Vineyard churches and a succession of movements within mainstream denominations have been typified by a lively style of sung worship and the use of spiritual gifts and prayer ministry. Most practise believer's, not infant, baptism.

There is a wonderful timeline of the key events in Christianity at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_Christianity.

A slightly cynical friend of mine once said that when two churches merge, a third is usually formed.

Some churches these days are quite eclectic. That is a technical word but it means 'gathered'. Those who prefer that church's style, theology or even building may travel quite a way to be part of it. Other churches are local. They minister to a particular area and do not seek to evangelise beyond some specific boundaries.

My own Church of England is local. I minister in a particular part of a particular parish. We get on well with our neighbours but we don't, for instance, drop leaflets through the doors of those who live outside our parish boundary.

What makes a church a church and not a cult? Belief in the Lordship of Christ and some understanding of the Trinity usually mark out a denomination of the mainstream church from a cult. Other differences of belief are usually the wrapping paper, not the parcel.

'I'm such a bad scholar, I feel like a man with a white cane bumping into knowledge.'

THE NARRATOR IN *ILLYWHACKER* BY PETER CAREY³

History lesson over. Told you it would be quick.

You might want to read the last few paragraphs again. If you are an academic theologian of church history, don't write in unless I've goofed big-time. This summary has been hopelessly inadequate, possibly to the point of offence, but it is part of a short book.

Many fine works have been written, putting flesh on these bones. The important truth is that the church is there to create the space in which people can find that they have been found by God.

Today, the place of Jesus is 'the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way' (Ephesians 1:22–23). The Bible suggests that if you want to know what God looks like, you should look at Jesus, the image of the invisible God. And if you want to know what Jesus looks like, you should be able to find out by looking at the church.

Now, is our church worth looking at? If people look, will they see Jesus?

Can you be a Christian without going to church? Possibly, but you are depriving a group of Christians of your gifts and

input. I don't think you can be a Christian without somehow being church. You need to work out how you are going to be accountable. This is not a leadership/control thing. We are all perfectly capable of making ourselves accountable to each other. But we need to give someone permission to ask us how we are doing in our prayer life, worship life and service life. The New Testament knows nothing of a Christian outside a community of other believers.

Pause for thought

Church is something that you are rather than somewhere that you go.

Discussion questions

- **In what groups of people, then, are you church?**
- **What is your personal denominational history?**
- **How many generations of your family have been Christians?**

Prayer

Lord, help me to understand what it is to be part of the church.



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