



# ‘Cool’ churches are overrated

It’s all about faithfully showing up

Like so many seminary students, I daydreamed about my future ministry while sitting in classes. By the time I graduated, I’d imagined my calling many times before actually experiencing my calling. I visualized cool programs, vibrant music and lively Bible discussions. I thought there would be children, youth groups and church retreats. Obviously, God thought differently.

My first call was to an aging congregation in a small town. There was no choir and no youth group. Worship and fellowship were the center of the life of the church. There was no “cool” factor at all. Five years later, I’m still there, showing up each week to share Jesus’ story. I confess that from the pulpit I sometimes push for

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more — challenging the congregation to follow Jesus more fully by doing more mission, more prayer, more visiting and more giving. Simply showing up for worship doesn’t always seem like enough, but it is something.

For me, the showing up for the worship part has been easy. Showing up at the hospital or funeral home isn’t easy, but it has been a gift for me as I’ve watched people cling to and question faith. While I’ve witnessed the daily challenges that health issues cause, I didn’t fully understand the life-changing impact they have.

That changed the day I learned that I have cancer.

The Sunday after my diagnosis, it was all that I could do to show up for work. As the people filed into the sanctuary, I told them my news on the way in since I wanted to keep the worship focused on Jesus. As I stepped into the pulpit and looked out at the congregation, everything looked different. The line “I was blind but now I see,” from the hymn “Amazing Grace,” planted itself

in my brain. One week earlier, I had dismissed simply showing up for worship as an enjoyable weekly habit. Now I saw it as an act of faith.

From my new vantage point, the effort that it took those in the pew to show up for worship with arthritis and heart disease and tumors became so much clearer. The way the congregants cavalierly talked about MRIs and chemo and minor surgeries now made my palms sweat and my heart pound. That medical terminology was now real. And because I am one who mentally prepares for a flu shot, I know the fear that is behind each word.

As I looked at the congregation that day, I could see that whatever I was going through, I was not alone. The faces in the room were people who know the fear, pain and uncertainty of medical tests and surgery. They, too, were people who had gotten bad news from the doctor. And yet, they are people who show up with the best intentions on Sunday morning because they love Jesus and they love each other.

When my parents happened to attend one of the worship services, the clerk of session pulled them aside. Some days it hurts her just to get dressed because of rheumatoid arthritis.

“If you think Sue is pushing too hard or doing too much, you call us directly,” she said. “We will step in and do whatever needs to be done.”

She knows what I am just realizing: We are a bunch of broken people — not just spiritually, but also physically.

My ministry isn’t nearly as cool as I imagined it would be when I was in seminary. But it’s far more loving than I ever imagined. God has put me exactly where I need to be for this time.

Small churches are relational, familial and generous. The five years we have spent showing up and serving God together have allowed our love and faith to grow. The saints of the church reveal to me how to experience gratitude in the midst of cancer’s uncertainty. They show up and I show up. Together, we bear each other’s burdens as we follow Christ.

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