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Is your church service comprehensible to an outsider?

As a person who was converted in my late teens from a totally unchurched background, I've always been interested in the culture shift that people have to experience when they attend church for the first time, because it happened to me all those years ago. I'd steadfastly refused to enter a church until the Sunday following the day I turned my life over to Jesus, and when I got there I found a lot of the practices quaint to say the least. Fortunately, I had no shortage of friends who'd been praying for my conversion and who were more than willing to show me the right way to behave in church in order not to show myself up.

One thing interested me, though. Among all the Christians I have subsequently met in the churches I've been involved with, it is comparatively rare among those who are committed to serving the church in any way they can to meet someone like me, who was converted from an unchurched background. Mostly you get people who were dragged to church as children because their parents were churchgoers. Church is just second nature to them, and they accept its idiosyncrasies in the same way as we might tolerate an eccentric aunt or uncle. Often they don't have much idea what it's like to see the church from the outside.

In more recent years, and especially since working with children and then having children of my own, I've noticed how difficult it is to engage children in our normal Sunday services, since so much of it goes over their heads. Not because children are stupid, or incapable of spiritual insight, but because church comes packaged in a form that only those "in the know" can relate to. I've been involved, with others, in trying to develop the kind of services that are hopefully comprehensible to all ages and backgrounds.

Now, the experience of being an outsider has been renewed for me as I've recently started going to a church of a different tradition than the kind I've become used to over the last 20 years.

Again, it's struck me how alien some of our practices are to someone who is not used to church. For a start, there will be a whole new vocabulary to learn. Often the words will sound like words you know but have a totally different meaning in the context of "church". Just for fun, try this little test. Imagine you've never read a Bible or set foot in a church, or imagine if you like that you're a child, and try to

interpret the following phrases:

- washed in the blood
- justified by faith
- go and be a witness
- walking with Jesus
- forgive us our trespasses
- let's magnify his name
- etc., etc.

Now try and put them in plain English. Done that? Good, now see if you can do it whenever you're leading a service, giving a talk, or chatting casually with your friends about God.

Then there's the actions that take place. How about if your church is of the "catholic" variety. You may know what's meant by the bell-ringing and incense-swinging during the service, but how would you feel about it if you weren't used to it? Incidentally, much as I enjoy worshipping in a "high" church, something I've found pretty annoying is turning up to a sung Eucharist (or Holy communion, or Mass, according to the flavour of Christianity of the church concerned) after a few weeks and thinking, "oh good, I'm beginning to get the hang of the tunes now" and we're about to launch into say, the "Gloria" (a kind of anthem of praise, spoken or sung, beginning "Glory to God in the highest..."), and suddenly the organist strikes up a completely different tune that everyone in the congregation seems to know except me. Imagine how dumb I feel being unable to join in. Worse still, when a chunk of liturgy has been turned into a song (of course, nobody tells you where to find it in the hymn book, because they all know it), and the words have been tweaked to fit the tune, so you can't even "mime along" using the words on the service sheet or book in front of you.

Maybe your church has Baptist leanings. Years ago I attended a free (i.e. unattached to a denomination) evangelical church whose practice it was to have the communion bread distributed to the people in their seats, and then the wine would come round in tiny individual glasses which you were supposed to hang onto until everyone had been served, then you all knocked it back in unison at the sound of the traditional words, ending: "we proclaim Christ's death until he comes". Gulp, goes everyone. Clink, goes each glass as it's placed into the little hole specially designed for it in the back of the chair in front. Nothing wrong with that. But just how bizarre does it look to a stranger? Does this simultaneous gulping and clinking have liturgical significance? Are you less a Christian if you unwittingly consume the wine in advance of everyone else? Trivial maybe, but this could be a source of real anxiety to someone who hasn't "learned the language" of churchgoing.

I'm not out to criticize anybody. I just think we could be more aware of the oddities of the Christian church at worship, and not make it harder for a non-churchgoer to penetrate its culture.

What helps? I suppose if we're talking about a different culture, which we are when comparing the experience of "church" with the rest of life, what helps most is to be made aware of the "rules" before you make the gaffe that embarrasses you so much that you're not sure if you can face turning up again next Sunday. I'm sure a few helpful pointers in the bulletin or whatever you hand out to people wouldn't go

amiss, or a few (brief) words of explanation by the person leading the service. Stuff like telling people in some way what bits they're meant to join in with, that's useful. And what to expect when communion happens. In one church I've been to, we had the unusual practice of all (yes, the whole congregation, together) standing in the chancel in a circle to receive bread and wine. The minister very sensibly mentioned this tradition before anybody got up out of their seats. Also it's useful to know how to indicate that you would rather not be offered bread and wine, if that is the case.

It also helps if the "rules" are few and have an obvious reason. This may go some way to reassuring unchurched people that we're not totally out of our tree, as it may sometimes appear, and that we don't leave our brains behind us at the church door (well, not all of us, and not all of the time, anyway).

Now I've got you started, you can probably think of more ideas of your own. If you find that hard, get one of your friends to come to church with you and quiz him/her about the experience.

Come on, the Good News is for everybody, not just a few. Let's see what we can do to make it easier for people from outside the church "culture" to meet and respond to God in church.

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