

Belonging and Believing

For years most of us have worked on the assumption that people first become Christians (**believe**) and only then associate themselves with a church (**belong**). But according to research in the UK at least, most people who have become Christians in the last five years say they 'belonged' before they believed.

In the past it has been typical for an un-churched person to be converted through attending an evangelistic event, reading a Bible, or being led to Christ by a Christian friend. They believe, and then seek out, or are introduced to a church to which they could 'belong'.

Now it is common for people to 'belong', or be loosely associated with a church for several years *before* coming to personal faith in Christ.

Mostly these people are looking for relationship. They want to observe us, at close-range, week after week, month after month. They hope to ask deep, searching and personal questions about our relationships with God and tell us about their spiritualities. These people, with whom we may feel we have little in common, might want to become our friends! We want them to come into our churches to hear the Gospel. They would prefer to come into our homes and see the Gospel.

What does this mean for us, wanting people, as we do, to come to faith in Christ. We can:

- ❑ learn to be more comfortable with the 'fringe dweller', the undecided, the long term enquirer. We have often felt uneasy about such people. We like clear-cut situations, things to be 'black and white', people to be 'in or out'.

- ❑ gear up for these 'belongers' who are not believers. Make the most of their presence. Provide for their questions, invite them to participate in appropriate ways - small groups, organising things if they have those skills. Obviously teaching positions won't be appropriate, but the community can embrace them in other ways.

- ❑ make the church a family, rather than 'being a church for families'. Amongst these people the divorce rate is approaching fifty per cent. Families are scattered all over the country, broken relationships are almost the norm. Consequently loneliness, isolation and depression prevail even amongst people living in busy suburbs and cities. On present trends there will soon be more people living 'solo' than in any other family or social grouping.

Forty eight per cent of unchurched people don't live in what Christians think of as families ie, the original husband and wife, living together with their own natural offspring. They live in a bewildering array of broken, single-parent, adopted, adapted, blended, divided, second or third time round, grand-parent led and same-sex parent families.



By all means let us be supportive of marriage, good parenting, and stable family life. But to focus exclusively on that is to automatically exclude nearly half the un-churched population!

In the twenty-first century we must see our churches not as 'churches for families' but as *extended families for people of all kinds*.

Gil Cann is Minister-at-Large for Evangelical Alliance Australia.
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