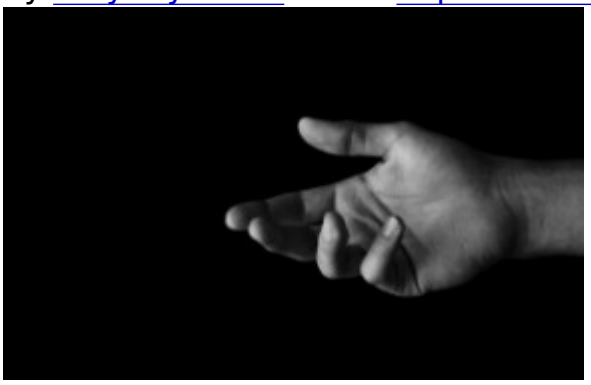
Belonging or not: My life as a nonjoiner

When I was baptized at 12, I refused what Baptists call “the right hand of fellowship.” I wanted the water but not the fellowship.

by Amy Frykholm in the September 16, 2015 issue



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When I was 12 and had just been baptized at a Baptist church, I refused to receive the “right hand of fellowship.” This adolescent choice heralded a lifelong hesitancy about the dynamics of church belonging.

Maybe I was slightly ahead of my time. The sociological research of Robert Putnam, the Pew studies on church affiliation, and lots of anecdotal evidence have told us that belonging is a challenge of our age. All kinds of civic groups are struggling for members, the church most significantly. Fewer people are choosing to participate in church and even fewer choose to join. I am not alone in finding it a challenge.

In part this may be because of the arbitrariness of belonging. As people are increasingly mobile, roots in a particular congregation or denomination do not go deep. Denominational differences become questions of style or a preference for a particular minister. Church-based relationships are disrupted by work, moving, Sunday morning soccer games, and life transitions. Diana Butler Bass expresses the concerns of many when she worries that church-related identities have been replaced by consumerism and nostalgia. We buy our identities instead of live them,

and such identities are inherently shallow. Yet no amount of theorizing changes the fundamental problem: belonging takes a commitment that is increasingly countercultural.

My baptism at Trinity Baptist Church was my second baptism. The first was when I was an infant. I was baptized by my father at the First Presbyterian Church in Flint, Michigan. Later, I watched my father baptize babies, and it was rather thrilling to see him hold the baby in his arms and walk her up and down the aisle, talking in a gentle voice to both the child and the congregation. A calm descended over him and, in my imagination at least, over the child as he spoke words of welcome and acceptance. He wore white robes and stood in front of a font made of polished wood. His hands scooped water over the baby's head three times.

The event contained a mystery: Why did a child who comes directly from God need to be formally accepted into the family of God? Why did the welcome require a rite? And why was the rite moving?

As an adolescent, I attended a Baptist church, and I watched members of the youth group stand before the congregation, read a testimony of faith, and get submerged in the water. I wanted the same. I wanted the white robe they wore and what each of the newly baptized received: a special Bible verse. I wanted to enter that body of water that lay behind the pulpit, mysterious and beckoning.

I was baptized on an Easter Sunday. Pastor Tim dipped me fully into the water while I held my nose. It was like disappearing, going into something black and blank and empty. While I closed my eyes and held my breath, only the wild pounding of my heart reminded me that I was alive. I came back up to the applause of the congregation and then moved awkwardly in my sodden robe to a side door and down steps to the basement, where a towel and dry clothes awaited me.

Later, while Easter dinner was being prepared, I wondered if baptism changed anything. Was I new? Clean? I remember wanting to move carefully in case my new life could be sullied by quick movements and impulsive decisions.

The next step in the Baptist tradition was to formally join the congregation by receiving the "right hand of fellowship." For whatever reason, I said, "No, thank you." I wanted the water and not the fellowship, the ritual and not the belonging. Maybe I was simply too shy, and getting up in front of the congregation once was as much as I could handle. Or did I have some deeper ambivalence about the process?

Was I really a Baptist? Did I want to belong to Trinity Baptist Church? Apparently I did not.

For 25 years I wandered in and out of churches, sometimes staying long enough for someone to learn my name, but not often. I could not see the meaning of membership or belonging for my own life. I could not sign up, and I was transient enough that it did not matter.

But perhaps sensing that my life was in danger of a certain shallowness, I started attending St. George Episcopal Church in Leadville, Colorado, in my thirties and became a regular. I cooked at the community meal, chanted psalms, served on various committees. One confirmation class after another came and went. I hadn't the slightest craving to join them.

Confirmation meant not only formally joining this community; it also meant joining a denomination. I had no reason to think of myself as an Episcopalian. Diana Butler Bass says that "belonging is an issue of identity." But if I could be said to belong to St. George's up until this point, it had been not an issue of identity, but one of experience. I felt that I belonged among these people, but I didn't think that I was one of them. If I became an Episcopalian, then the answer to "who are you?" would become, at least in part, "I am an Episcopalian." I could not quite make sense of that.

I found denominational thinking itself odd. Denominations seemed to represent an excess of belonging. For years, I had the responsibility of writing the pledge check from my little church to the Episcopal Diocese of Colorado, and each time I couldn't help thinking: "Why are we supporting you? We are poor, and you are rich. We have trouble paying one priest a part-time salary and you have a staff of dozens." To my mind, the flourishing of denominations was a fault of the 19th and 20th centuries—bloated and unnecessary, a byproduct of the Industrial Revolution.

I had never felt an allegiance to a denomination. I loved the Lutherans for their great sung liturgy, I loved one Methodist preacher for the hand-woven stoles she wore, I loved the Quakers for their silence, I loved the Catholics for the preservation of ancient words, I loved the Presbyterians for organizing the yearly CROP Walk for Hunger, and I loved the Orthodox for the smell of incense and burnt wax and for their whispering icons. And now I loved the Episcopalians for their Book of Common Prayer, which linked people continent to continent with simple, beautiful prayers.

But these individual loves—each based on a sliver of experience—did not compel me to join up with any one in particular.

Years before I arrived at St. George, a great fight had broken out about the roof of the church. Some wanted to put on a metal roof—something very common in this mountain community, where the heavy snow and bright sunshine create ice dams that can be a couple of feet high and put great pressure on shingled roofs. Others thought that a metal roof would compromise the historic character of the building. The fight became bitter, and everyone lost. No new roof was put on the building, and nearly everyone involved in the argument left the church.

The roof eventually began to leak. Water damage appeared on the sanctuary ceiling and walls. One winter, the ice dam on the east side of the building was menacingly high, and you could almost hear the shingles groaning under the weight. Every Sunday, I looked up at the spreading water stains and worried. One night I dreamed that the entire east wall of the church collapsed. I felt that I was somehow responsible. “We were too late,” I said to myself in the dream.

That spring, I joined the confirmation class. I didn’t have an explanation for it. Partly I was embarrassed to have served as the warden of the church—“bishop’s warden,” no less, in the Episcopal lexicon—and to be involved in every detail of the church’s function and organization yet be squeamish about membership. On a practical level, I felt that joining would help my priests: they could put my name on the roster and call it “growth.” But I didn’t come to the decision with any resolution of my inner conflict.

The dream also haunted me. This little church had sheltered me, body and spirit, for nearly a decade. If I didn’t claim it, would it melt away?

Our confirmation class was given a simple assignment. We were to read all the biblical passages that are part of the Easter Vigil and select the story that was most “ours.” Which one of the stories of salvation history—from the story of creation, to the journey in the wilderness, to the words of the prophets, to the final gathering of God’s people—spoke most to us? Where did we enter the story? The plan was that we would tell about our choice when the bishop came for the ceremony of confirmation.

Still wrestling with my reluctance, I chose the story in Ezekiel about the valley of the dry bones. I felt that the question, “Can these bones live?” was my question, and not

one to which I had an answer. Sometimes I felt I was in that valley, not knowing where to begin to put the pieces together. I wondered about joining myself formally to Christianity. Was I joining a tradition whose cultural relevance was dying? Was I joined to a dead body, the hip bone connected to the thigh bone? Can these bones live? Can this action bring life to me and to others? What meaning did resurrection have in my own life? I didn't know how I was going to express all this to the bishop, and I wondered if he would reject my "entering place" as insufficient for confirmation. I imagined him staring at me, puzzled, and saying, "Not good enough!" But it was all I had.

On the day of confirmation, the bishop arrived at church at the same time as my son and I did. As we got out of our cars, Sam, age five, went up to him and asked, "Why do bishops always move diagonally?" Bishop Rob played along. "There are a lot of things about bishops that aren't quite straight," he answered. That encouraged Sam to ask his next question, his favorite joke. "What kind of churches are there in outer space?"

"I don't know. What kind?"

"Episco-alien!"

The confirmation class gathered in the community room, 15 of us around a long table. I poured myself a cup of coffee so I would have something to cling to while people talked. I looked at my fellow confirmands and felt strange to be there. I knew their stories, which included experiences of sexual abuse, child abuse, domestic abuse, drug abuse, and alcoholism. I saw brokenness and loneliness and people scratching out their lives. With a Ph.D., I was the most educated person in the room, and that made precisely not one iota of difference. Somehow we were all washed up on this shore in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains, like people from a shipwreck.

The first person to speak about a Bible passage was Floyd. He sat in his metal folding chair with his long, white beard and overalls, hands in his pockets, nervously jingling his keys. His eyes were bright blue and exaggerated by the lenses of his glasses. His life had been defined by a mental breakdown he had suffered in the Vietnam War. Ever after, his claims on sanity had been tenuous. He fixed cars and lived quietly, eating breakfast at the Golden Burro and going to West Central Mental Health Center for antidepressants. At the community meal our church hosted, he often brought the latest commentary from Fox News and Rush Limbaugh.

“Well,” he said to the bishop, “I picked Genesis 1, the story of creation.” He stared down at the plastic tablecloth in front of him and then looked around the room. “Before I came to this church, I was formless and void. Darkness was all around me. Then God moved over my waters, and there was light.”

The pause that followed was long. Floyd had shifted the ground under our feet. In just a few words, Floyd had all but made a mockery of my convoluted speech about the dry bones of Ezekiel. Did I have anything that honest that I could say? My cynicism looked petty—as did my speeches about the church in America, about culture and agnosticism, and my own peevish doubts.

We continued around the circle. Linda, the woman sitting next to me, had come to St. George through the church’s community meals. She was well known for her anger that often seemed larger than her thin frame could handle. One day when both our children were playing at the park, she asked me, “What can I do when I get so angry?” It was not a rhetorical question.

When it was Linda’s turn to speak, she said: “I chose Psalm 122, especially the part where it says, ‘May there be peace in your towers,’ because that is what I need. Peace in my towers. I never knew that an old book like that one could say exactly what was inside me.”

Then it was my turn. I felt everything I had wanted to say had already turned to sawdust. There was no space for intellectualizing, for holding myself apart. I stumbled through my choice of the dry bones story, with a big stick in the back of my throat. Then I said, “Everything you all have said is so beautiful. That’s what I mean. I am grateful to have found you. Grateful to be a part of you. That’s all.”

The ceremony of confirmation was simple. “There is one Body and one Spirit,” we recited. “There is one hope in God’s call to us.” We renewed our baptismal covenant with ancient words of belief. We committed ourselves to resisting evil, to seeking and serving Christ in all persons, and to striving for the dignity of every human being. I knelt before the bishop in his silly pointed hat, and he placed his hands on my head. He prayed for my sustenance. And for Floyd’s and for Linda’s.

Since then, Linda has moved away. Floyd committed suicide, a consequence of unrelenting PTSD. Perhaps those facts illustrate one of my greatest difficulties with belonging, one of its terrible risks: the thing to which you claim to belong changes minute by minute. “Community,” Martin Buber said, “is the moment’s answer to the

moment’s question.” Belonging is not a possession; even as it is claimed or imagined, it changes.

No wonder people drive by churches and don’t go in: the risks are great, the rewards intangible. The forming of a community is fragile and takes a lifetime. It can disappear in a breath. And yet I think of Robert Hass’s poem “Spring Rain”: “The blessedness of gathering and the / blessing of dispersal— / it made you glad for beauty like that, casual and intense, / lasting as long as the poppies last.” That is belonging for me—not an identity, but a gathering and a dispersal, a moment for which I am glad.