

SUNDAY ARTICLE

ST DAVID'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Where do you park your car at church?

Mark Bolas

What would your church look like to a person coming for the first time?

For long-time attendees, sometimes going to church can be the same as going to the supermarket. We only go when we need something. Or we come with a list of things to do. We tick them off and then we get back in the car and go home. Church...tick!

What could make church even more like a supermarket are self-serve checkouts. You can walk in and buy everything you need to without having an awkward conversation with anyone. It's brilliant! Imagine how good it'd be if church was like that!

But that's not how things work. When we become followers of Jesus every area of our lives is affected, no exceptions. When we become followers of Jesus our lives are transformed.

This may mean parking as far away from the church as you're able to, so others who come after you can take the close spots near the entrance.

Throughout the New Testament we see that those to whom God has been merciful are now described as the body of Christ. We see a little of this image in Romans 12:4-5. Not only have we been brought together, but we collectively have a new master, a new head. We are now in Jesus, part of his body. He is the one who equips us to do what he would have us do as his body.

What makes a body a body? When you see a person, why do you call them one name instead of identifying all the pieces, "Hey Ashley!" rather than "Hey face!"? Because we realize that a face is part of a whole, recognizable person.

This is what God has made us into. We are a recognizable body, not just a bunch of parts. The church is God's people brought together in a recognizable whole, so that when you see them, especially together, people will say "Hey, that's Jesus!"

We, as God's people who gather together in this building are a part of the body that is the image of Jesus in the world. When people

see us, they are meant to see Jesus. That's a confronting thought isn't it! But it's true. When people see us, they see Jesus. This is especially visible when we are together.

What does the body of Christ do? The people who together are recognizable as Jesus, with him as their head, are dedicated to the loving service of others. In verses 6-13 of Romans 12 we see that

loving service of others is the mark of how we relate to each other.

It shouldn't come as a surprise to us either. Selfless serving is the way Jesus walked, so it is the way that his people walk. He lovingly served others, so his body – that's us – we lovingly serve others.

When we meet together, everything we do has the purpose of pointing to Jesus, because everything we do is shaped by who we were and who we now are in Christ as part of his body. There are no self-serve checkouts at church. We aren't here for our shopping list, we're here to serve everyone else. Since we are members of one body, we show devotion to one another. We love sincerely. We honour one another. We belong to everyone else.

I want to suggest some things we could do that will hopefully be helpful in making this real for us.

Before the service, I think it's helpful to be as actively prepared as we would be if we were inviting people to our own house. Invite friends to come along, pray for what God might teach you and others, and pray that you'll be ready to serve people well.

This may mean parking as far away from the church as you're able to, so others who come after you can take the close spots near the entrance. It may mean looking for people whom you haven't met before, greeting them, talking to them, inviting them to sit with you. It could mean sitting close to the front and moving to the middle of rows, so that those who come after can easily find a seat. And it'll probably mean arriving early, as serving people in these ways relies on that.

During the service, serving others is going to look like active listening, singing, and participation. It might look like taking notes. It'll definitely look like being responsive by smiling or thinking deeply. What happens when we're together isn't TV. There are people looking back at you, there are people in front of you and beside you, so what you do during the service ought to be helpful to them as well as to you.

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After the formal time, serving others means taking an active interest in them. When the service finishes, if you're near someone you haven't met before, don't get up straight away: talk to them. It's a great time, whomever you're talking with, to discuss what you've heard and be interested in what other people have learned from God's Word. If there are things you've been reminded of or challenged by, then pray to God together. When you start talking with people you haven't seen before, invite them to join you for tea or coffee. Ask them questions about what you've just heard before you ask them what they're doing on the weekend.

It may also mean staying back later than convenient. Bump back that appointment or delay lunch for a while. After you've finished talking with all the people you haven't seen before, you can talk to your friends. They're still there, because they've been talking to the people they haven't seen before too!

If each of us started thinking about one of these things and then actually doing it, what would our churches look like? When God's gathered people are dedicated to the loving service of others, it looks like Jesus.

We've been shown mercy and brought together to be the impressive image of Christ in the world. We're called to be people who lovingly serve others for the glory of God. Let's make sure that our attitude, seen in all we do together before, during, and after we gather reflects who we really are: the body of Jesus.



Mark Bolas serves as associate minister of Penrith Anglican Church in western Sydney. Mark and his wife Kylie have the joy of parenting their son Jonathan.

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