

Looking in From the Outside

Have you met the Jones family? They're fairly new to the church. In fact, they are always new to one church or another. They just can't seem to find a place where they fit in. The churches always *seem* welcoming enough, and the doctrine and preaching are fine. But when their status as visitors wears off and real church life begins, they are dissatisfied. They just can't seem to find their niche. They long for real fellowship—for mutual encouragement, correction, and for the experience of belonging to a loving family that shares joys and trials—but don't find it. They attend less and less, and finally go off in search of a new church to start the process all over again.



Or perhaps you've seen Sally. She's been attending on the edges of fellowship for 10 years or more. She's given up the hope of finding meaningful relationships in the church, and you can see the resentful disappointment in her face. She flees as soon as the last hymn is sung, never attends any other church functions and frankly, no one notices. Sally understands that she has no real connections in the church and that she's missing something that she hungers for, but she doesn't know how to fix it.

Or perhaps you haven't just met these folks; perhaps you *are* these folks. Or at least, you can identify with their feelings of being on the outside of real, intimate fellowship in the church. I've experienced times like that in my life, too, and believe it or not, it wasn't the fault of the church. I wasn't doing everything the Bible commanded *me* to do as a member of the body. What about you?

Are you showing up consistently? *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some . . .* (Hebrews 10:24-25a) You won't have close relationships in the church if you don't make spending time with the people a priority. That means that you attend regularly, and not *just* the worship service. Does your church offer small groups? A men's or women's Bible study? Find a group that fits your situation, and commit to attend regularly.

Are you serving? *As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace* (1 Peter 4:10). Have you let the church leadership know that you want to serve? When you are new to a fellowship, it may take a little time to find just the right place, so be flexible. Be willing to work in supporting roles and be utterly dependable, and God will lead you to the best avenue of service.

You may need to invent a new ministry! An elderly gentleman I know was limited in the ways he could contribute. He became "the birthday man" who sent cards to all the children in the church, letting them know he was praying for them on their special day. The children (and their parents) went out of their way to meet the man who sent the cards. His simple act of service created a bridge for him to get to know and support young families.

Are you encouraging others? . . . *but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near* (Hebrews 10:25b). Did you just hear an extremely helpful sermon or Bible lesson? Were you encouraged by someone in a personal conversation? Are you grateful for godly leadership in your church? Communicate! Talk to the person who blessed you, send an email, or better yet, a handwritten note.

Make an effort to greet one person you don't know well every time you attend. (They may be feeling as disconnected as you do!) Even something as simple as a smile can be an encouragement to a brother or sister who feels discouraged or lonely. A smile also encourages others to talk to you. Don't be known as the scary person with the angry expression, but as characteristically warm, smiling and approachable.

Are you helping others and showing hospitality? *Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.* (Romans 12:13) When the church asks for volunteers to help someone move or provide meals for the sick, make yourself available. You'll get to know the people you help and forge the beginnings of a relationship.

Even though it may be intimidating, try inviting someone from church over for lunch or out for coffee. If you are a poor conversationalist like I am, it takes some pressure off to invite two people over at the same time (since they can keep the conversation rolling when I'm tongue-tied). Keep it simple and don't get hung up on presenting a perfect house or gourmet food. Let the focus be on relationship instead of on your entertaining skills. Just think what a difference you could make in Sally's life by making the first move in building a relationship!

Did you notice that most of these suggestions encourage us to look outward—toward those we can help—and not inward, wishing someone would reach out to us? When we start meeting the needs of others instead of waiting for others to meet ours, we'll suddenly find our place in the life of the body. Try it!