

Ten Special Offers at Your Local Church

By Roy Lawrence

Let's face it. It's not very fashionable to go to church today. That is not to say that people do not have some sort of belief in God. According to opinion polls most people say that they do. In fact the majority think of themselves as religious. But going to church is something else. We might perhaps go to a carol service at Christmas or turn up from time to time at a wedding, christening, or funeral. But as for ordinary, run-of-the-mill, bread-and-butter, week-by-week church services, that's something different.

After all, if we turn on the television, we often find that regular churchgoers are pictured as wimps or bigots or both. And we don't want to appear like that, do we? So the average weekend does not include a visit to the local church.

However, the majority does not always get things right. The government is keen that we should know the majority diet is at present an unhealthy one—and we have the heart attacks to prove it. And although for generations a massive number of people have been smokers, that does not make smoking good for us. And our current rejection of traditional sexual morality has not served us well. The escalation of sexually transmitted diseases shows this clearly. The majority can sometimes make horrible mistakes. Sometimes it is better not to go with the flow.

So before you and I go with the flow—in the opposite direction to our local church—let's just stop for a moment and ponder. Could we be missing out on something of real value?

Before I sat down to write this article three pamphlets dropped through our letterbox. They were from local supermarkets, and in glowing and glossy colours they contained details of their special offers. Pamphlets like these come to us regularly, and I sometimes find myself wishing that the churches were rich enough to send something similar. You see, I do believe that the churches have special offers which make the supermarkets pale into insignificance.

Here then are some of the offers currently available at the church down your road—my own 'top-ten' selection. If you and I are interested in living life to the full, they really are too good to ignore.

1. Friendship: There are a lot of lonely people in the world. A newspaper editor has written: 'Every time loneliness is mentioned in any part of the paper, letters arrive literally by the dozen from people who are lonely'. They come from the young, the old, and in-between. Those who write them may be doing quite well

at work. They may not be short of worldly goods. But in spite of that they are finding themselves short of flesh-and-blood relationships.

Yet nobody needs to be lonely: friendships can be found in the church down the road. Of course the people there will not be perfect, but one of the reasons they are there at all is that they believe that to love your neighbour as yourself is a good basis for life. That is why millions of good friendships have been made in churches around the world. Speaking personally it was in church that I met my wife, my best friend of all.

2. Self-awareness: This is one of the church's special offers which we may not find quite so attractive, for there is a dark side to human nature, which we would rather ignore. It is true that we will hear in church that all human beings are sinners, that we all break God's laws, that we all need his forgiveness. But we will also hear that each one of us is uniquely precious in his sight. Self-contempt



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has no place in Christian character. Churches teach us to value and respect ourselves.

3. Good news about God: Christian self-respect and self-value rests upon three fundamental truths about God, which we will hear again and again in church:

- God made us—he does not create rubbish;
- God loves us—the cross of Jesus shows us just how much; and
- God wants us—he has something quite unique for each one of us to do and to be.

The world can seem a frightening place, but because of these three truths churches can help us achieve a new personal significance and security.

4. Worship: The person who does not worship lives in a room surrounded by mirrors, many of them distorting mirrors. It is a room in which space is confined, the light is dim, and the air is dank. If we would break out into sunshine and freedom, we need to become aware of that which is greater than ourselves. We need to reach out in worship towards our Creator. Of course we do not have to be in church in order to pray. But it is a sad fact of life that our prayer-life can all too easily wither away, unless churchgoing is motivating us to make it a regular and healthy habit. Worshiping in our local church can help us to keep



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right with God, to get right with each other, and to come closer to achieving our own true nature.

5. Time to reflect: You can find wisdom in some unexpected places. For instance how about these words right at the beginning of A. A. Milne's children's book *Winnie-the-Pooh*?

Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump on the back of his head behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but he sometimes feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think about it.

In this world of stress and pressure the opportunity provided by an hour in church to stop bumping and start thinking can be very precious.

6. A chance to help others: There really is very little fun in being totally turned in on ourselves. Life is better if we care about others. Every church provides opportunities for service. Those who take these opportunities find in them an important part of happy, balanced living. For instance in my last church we had the practice of throwing a big party on Christmas Day for people who would otherwise

have been alone and unhappy. Many of the people's names were provided for us by the local Social Services. Year after year our guests told us what a good time they had, but also again and again the helpers said that serving others made their own Christmas complete. They felt quite sorry for some of their neighbours who just sat at home, over-eating and over-drinking, and often falling out with the family!

7. A meeting with Jesus: Here is something deeply mysterious. We have a promise from Jesus: 'Where two or three gather together in my name, there am I in the midst.'¹ If you believe that Jesus does not tell us lies, then it follows that coming together with like-minded people to worship in the name of Christ makes it possible to reach out to him and experience his life-transforming presence.

8. A place of healing: If we experience anything at all of the reality of the presence of Jesus in our worship, the Church's ministry of healing must follow naturally and logically. He was always 'infectious' with wholeness, and when people were in his presence, they encountered a power for healing. So if we truly can



meet him today, we should not be surprised if we are better in body, mind, and spirit for that meeting. Logically we should be surprised if he makes



Jesus has promised to be wherever two or three gather for worship in his name...

no difference at all! As I sit here writing, I can think of scores of people—even hundreds, if I put my mind to it—who have been changed whilst worshipping in church. I can think of relationships healed, of peace discovered, of mental and physical health improved, and even of supposedly incurable diseases and disabilities which have unaccountably been taken away.

9. New goals and directions: As part of this healing experience, it is not uncommon to find that regular worship in church brings a new sense of purpose into life. God has a plan for each one of us. It will be a tragic waste if you and I fail to do and to be what we were meant for, but it is so easy to fail to hear his call to us in matters both great and small, unless we take time out with God.

10. The offer of eternal life: One of these days we are going to die. What then? The Bible says there can be a place, a purpose, a destiny for us beyond this world. But have we actually listened to the Christian message of eternal life? Do we know what it means that 'God so loved

the world that he gave his only-begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life?'² It is a major function of the church in our neighbourhood to make the meaning of those words clear. Any one of us can go along and ask the vicar, the priest, the minister, or the pastor to explain this message. Your church has the potential to be the gate of heaven!

So how's that for a list of special offers? You don't have to seek out some mega-church with a congregation of thousands to find any of them. There will probably be less than a hundred worshippers at your local church if you call in this weekend. But that's all right. Jesus

promised to be in the midst when two or three meet in his name. He does not require two or three hundred, let alone two or three thousand.

Of course you may have to work at getting the best out of your local church. The same would be true of joining a local health club or any other organisation. Even at the supermarket you can miss the best offers if you don't take care. As far as the church is concerned, the offers are so spectacularly far-reaching that they certainly merit attention. The only way to find out whether they are genuine is to go and see for yourself. None of it may be fashionable just at present. But then, Jesus never said: 'Follow the fashion'; he said: 'Follow me!'



whether in a small country parish church that might barely hold a hundred,



or a mega-church that seats several thousands.

Notes

- 1 Matthew 18:20
- 2 John 3:16

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