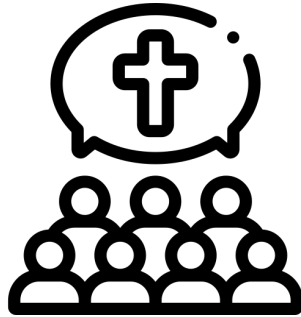


# Finding a Church



*...and Staying*

A resource for international students and graduates answering some big questions about the importance of being part of a local church.

# Introduction

What do you think of when you hear the word 'church'?

- A particular building?
- A special group of people?
- A style of worship and some favourite songs?
- Good teaching that makes you think and helps you know how to live?
- Coffee with friends after the service?
- Delicious lunches provided by church members?

All of these can be important parts of our experience of church and can help make attending church feel comfortable and enjoyable. But these things can also vary a lot. Church can happen in a huge cathedral or a tiny hut or a home, with thousands of people or a very small group. Worship can be modern or traditional, loud or quiet, feel very formal or very informal, be very public or happen in secret. So, what really is church?

It's helpful to note that we use **the word 'church'** in at least three different ways:

- The world-wide church: Christians are all part of one universal church.
- The local church e.g. the church in Cairo, Cambridge, Caracas, Chiang Mai, Copenhagen.
- The building where a congregation meets: I'm going to church on Sunday.

In this booklet we will consider:

- What does God think of church?
- How do I choose a local church?
- How do I decide if I should stay in my church?
- Some practical advice.

You might like to work through this booklet on your own or in a group.

Remember to pray as you explore each section.

Perhaps first we should ask:

# 1. What Does God Think Of Church?

The Bible uses different pictures to describe church:

## ***The Family of God:***

*Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.*

**- Hebrews 2:11**

## ***The People of God:***

*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.*

**- 1 Peter 2:9-10**

## ***The Body of Christ:***

*And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.*

**- Colossians 1:18**

## ***The Temple of God:***

*Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?*

**- 1 Corinthians 3:16**

## ***The Bride of Christ:***

*One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.*

**- Revelation 21:9**

**The church** is very important to God, and He uses very special terms to describe it. We can see too that the descriptions are personal and relational. The church is not a building or an institution, but **people**"

Note too that all of these are plural pictures. When we start to follow Jesus, we are made **New Creations** (2 Corinthians 5:17), but we also become part of a **New Community**.

*Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

**- Ephesians 2:19-22,**

*His 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**

The Bible is clear that the Church is God's idea, a body of His people of whom Christ is the Head. It is to be a community where we worship God, support each other and witness to those outside the church. It is also in a mysterious way a witness to spiritual powers.

It is clear that belonging to a local church is not 'an option', but part of God's will for all Christians.

## Reflection Questions

1. What is most important to you about attending church?
2. Look again at the Bible pictures used to describe church. Are any of them new to you? Do any of them make you think differently about church?

## 2. How Do I Choose A Local Church?

Maybe you have already been part of a church in your home country. Or perhaps you are already thinking about which church you should join when you return to your home country or move to another UK city.

Depending on where you are returning to, there may be a very limited or a very wide choice of churches. In some countries it may be forbidden to meet with other Christians and there may be no public church. If this applies to you, do seek help and advice before you leave the UK.

You may have already realised there are many **different Christian denominations**. There are often historical reasons for these, some positive, some less so. Different churches offer different ways of worshipping or organising leadership structure. It's also true that the same church denomination can look quite different from country to country and even within a single country.

### What are some criteria for choosing a local church?

Look at the table below. How important are these factors for you in choosing a church back home or wherever you go next?

Which of these are a priority, *essential*, and which can you be *flexible* about?

|                                                        | Essential | Flexible |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------|----------|
| Location e.g. distance from home                       |           |          |
| Music/style of worship                                 |           |          |
| Biblical teaching                                      |           |          |
| Church leadership structure                            |           |          |
| Diversity of people in the church                      |           |          |
| Opportunities to use my gifts/serve                    |           |          |
| Church ministries e.g. evangelism/children's programme |           |          |
| Denomination e.g. Presbyterian, Baptist, Pentecostal   |           |          |
| A church where I can invite my family and friends      |           |          |

Churches will differ on secondary issues, for example:

- Style of worship: modern or traditional, loud or reflective
- Organisational structure: how leaders are appointed, the role of the congregation in making decisions
- Baptism: Baptising babies or believers? By immersion or sprinkling?
- Women's roles: Are women allowed/encouraged to preach and teach or be part of the leadership?
- Use of some gifts of the Holy Spirit e.g. speaking in tongues.

We may have strong preferences or beliefs around these things. But in choosing a church we should first ask, **What are their central beliefs?**

- What does the church believe about Jesus? That He is both God and man?
- Do they believe in the Trinity – that God is three in one: Father, Son & Holy Spirit?
- Is the teaching based on the Bible and does the preacher talk from the Bible and point you to Jesus?
- Is our salvation dependent only on what Jesus has done for us on the cross? Or are we encouraged to add our own good works to gain our salvation?

#### **Other important considerations:**

- Is this church outward looking? Are they active in evangelism and do they encourage members to share their faith? Do they have concern for the worldwide church?
- Does this church encourage me to be involved in ministry and use and develop my gifts?
- Would I be comfortable in bringing family and friends to this church?

#### **What is a cult?**

Sadly, not every church is a **true** church. We need to be able to recognise **cults** or **New Religious Movements** as they are often called, which sometimes appear to be true churches. Some more questions to ask:

- Is there any mention of **Jesus plus** something else (things like good works/being part of that church/knowing another book)
- Does the leader say this is the only true church and only their members are correct and can go to heaven?
- Is there another book you should follow apart from the Bible? Or another leader who is given the same authority as Jesus or the Bible?
- Does the group restrict your freedom e.g. put pressure on you not to leave?
- Does the teaching about the Christian life give a balance between joy and suffering?

For more information about cults, see the following resource:

[www.friendsinternational.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/world-views\\_cults-leaflet.pdf](http://www.friendsinternational.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/world-views_cults-leaflet.pdf)

**Remember – You won't find the perfect church!  
You will have to compromise on some things.**

*If the teaching is right, it's the most important thing. Have a humble heart as you visit churches. Deciding to commit is important – you can only really settle down, become part of a discipling community and grow if you commit.*

*Avoid being over-critical.*

***Advice from a returnee.***

## Reflection Questions

1. What do you know about the churches in your destination country or city?
2. What differences have you observed between your home church (if you have one) or maybe a church you have visited in your home country, and your UK church?
3. If you had already attended church in your home country, can you remember how you felt when you first started attending church here? Did you struggle with any differences here?
4. Can you think about which of these differences might be cultural rather than biblical?

### 3. How Do I Decide If I Should Stay In My Church?

Remember the church is people not a building. But where there are people, they can challenge and disappoint us.

What should we do when we become unhappy with our church? It can be very tempting to leave quickly and find another one. But is that always the right thing to do? We've already seen some of the things people might disagree about in churches:

#### Scenarios

##### In which of these situations would you consider leaving your church?

You might find it helpful to discuss these with a more mature Christian.

1. The church you used to belong to before going to the UK somehow feels 'old-fashioned' now, whereas another church in your city is what you've become used to: structured teaching, lively music, diverse congregation etc.
2. You are concerned that the preacher rarely refers to the Bible and increasingly teaches things that make you feel uncomfortable.
3. You have started to help with the church youth group and the leader is very keen you get straight into Bible studies; you remember your time in the UK and think it's important for people to get to know each other before they will share deeply.
4. You are aware that one of the leaders is having a relationship with a woman in the church who is not his wife. Many people know this, but no-one seems to care or think it important.

**To stay or to leave?** Sometimes we need to decide which are i) flexible and not priority issues, which are ii) secondary issues – important but not central, and which are iii) primary or essential things.

##### *i) Flexible things*

The style of preaching/preacher; style of music/worship; what people wear; how to treat Sunday; how/what to give to church; who does which roles in the church

##### *ii) Important but secondary things.*

Deeper things such as whether to baptise babies or those old enough to decide for themselves; how much some of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (e.g. speaking in tongues/prophesying) are to be used in worship today; the roles of men and women; details about the second coming of Jesus.

##### *iii) Essential things*

Central beliefs as above (P5); leaders who live lives of integrity.

You would probably leave a church if the essential things are not taught and believed. You may or may not leave a church over a secondary issue. You would probably not leave a church over a flexible thing.

**Before you decide:**

- Pray
- Give it time
- Talk to people in the church and make sure you understand the whole situation
- Talk to mature Christians you trust, at home or in the UK
- If you leave, leave well with a generous heart to the leader and the people
- Pray

Leaving a church where you have been attending for some time is a serious thing and may unsettle other people in the church. Sometimes it is necessary but always do it prayerfully and carefully.

*Commitment to a church body with all its faults is essential for growth.  
Returnees need to know the difference between being discerning and  
humble and being critical and judgemental.*

**Advice from a returnee.**

In any discussion and decision, our **attitudes and behaviour** are very important

*Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.<sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,<sup>4</sup> not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*

**- Philippians 2:3-4**

## Reflection Questions

1. If you are already attending a church, what things are you finding challenging about it? If you are still looking, what things might make you hesitate to join one?

2. What do you think it means to be 'one in spirit and of one mind'? Does this mean we always have to agree with everyone? Why do you think it is important to have unity in a church? (See John 17:23)

## 4. Practical Advice

### A. For finding a church

- **Start looking early.** As soon as you know which city you are likely to return to, it's good to start investigating churches. Even if you may only be there for a short time, it's still worth connecting with local believers.
- **Get advice/recommendations.** Maybe you already have Christian friends back home who can give you advice or introduce you to a church. If not, ask your UK church or Friends International worker to help you.
- **Pray.** It's important to God that you connect with a group of His children, so He will guide you.
- **Don't 'church hop' for too long.** It can be helpful to try some different churches and not make a very quick decision. But remember you won't find the perfect church, so don't wait too long before deciding. You will only really understand a church, benefit from it and be able to contribute when you are committed to it.

*On going home, and especially when looking for a job in a new city, check to see if there is a good church there when you get a job offer. Also check early in the application process if the new company will want you to work overtime especially during the weekends, preventing you from going to church, or in a way which will affect your time with God.*

**Advice from a returnee.**

### B. For adjusting to church

- **Prioritise personal 'quiet times'.** Church is not a substitute for your own personal spiritual life. It's still very important that you read the Bible and pray yourself. That in turn will help you contribute to church life and encourage your Christian brothers and sisters.
- **Aim to make some godly friendships** where you can encourage and pray for each other. These could be people from your church or perhaps your workplace.
- **Maintain contact with UK Christian friends and be wise in connecting with online teaching.** You will want to keep contact with your Christian friends from the UK and maybe still enjoy some online teaching<sup>1</sup>. That's great but try to ensure you balance that with local fellowship and teaching<sup>2</sup>.
- **Try to commit to small group fellowship.** Many churches organise small groups for Bible study, mutual support and prayer, and/or perhaps prayer partners/triplets. These help us connect more deeply with a few people and can help our sense of belonging.
- **Continue to serve.** Find an area of church life where you can serve. This might be in music, helping with children, practical or spiritual aspects of church life. Serving helps us feel we belong and keeps us committed to our church.
- **Accept you are in a different phase of life.** When you return home you will probably no longer be a student – or not for long anyway. That will mean that you probably have less time, more responsibilities and also you may be treated differently e.g. not so many lifts or free lunches! It can take some time to adjust, but perhaps now is the time for you to be the one welcoming others to your church?

- **Learn to forgive, and maybe to set healthy boundaries.** Church life is one of the means God uses to help us grow. Growth can sometimes be painful. We may need to forgive Christian brothers and sisters who hurt us or behave insensitively. Or sometimes we need to say 'No' to pressure to take on too many responsibilities. But growth also comes through our being stretched as we learn new ways to serve and discover the gifts God has given us. God will use all these experiences to help us understand more of His ways and to grow more like Jesus.

## Reflection Questions

1. What are some of the reasons it is important to start looking for a church early?
2. What do we mean by having a 'quiet time'? How might this help us settle back home and grow in our Christian life?
3. How does our culture think about forgiveness? Why is it important to learn to forgive?

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1. For some countries you may need to be careful about online communication. Please take advice on this.  
2. Please see Appendix 1 on Online Church Services.

## In Conclusion

*It took me almost two years to finally accept my church again and be at peace with it. It was a good church, but I just couldn't stop comparing the way things were being done with the way things were in my London church. I scrutinised everything – the songs we sang, the plays we produced, the sermons, the courses, the church's vision, the people, their faith, their knowledge and desire for God, everything. I left nothing unturned and ended up a very drained and critical person. Nothing measured up to my experience of Christian thinking and living in London.*

***Story from a returnee.***

**Being part of a church is a tremendous privilege. We become part of a new family with all its joys and challenges. God does not want us to be 'solo' or 'lone' Christians. Rather He has designed us and gifted us to be part of one body. If we don't commit to a local church, we lose out and so does the church!**

**So finally....**

*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

**– Hebrews 10:24-25**

## Appendix 1:

### Online Church Services

Video recording and live streaming make it possible for us to listen to and watch church services all over the world. This was of course incredibly helpful during Covid times and even now in some situations – e.g. if there isn't a church near where we are or we're unwell. It also enables us to watch a service we've had to miss and of course to keep in touch with our church in the UK when we move on. We thank God for the technology which makes this possible.

However, wherever possible, online church **shouldn't be a substitute** for attending church in person. We need the interaction with other people and the opportunity to serve which aren't available in the same way online. We're not meant to be solo Christians but to play our part in the body of Christ.

Relying on online services from our previous church can also make us critical of our own church and delay the process of settling in and committing to a church where we are now. We grow as Christians as we interact with other people, learn from and support our brothers and sisters, and sometimes to forgive.

## Appendix 2:

### Case Studies

After one or two years in the UK, and even more so if you have lived here longer, you will have become used to your UK church and its way of doing things. When returnees start attending church in their home country again or in another UK city, they may find it uncomfortable at first, sometimes even questioning if their church is doing things biblically. Let's pause and consider:

*Each of these case studies describes an international student's experience of church three months after they return home. Do you think the issues they are struggling with are **cultural or biblical**? What is really happening in each case study? Personally? Culturally? What advice can you give them?*

*Maybe find an older/more experienced Christian to discuss these with? See Endnotes for some more questions to ask/things to consider:*

- 1) Keiko finds her church very formal. Most of the congregation is elderly, the music sounds old-fashioned, and the sermons are long and boring. Worst of all, she has just discovered that a personal problem that she mentioned to a church leader is now known by all the elders! She feels she cannot trust anyone not to gossip about her and wants to leave the church.
- 2) Emmanuel is feeling frustrated in his church. It is his home church and probably nothing has changed, except now he is aware of flaws like how sermons jump all over the Bible, instead of teaching carefully through a passage. Many people in the congregation quote the Bible, but often not in context. Services last for hours, meetings start late and he feels like people are resistant to change.
- 3) Jiyoung is finding her church back home demanding. She joined a cell group on Thursday evenings, but there are also many prayer meetings, Bible courses and outreach events, and people make her feel guilty if she doesn't attend, even though she works long hours and her family complains they never see her. Recently she started dating someone (a Christian!) but church members have been asking a lot of questions about him and advising her to go slow. Why is it their business?
- 4) Stefan really misses his UK church – the close fellowship and hospitality, Christians from all over the world, deep conversations about God and about life, bold evangelism projects. He's found a church in his hometown, but it is small and everyone is local and seems preoccupied with their own jobs, families and houses. People seem to him to be more focussed on their own lives than on Jesus.

Further questions to ask ourselves when we're struggling with our new or previous church:

- Is it avoidable or are all local churches in the culture like this?
- Are we overly critical? Have we idealised our UK church?
- Can we be patient?
- Do we want to serve?
- Is this a church which is truly following Jesus and His Word?

## Endnotes

- Consider whether you have misread the situation. For example, in Keiko's case, what she thought was gossip and a break of her trust may be understood very differently by others in the congregation who know that pastoral issues shared with one church leader will always be made known to the other five church elders, but it will stay within the leadership team.
- Consider whether the issue you're struggling with is avoidable, or if it's a feature of all/most local churches. For example, it's hard to find a church in your home country that isn't really busy or where people don't offer unsolicited advice as part of the wider culture. So perhaps your focus should be on developing some coping strategies (e.g. saying 'no' without guilt) and praying for God's grace.
- It may be reassuring to remind yourself in the first few months of being home and finding it hard to enjoy church, that many of the negative emotions you feel are part of reverse culture shock as you adjust. Many returnees find themselves adapting over time. Being able to be patient and to keep persevering with church through those early months is so important. God will help you.
- It also helps to approach church with the desire to serve with a servant heart rather than as a critical consumer. For example, in Emmanuel's case, if he is concerned about the quality of the preaching and teaching, perhaps he can find a small way to introduce what he considers good teaching, and he can pray for the leaders.
- Staying in the church is not always the right response. There are times when it is right, and indeed necessary, for you to leave. One big reason to do this is if the church doesn't follow the Bible or preaches a false gospel. See the advice on recognising cults (P5).

## Find Helpful Resources On Our Online Shop!

Returning Home and Think Home are two great titles we have produced for those returning home after life in the UK. Think Home is written specifically for Christians and contains Bible Studies. Returning Home? can be used by returning students from any religion or background. Find them and other resources at our online shop.

[www.friendsinternational.uk/shop](http://www.friendsinternational.uk/shop)

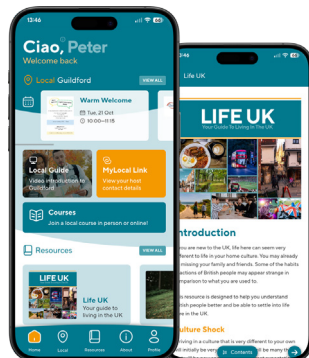


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