

Members only?

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 22, 2014](#) issue



Alonso Rodriguez, Peter and Paul exchanging the kiss of peace (16th century)

When the church was under siege, the ritual of passing the peace was important to members who were meeting in secret and literally holding on to one another for dear life. Today it's meant to serve an important function in worship.

But I have come to dread this part of the service. I have visited two small congregations several times lately. Both include the passing of the peace. The

presiding clergyperson invites worshipers to greet one another with a handshake and the words “Peace be with you.” (Why don’t we say, “The peace of Christ be with you”? We don’t mean the generic 1960s peace that was communicated with a V sign.)

After the clergyperson says, “The peace of the Lord be with you,” and we respond, “And also with you,” all hell breaks loose. People leave their seats, walk around and greet nearly everyone else in the room. Robust conversations ensue. There is laughter, sometime raucous, as two members share an inside joke. People discuss the results of a football game or yesterday’s storm. As a visitor, I shake the hands of the people immediately around me and then venture tentatively into the aisle. There I encounter a barrier that might as well be a sign announcing “Members Only.” I’m on my own and not sure what to do. I feel as if I’ve intruded in someone else’s family reunion. I slink back to my pew, pick up the hymnal and read a few verses.

The ritual that’s intended to affirm community often does anything but that if you happen to be a visitor. Instead, congregation members are communicating clearly to strangers that their church is a closed corporation.

To be fair, in both congregations there was a person who seemed to understand what was happening and greeted me warmly, asking my name. But most were busy renewing existing relationships.

The same dynamic is in place at the coffee hour. Good friends, longtime members of the congregation, are so happy to see one another that a visitor may stand apart and alone, balancing a coffee cup and cookie and carefully examining the pattern of the tiles in the fellowship hall ceiling.

The hospitality of welcoming the stranger is not only good manners but also Christian spiritual practice. But sometimes a Christian ritual that’s meant to affirm community, love and unity among believers can be exclusive, awkward and off-putting to people who are new or not part of the community. When this becomes true about the passing of the peace, when it’s become a liturgical social hour for members only, we need to reevaluate it.