

The Case for Church

By Jane Bailey

I was raised in a 1950s household that went to church faithfully. Every Sunday my mother packed my two sisters and me into our car to go to the Episcopal church where we dutifully attended the one-hour service and 45-minute Sunday school class. According to my mother, we went "because I said so!"

While I followed the required regimen of wearing a hat to church, my sister got into shouting matches with my mother as she defiantly yelled, "I'm not going to wear a hat—make me!" I would mutter under my breath, "Just do it, Jean," all the while thinking—but not saying—I agree, why do we have to wear a hat? At that point we were more worried about hats than God.

Unlike many fathers, my father also went to church every Sunday, only his church was the Methodist one. Dad sang in his church choir, served as the church treasurer, and painted either the church or the parsonage each summer. While he didn't talk about his religion, he lived it. His service to the church was a labor of love. My sisters and I preferred Dad's church, as there were no hats to wear and the service was simple, with grape-juice communion just once a month. But we were only allowed to go with Dad in the summer when our Sunday school was on break.

I simply accepted what I learned at church—my beliefs were what the priest said they were: "God is great, God is good. Jesus is man, Jesus is God." That part got a red flag in my psyche, but I didn't question it. Sunday school was a time of Bible stories and tenets of the faith; it was not a time to question. Questions were best left for Mom and Dad to answer.

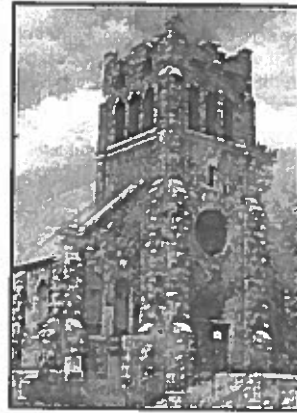
Follow-up at home consisted of grace before supper and the daily question, "Did you say your prayers?" We did not have family discussions about the meaning of the sermon or how Jesus can be both human and divine. I never found my voice to question my faith; rather, I grew in my faith through blind acceptance. I was one of only a few students in my college dorm who made it onto the Sunday-morning shuttle to various churches in our college town. Somehow, the Sunday community of faith had become important to me. Church provided a protective net around new and expanding freedoms, sexual and otherwise, that clashed with my parents' values and left me dazed and confused about my own.

It seemed to be destiny that I fell in love with someone who was also a churchgoer. He too had an Episcopalian-Methodist background

but had settled on the Lutheran church with its emphasis on grace as a compromise between high Episcopalian and low Methodist traditions. The Lutheran liturgy was comfortable for us both, and soon we had our own family to carry on the Sunday ritual of church and Sunday school.

Without the requirement to wear hats each Sunday, my daughter asked much harder questions than my sister had. The big one was, "What do you believe, Mom?" It stopped me short. I mumbled something about the creed; after all, I said it faithfully each Sunday. As I pointed to the creed, an internal voice shouted at me, "Is this what you really believe?" The red flag popped out of my psyche and waved frantically until I could no longer ignore it. "How can Jesus be both human and divine?"

While that question had been underground, it had propagated



believe and can't go on acting like I'm a good Christian."

I easily settled into a Sunday routine of watching *CBS Sunday Morning*. And yet . . . I miss church. Church as place—a sacred place of serenity and beauty, a place for contemplation and exploring the path you're on and where you're going;

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itself. Other flags began waving at me. "If the resurrection of Jesus is so special, why isn't Lazarus divine too?" "How can you not be saved just because you are born in a Hindu culture?" "Why do we have to be baptized into the faith in order to receive communion?" The flags flapped so loudly I could no longer say the creed. I still received communion, but my doubts were getting the best of me. I felt like a heretic because I was a heretic! Each Sunday I slinked into the back pew and soaked in the beautiful music, read the bulletin for opportunities of community service, watched my friends serve as ushers and lay leaders, and listened to good sermons that challenged my thinking. Yet when the creed came, I couldn't make my voice say the words.

I didn't know what I believed. I was having a crisis of faith. I felt my very integrity was at stake by attending church when I couldn't say the creed, and by forcing my children to learn a doctrine that I myself was questioning. Still I continued to go every week, more to maintain constancy for my family than any hope for a spiritual awakening.

Years later, after the children had all left the nest, I woke up one Sunday morning and said to my husband, "I'm not going to church."

"We don't have to go today," he said.

"No, I mean I'm giving up church. I just don't know what I

church as opportunity—opportunities for social action, opportunities to reflect on personal and societal ethics and morality; church as community—a community that will help you through pain and suffering, doubt and fear, and that will celebrate joy and love while serving as a model of belief in action. I miss sermons that point me to answers. I miss the beautiful stone sanctuary, the Tiffany stained-glass windows, the liturgy and the Eucharist, the language of metaphor and symbols, and words like *grace*, *forgiveness*, and *redemption*. The question is: Is there a place in the church for someone who is having trouble believing church doctrine? Is there a place at the table for me to sit?

Apparently I'm in good company (I suppose my priest would say I'm in bad company). According to the Pew Research Center, 78 percent of adults who do not identify with a religious group were raised with religion. Of these adults, 49 percent left their affiliation because they lack belief. Another 18 percent say they are "religiously unsure," describing themselves as "seeking," "spiritual but not religious," or "uncertain about their beliefs." That's me alright.

Yet deep in that psychic well of mine is a strong belief that church is very important, especially for cynics and doubters like me. It is my prayer that churches will set a place at the table by welcoming and acknowledging doubt and challenges to

belief; encouraging questions and providing forums for exploration of answers to those questions; avoiding platitudes; pointing to biblical and metaphorical answers; allowing discussion of individual beliefs or non-beliefs and how those can be aligned—or not—with church doctrine; and following up with people who leave the church as to the real reasons for their departure.

Those of us who are using the church to explore our doubts have responsibilities as well: a responsibility to respect the believers and non-doubters; not to undermine the doctrines of the denomination; to support the church financially and with time and talents; to read and listen with a discerning heart and open mind; and to pray, listening to the still, small voice within.

Today I am tiptoeing back to church, called by Episcopal food pantry work, a Lutheran ministry to the mentally ill, the peace and stillness of a Catholic abbey, the music of Bach, the catechism of Luther, and the prayers of the people. My belief is not a straight catechistic line; for me, church is a sacred portal to something divine that I'm searching to understand. Church takes us out of ourselves and puts us on the line of social action. It challenges us to begin again, over and over. Forgiveness, like an Etch-a-Sketch, wipes our sins clean.

Throughout this journey of faith, I am grateful that my church experience has forced me to contemplate the question, How then shall we live? More important, it has helped me to contemplate a closely related question: How then shall we die?

We held my mother's memorial service at my childhood Episcopal church. As I opened the big red door early that morning, the familiar pews were empty, soon to be filled by relatives coming from near and far. The organist was practicing, and the pipes echoed the hymns of my childhood. I set my mother's ashes on the small table next to the altar and knew she was home. I too felt at home. One thing I do believe is that the church stands ready to walk each of us home; even, and maybe especially, those of us who doubt.

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