

# On Leaving Church

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At age 40, I stopped going to church. I was tired emotionally, mentally, and physically, and the day of rest was often the most tiring day of the week because of church. If it wasn't the monumental effort to get my family out the door, it was the volunteering I'd do to keep any one of a long list of programs running. The nursery, Sunday School, Wednesday night activities, a building committee—I was actually just a minimal volunteer compared to others, but I was tired.

Even more than physically exhausted, I was emotionally exhausted. As a woman, my roles were limited. As an ally to the LGBTQ community, my words were heresy. As so much progress was made nationally, my spiritual support system remained stagnant. Then, a child rocked everyone's world.

A fourth grader in our conservative church made the decision to be more honest about his identity. A child decided that what's on the inside is more important than what's on the outside. That child, who loves God and church, transitioned in name and appearance from female to male.

His family, whom I knew but wasn't close with, penned a letter to some of the congregation to announce their child's transition, which commenced after a year-long process of discussion, research, prayer, and Christian counseling, not to mention the years of struggle and disillusionment for the child since age 3. The night I heard about the letter, I sent a message to the child's mom: "Hi! I'm just writing to let you know that you have a friend in me. I have students and friends from all across the gender spectrum, and it's been my privilege and pleasure to be a part of their lives."

For some churches this wouldn't have been a big deal. But, it was for our church, so the family left soon after their son's

transition. Some in the church rallied around the family, spoke to leaders, and reached out with remarkable compassion. But, others were painfully hurtful. And, even more were paralyzed and confused. They weren't ready to figure out how to interact with and tell their children about the child who was a girl but is now a boy.

I tried to have grace and patience for the people wrestling with how their convictions should best be demonstrated. I tried to be that other voice. But, I just wasn't strong enough. I needed respite from the spiritual disillusionment and stagnancy I'd already been facing for years, so I left church to reclaim my spiritual energy and to walk more closely with my LGBTQ friends who are very often leaving church too.

During my 40 years in church, Sunday service meant we served ourselves inside the church. We were more interested in the rules we'd learned at church than actually learning about the nature of Jesus's life and attempting to replicate that. We left frustrated when we weren't fed (church lingo for inspired). We paid for sound systems for singing and flat screen TVs for announcements. We merged religion and politics into one angry mess.

Now that I've left church, Sunday service means helping my 94-year-old grandpa attend chapel at his nursing home, getting him and his tablemates their food for lunch, helping my own family with their needs and projects, or cleaning for a friend. Now, church means getting together with four families on a Saturday night to talk about faith.

And, prayer and worship look like me sitting in the sun with my tea. At age 40, I learned that leaving church could resuscitate my faith.