The Church Factor:
How Crucial Is It?

By Karen Meehan

When I look back to my college years I remember a time when Sunday morning service was a "necessary" time waster. (All good Christians attend Sunday service.) Going to Sunday school was unthinkable. I was in classes all week plus Bible studies and meetings with my college fellowship. Not until I graduated, moved away from college and my hometown, did I consider my need for a church and the church's need for me.

As I did become involved in the church, I became slightly impatient with its slowness in accepting new ideas. I began to see my inability to relate to believers who had families, who were retired, or who didn't think quite the way I did. I was very interested in talking about missions yet there didn't seem to be anyone who had a vision for the world like I did. So why be involved in the church? I was slow in learning but I finally realized the church's importance.

The New Testament shows that God established local congregations as His means of expressing His purposes both locally and globally. As missiologist David Dougherty stated it, "The local church is the normal grouping and normal home for every member of the body of Christ." Every member of the body, regardless of age, should expect to be in a reciprocal relationship with a local church.

Just as any quality and growing relationship is one of mutual giving and receiving, so should every part of Christ's body expect to be giving and receiving from the other parts of Christ's body directly around him.

Romans 12 parallels Christ's body with the human body. The diverse parts of the human body cannot function effectively as separate entities, and the same is true of Christ's body. American Christians tend to function independently of each other because our culture elevates independence as a supreme value. This aspect of our culture works to the demise of Christ-like cohesiveness and effective body cooperation.

Christ desires dependence on Him. All of us have little trouble concluding that truth. However, the truth that we are to be interdependent on one another is much more difficult to accept and live out. This is especially true for college students gaining their first real break from home life. Even within Christian circles, there is a search for independence. Students are looking for an identity and, of course, all of us know that that's done alone! At least that's what the world would trick us into believing. The Bible clearly states that finding oneself and gaining true freedom happens only in dying to self for Christ's sake.

We need to learn interdependence, and the place to begin learning is the local church. Let me share with you some questions and answers specifically regarding your role in the local church.

First of all, why do you need to be involved in a local church?

You need the teaching, encouragement, stability, perspective, and support a church will provide. Along with those vital aspects, you will be exposed to people of all age groups. Being in an environment like this, one comes to understand what the Gospel has to say regarding life, death, marriage, illness, and financial problems. The diversity within a church

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is tremendous and often will be the first "cross-cultural" barrier a student crosses. Church involvement will give you Biblical principles on being part of a church and also on how to plant a church. A church offers numerous opportunities to discover, develop and use the gifts God has given you. You also need the wisdom available from pastors, elders, and committee leaders.

As you are in a receiving position you are also able to give to the church. You can offer an example of commitment, an understanding of the world, faithfulness in ministry and a vision for the church's involvement in missions.

Church involvement should not rule out involvement in a campus fellowship. God has raised up many fine interdenominational campus organizations whose purposes are to enhance or extend the local church's ministry. These organizations realize that they do not have a life apart from the local church, and therefore, they cannot meet all the students' needs.

After seeing the need for a church, what steps should you take to get involved in a church?

- Look for one to which you can whole-heartedly give yourself. Key things to look for are people in love with God, His word being preached and obeyed, and leadership that is godly and worthy of respect.
- Spend time in relationships and ministry with this group of believers. This is as important as a daily devotional time.
- Find a few individuals who would be willing to pray together regularly for the kindling of world vision in yourselves and the church.
- Serve the church by offering your talents, your gifts, and your time to be used for the furthering of God's kingdom.
- Get to know those who are in leadership. Ask questions of them, and build quality trust relationships.

Does the level of involvement differ for those who are planning to send others compared to those who are planning to go as missionaries?

The overwhelming answer to this question is there is no difference. Each of us, as a disciple of Christ, is called to be furthering the kingdom; our plans or location should not affect our level of commitment or involvement to the church.

Karen Meehan served with the ministry of Caleb Project after college, and continued to support the ministry as a donor, board member, and friend, as well as serving faithfully in her local church.

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