

## Church and Parachurch

# Like Families and Soccer Teams

by  
Campus Crusade worker  
**Byron Straughn**

**F**ive years ago my family moved to Pennsylvania and began looking for a new church. At the first church we attended, a number of friendly people greeted our family after the service. But interestingly, the conversations kept going in the same direction as soon as they discovered who my employer was—Campus Crusade for Christ. Like clockwork, every single person asked me, “What do *you* think of the local church?”

After the first conversation, I thought nothing of it. By the third I was mildly annoyed. By the fifth, if it were not for the resurrection power of Christ subduing my sarcastic tongue, I’m not sure what I would have said.

At the same time, I have to admit the question made sense. Too often, parachurch workers (PCW’s)



*This article was featured in the March/April 2011 9Marks eJournal. That edition of the eJournal focused on the relationship between the church and parachurch. More at: [www.9Marks.org](http://www.9Marks.org)*

*9Marks exists to equip church leaders with a biblical vision and practical resources for displaying God's glory to the nations through healthy churches.*

***9Marks is grateful to partner with Campus Crusade for Christ.***

**“Working for a parachurch ministry is like playing for a soccer team.”**

do have an unbiblically low view of the local church. And their lack of involvement in the local church reflects this low view. Here are a few reasons PCW's sometimes give for their less-than-whole-hearted involvement in a local church:

- **“What’s the difference? We sing, pray and listen to messages in our ministry.”**
- **“Our ministry is where it’s at! Churches are old fashioned, stuck in tradition, and irrelevant.”**
- **“I’m just not here much because of my ministry responsibilities.”**
- **“I give and give all week. I just want to come to church to be ministered to and fed,” which is really a way of saying, “I’m tired and I’ve done my part.”**

This is what I hear from people whose weeks are filled with good ministry. Their hearts are wonder-

fully engaged in discipleship relationships and evangelism, and such work can be weighty and difficult.

What's critical to understand, however, is that such activities don't replace a church. When I ask a college student or a PCW why he or she has slept in for an eleventh Sunday in a row, and I hear one of these lines, I become concerned about their lack of experience of God's sustaining grace, as well as their basic understanding of the gospel and its corporate implications.

## **“Parachurch work does not replace church involvement.”**

If you're reading this article, more than likely you are a parachurch worker, or maybe you share the opinion

that PCW's are ecclesiastical slackers. Either way, let me try to persuade you that parachurch work does not replace church involvement, first, by pointing to the gospel. The gospel helps us to see that belonging to a church is like belonging to a family, while working for a parachurch is more like playing for a soccer team.

## **CHURCH AND PARACHURCH: LIKE FAMILIES AND SOCCER TEAMS**

The gospel is the good news that sinners like us can be reconciled to God through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Read Ephesians 2:1-10 for a picture of this vertical reconciliation. But another set of relationships follows. Being reconciled to God means we're reconciled to God's people. Read Ephesians 2:11-22 for this picture. Becoming a Christian means being adopted into God's family. And joining a local church is like showing up at the family

dinner table. Don't tell me you belong to God's "universal church" if you don't prove it on earth by binding yourself to a local church. That's like saying you belong to the family but never showing up at family events.

Working for a parachurch ministry, on the other hand, is like playing for a soccer team. (But wait, Byron, I know you. You've never played soccer. Yes, it's true, but I have friends who play soccer, so hear me out.) You know how soccer teams work. Team members are selected, and then they gather to play soccer. They don't gather to receive math tutoring, to brush their teeth, to give and receive family love, or to care for the elderly. They gather for one purpose and for a limited season of involvement: to play soccer. What's more, everyone on the team usually belongs to the same gender and is approximately the same age.

But a family is different. It's broader and deeper. Whether you're adopted into a family or are born into one, your family is responsible for your entire nurture, growth, and education. Your

family is the group of people you live with and learn to love. The relationships are permanent and all-defining. There's no such thing as a "family season" which ends after the championship game, like there is a "soccer season." And "family practice" doesn't end at 5:30, even if soccer practice does. What's more, the family is where you learn to love people who are very different from you in age and gender – siblings, parents, grandparents, crazy uncles. Though you might be disappointed if your soccer league dissolved, you would be devastated if your family disappeared.

As I said before, the gospel makes us members of the family of Christ, a membership made concrete through joining the church on earth, the local church. We "put on" our membership in Christ's body by putting on that membership in a local church, just like we "put on" our righteousness in Christ by walking in righteousness. But as family members, we still have the freedom to pursue all kinds of specific kingdom purposes and

“It’s through the life of a church that we learn to love people who are different than us – people with different backgrounds, struggles, and strengths.”

activities. Maybe that’s playing soccer. Maybe that’s working for a parachurch ministry.

With this comparison in mind, let me offer a few reasons why PCW’s, together with all other believers, should participate in the life of their churches. Then I’ll point to a few more reasons for why PCW’s in particular should be active, deeply invested members of local churches.

## REASONS WHY ALL CHRISTIANS SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN THE CHURCH

### 1. For the sake of their own souls and the glory of God.

If you read much from 9Marks this probably sounds obvious or redundant, but it should not be assumed. There are not two ontological categories of believers: church-based and parachurch workers. God calls men and women

to himself through the gospel and he calls us into one body, for our good and for his glory.

### 2. Faith is expressed through love.

One aspect of our assurance is seeing Christ-likeness developed in our lives. One aspect of this Christ-likeness is love for others that expresses itself in commitment to others. God’s love for us moves us to faithfulness and love toward others.

### 3. Cross-centered implies cross-section.

It’s through the life of a church that believers learn to love and serve people who are different yet united in Christ. We also learn what it means to follow Christ in various settings or stages of life. Our maturity deepens and broadens through our participation in a congregation, which is part of God’s means of rounding out our discipleship and sanctification. It’s a beautiful thing to see a twenty-two-year-old helping an eighty-five-year old man to his seat. Think of the power of allow-

ing a young believer from a broken home to watch a godly family that is striving to love God.

#### 4. Understanding the fullness of the church's mission.

Your membership in a congregation will expose you to the ongoing, body-sustaining work of the church that transcends culture and situations. Until Christ returns, there will always be the need for God's people to gather, to hear, and to respond together to God's Word. There will always be the need for Christians to watch one another, to pray for one another, and even at times to initiate difficult conversations with one another. There will always be the need for the gospel to make its way out into families, schools, marketplaces, and other countries. These aspects of the fuller ministry of the church will always continue regardless of world wars, technological advances, biomedical challenges, or cultural fads. To reduce Christianity to a particular ministry of any one parachurch organization is not only narrow but short-sighted.

## REASONS WHY PCW'S IN PARTICULAR SHOULD BE ACTIVE CHURCH MEMBERS

Beyond these basics, here are a few more reasons why PCW's in particular should be active members of local churches. I'm now speaking especially to you, the parachurch worker.

### 1. Church membership is required by your parachurch organization.

I'm not going to tattle on you, but I'm guessing your organization's leadership would point you to your HR handbook, which communicates the expectation that you

would identify or associate with a local congregation within a certain time frame after beginning your assignment. If it's not in your HR handbook, well, it should be.

### 2. Church membership allows you to cast vision among your fellow members for how the gospel is at work in the world through your ministry.

As a PCW, you have opportunities to see what others can't. This is not because you have some special power, but because you get a first-hand look at your organization's strategic mission efforts and large-scale outreaches.

You can therefore build up your local church by regularly updating them about how the gospel is advancing outside the church's immediate area. Hearing about God's work in places they have never been will refresh and encourage their hearts, especially on the tougher days. Not only that, it will broaden and enrich the church's vision for ministry.

So, very practically, one way you can encourage your church is to let people know how they can pray for your work.

### 3. Church membership allows you to invite members of your local body to participate in your work and be strengthened by it.

On a related note, church membership allows you to invite others to join in the work of your ministry. Other church members can pray, give, help you strategize, or volunteer to help you in your work.

I don't know of any ministry that has so much funding that it has returned contributions back to its donors. There is always financial need, and even more so when it comes to labor and manpower. Campus ministries like my own would gladly welcome men and women from our congregations to help with evangelism, follow-up, Bible studies, mentoring and life skills, and so on. The same is true of other parachurch ministries, from mercy ministry work, to missions work, to "building healthy churches" work.

“Everyone asked me,

## ‘What do *you* think of the local church?’

If it weren’t for the resurrection power of Christ subduing my sarcastic tongue, I’m not sure what I would have said.”

Volunteers from your church may not have the same level of training you do, but their participation in your work should strengthen your parachurch work, as well as the church’s overall ministry. For instance, ask some of your fellow members to lead a small group on campus. The experience will be worthwhile in and of itself; plus, it will prepare them to lead a young-married-couples small group or Sunday school class in your church. Or, have them help with logistics or operational needs on campus. That will grow these church members in their capacity to serve on the church’s budget committee.

### **4. Your involvement in a church will model Christian love and maturity to those to whom you are ministering in your parachurch work.**

Especially if you’re involved in an evangelistic ministry in which new converts are a large part, your participation in the church—or neglect of the church—will serve as a model to these young Christians. They are watching you. You

don’t need to do a lot of explicit teaching about ecclesiology and membership to set a good example. You just need to be involved in your church. It’s like imprinting with ducklings—the first thing the duckling sees it will follow. Think of it as low-impact discipleship.

### **5. Church membership allows you to cultivate personal and organizational humility.**

As a PCW, you must make it your primary calling to live worthy of the gospel, remembering that your identity is ultimately wrapped up in Christ, not a particular ministry or organization. When God calls us to himself, he calls us into his family. Fight the temptation to believe that you are different from every other Christian. You need to be, and were always intended to be, part of a local body.

Because our parachurch ministries are made up of people, there is the temptation to develop a subtle organizational pride. “We’re so great.” “We’re so right.” “We’re so accomplished.”

By God's grace, these are easy bubbles to burst. Just remind yourself: Jesus did not establish your parachurch ministry on the pages of inspired Scripture. He did establish the church.

Furthermore, PCW's would have no salary if it weren't for the members of local churches who sacrificially give and support our work. Doctrinally, we stand on the shoulders of the church's orthodox tradition and local expressions. It's a good thing for ministries to recognize their need to partner with other organizations and churches if they are to faithfully carry out their mission.

**“Parachurch workers have opportunities to see what others in a congregation cannot, which means you can encourage your church by helping them to see what God is doing in other places.”**

## **6. Church membership offers accountability and a corrective to parachurch groupthink.**

People outside of a given group are often well equipped to look inside a group and offer valuable insights that members of the group themselves cannot see. They aren't stuck to the same commitments or subject to groupthink. Thus, your involvement in a local church body and its involvement in your work might be one of the ways God speaks into your movement or ministry.

One of my colleagues said he believes that people like us (PCW's) need the accountability of a church more than almost anyone, since we often have great opportunities to influence. We need the leaders and members of a congregation to provide formative input and sometimes the gentle, corrective word of a friend.

## **7. Church membership offers continuity and stability for the Christian life.**

Nothing stays the same, but I've noticed that parachurch ministry teams especially dwell in a state of flux.

One of the benefits of being rooted in a church is that it offers you some measure of stability and continuity in your friendships and fellowship. Congregations experience moves and deaths, but they are far more stable than a campus team and the constant turnover of students that takes place every four or five years.

The constancy of a church's fellowship might be God's enabling grace for you to minister long-term at your particular assignment or location. Furthermore, who will you lean on should you need to leave your parachurch, or if your ministry hits some crisis? Who will encourage you to persevere?

## **8. You can bless a smaller congregation.**

Smaller churches often do not have access to lots of resources or opportunities. Through your work in the parachurch ministry, you might have developed operational skills, discipleship material, evangelism training, or communication experience that your pastor would love to see threaded into the congregation's ministry.

Or you might have contacts and connections with believers overseas who could help coordinate and foster a long-term partnership. For instance, maybe your ministry has you regularly involved with work in India. It could be that God uses this involvement to connect your church to that area of the world.

## 9. You will cultivate love in its many forms and expressions.

If you worked in campus ministry like me, you would be tempted to believe that most people in the world are between the ages of 18 and 22, wear a backpack, and have excessive amounts of piercings or tattoos.

If you work in humanitarian aid, you will constantly be thinking about malnourished children, or maybe HIV infected women.

Maybe you contribute to the Bible translation process and so you've prayed daily for years for a tribe tucked away in a southeast Asian jungle.

My point is not that you should stop trying to reach these specific groups of people. Rather, you must remember that God has sovereignly placed you in a family with men and women from a broad cross-section of life (see the section "Cross-centered implies cross-section" above) who may seem normal, but who are no less urgently in need of your care and love.

Consider the brother who just lost his job. Or the senior woman who has followed Christ twice as long as you've been alive and needs to talk about the sadness of outliving all her friends. There might be someone who you think is rough around the edges. Loving these varied men and women and children will move us beyond what we're familiar or comfortable with. Loving these believers will help us to see what kind of selfless and impartial love God has for all of his people. Such love will also be a beautiful testimony to the world and the angelic realm of God's manifold wisdom and immeasurable love.

## 10. Church membership might even allow you to cultivate your support base.

I'm not advocating mercenary membership. One of our leaders told me, "People give to people justified by the cause." Joining a church allows people to know you and trust you. And hopefully it helps make you trustworthy. In other words, Christians should be able to give their money to people that they know and trust, and your membership in a church allows this to happen.

Honestly, this seems like the most natural way to cultivate and raise ongoing support. Of course it's not the only way, but as you live out your faith locally, fellow members might be more inclined to partner with you in these ways.

## 11. You will experience the ordinances as Scripture intends.

Maybe sharing that communion experience with your freshman women Bible study felt like a bonding time for all of you. Maybe getting baptized in the Jordan River on your missions trip was a spiritual jolt. The problem is, Jesus gave the local church authority to exercise the ordinances, not your Bible study or your missions team.

Other than in missionary contexts where no church exists (as in Acts 8), Scripture always places the practice of the ordinances in the setting of the local church. The Lord's Supper and baptism should be practiced among a community of believers who have promised to keep one another accountable through the formative discipline of the preached Word and the corrective discipline of rebuke and excommunication.

In some ways this point is the culmination of other points above. We should share the bread and cup of communion with those who are alike and different from us, those whom God has brought together, so that we might corporately declare his death until he comes again. Communion among affinity groups can cloud the universal and inclusive nature of the gospel. IX

*Byron Straughn is a deacon at East Brandywine Baptist Church (Downingtown, PA) and the mid-Atlantic director of theological development for Campus Crusade for Christ.*



## Dear Campus Crusade Worker,

Thank you for all you do to share the gospel with staff and students on campuses around the world. I look forward to beholding all the fruit of your labors one day in glory.

To help you with your work, let me introduce you to the ministry of 9Marks. We exist to build healthy churches. We hope you will find our books and articles helpful for discipling your students in thinking about God's plan for local churches. You might find our "Church Search" function useful for directing them to healthy churches. All this and more you'll find at [www.9Marks.org](http://www.9Marks.org).

Praying for God's richest blessings in your life and ministry,

Mark Dever



**Web:** Find more information about 9Marks at [www.9Marks.org](http://www.9Marks.org)



**Training:** Want to learn more about the local church? Join us in Washington, DC for a 9Marks Weekender. Go to [www.9Marks.org/events](http://www.9Marks.org/events).



**Church Search:** Need help finding good churches for your students? Check out the "Church Search" option at [www.9Marks.org](http://www.9Marks.org).



**Information for Your Pastor:** 9Marks provides free resources to help build healthy churches. Contact us at [info@9Marks.org](mailto:info@9Marks.org) or at (202) 543-1224 if you would like a free pastor kit sent to your pastor.