

A
SHORT
GUIDE
TO

CHURCH

What Is It All About?



DEAN INSERRA

Foreword by
J. T. ENGLISH

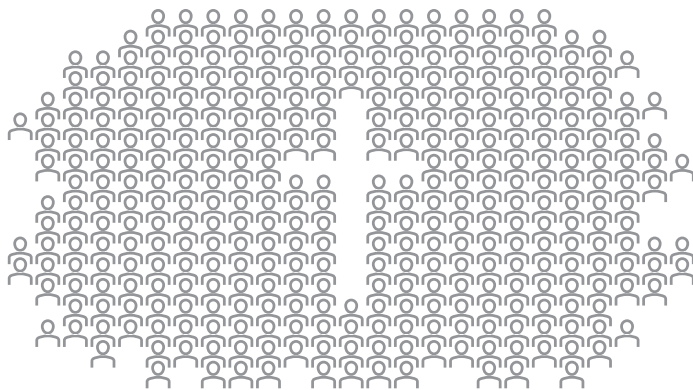
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To Alex Scott and Ashlyn Portero.
Thank you for loving the local church.

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I CANNOT WRITE A book about the local church without thanking City Church of Tallahassee, for being the home church of my family, and a place we love. It truly is the dearest place. Thank you for being a church we would want to be members of even if I wasn't on the staff. We love our church.

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Foreword

I GREW UP AS an only child of divorced parents. I was deeply loved by my parents, but I didn't really grow up around family. No grandparents, no siblings, no aunts, or uncles. I also didn't really grow up in the church, nor did I have an understanding of the gospel. Our family rhythms were centered around work, sports, and school.

I was in college when I first heard the gospel presented to me. Someone sat down with me in the university student center and presented a gospel tract to me. He shared with me that God made me, that I was living in rebellion to him, that Jesus paid the price for my sin, and that I could have everlasting life with him by placing my faith in Christ. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, God used this simple gospel message to transfer me from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of his Son. I was dead, but God made me alive.

I spent the next several years very engaged in campus ministry. My parents once said it felt like I was majoring in ministry and minoring in college. During those years, I learned how to share my faith. I spent time in Christian community and

grew in my love for the Lord. These were really sweet years for me, but one thing I never really understood was the church. What is a church for when I have what I need in campus ministry? Is the church *really* necessary? During those years, I was growing in Christ, but I was separated from his body. In fact, where I pastor now, by far the greatest area of confusion for confessing Christians is the church.

Over the last several decades evangelicals have attempted to center the gospel in all that we do. This gospel-centered movement has rightly emphasized the holiness of God, the sinfulness of humanity, the sacrificial and atoning work of Christ, and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. But what about the church?

Throughout the past fifteen years, my understanding of the gospel has grown wider and deeper. More specifically, I understand that being adopted into the family of God, the church, is part of the gospel. The good news of the gospel is not just that we are saved from something, the judgment of God, but that we're also saved into something—the family of God. Entrance into this new family should be good news for all Christians. For all of us who are lonely, outcasts, spiritual or physical orphans, or to anyone looking for a family, the church is good news. God has not just saved us from hell, he has adopted us into his family.

FOREWORD

The church is good news, because when we are saved into this family, we stand on God's Word together. We are full of the Holy Spirit together. We pray together. We sing together. We encourage one another together. We invite sinners to repentance, belief, and baptism together. We enjoy the Lord's Supper together. And we will, one day, enjoy a kingdom without end together.

I am thankful you've picked up this book about the church, but you may still be asking the question, "Why does the church matter?" It is because the gospel matters.

—J. T. English, pastor, professor, author of *Deep Discipleship* and coauthor of *You Are a Theologian*

CHAPTER 1

What's the Deal with Church? Do I Have to Go?

THERE IS MORE TO being a Christian than going to church, but there is certainly not less. The local church is significant in the lives of those who follow Jesus Christ, whether through its presence or its absence. Of all the pushback I get on social media from professing Christians, the most consistent negative comments come when I assert what I thought was a basic understanding: Christians should go to church. The rebuttal is predictable, almost automatic: “You don’t have to go to church to be a Christian.” And, of course, church attendance does not forgive sins or reconcile anyone to God. It is by grace we have been saved, through faith, not by works (Eph. 2:8–9). We are forgiven and saved from God’s just punishment of sin through the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ. One does not have to go to church or do any other work whatsoever to be saved, since Jesus has done all the work through his perfect life, death on the cross, and glorious resurrection.

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The New Testament is full of inferences and references to the role of the church in the life of a believer. The professing Christian who does not go to church will say that one can “have church”—on a boat, playing golf, sitting on the back porch enjoying a Sunday morning coffee. “It is about your personal relationship with God.” While I want to acknowledge that these individuals may have been taught that at some time in their lives or been convinced of it by a friend, Scripture just does not recognize an unchurched Christianity. Yes, we can have a personal experience with God anywhere in creation, but that is not the ultimate point regarding the Christian and the church. The better option is to discover and pursue what God has *willed* and *designed* for his people to live out the Christian life and experience.

Throughout the New Testament, God’s design for his people is the church. Outside of an important instruction from the writer of Hebrews for the Christians not to neglect gathering together (Heb. 10:25), you may not think there are an abundant number of slam-dunk, drop-the-hammer, case-closed commandments about the Christian being part of the church. However, the letters of the New Testament are written in the assumed context of local church congregations. If I am telling you about the game Tom Brady played where he threw touchdown passes, I don’t also have to inform you that he’s playing football. The context is the football game. Similarly,

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the Holy Spirit-inspired New Testament letters are addressed to actual churches. Local churches are the context.

The claim that “we *are* the church; we don’t *go to* church” sounds spiritual (and is not completely wrong), but there is much scriptural emphasis on the local church, perhaps even more than the universal church. The New Testament letters were written to actual, organized churches that existed at the time. This is the context for living out the new life to which we are called. Jonathan Leeman wrote that “membership in the universal church must become visible in a local gathering of Christians.”¹

The New Testament letters were
written to actual, organized churches
that existed at the time.

As a pastor, I officiate weddings on a regular basis. I count it as a privilege to be asked by a couple to stand with them on their wedding day, share the Scriptures concerning marriage, lead them in their vows, and pronounce them husband and wife. My relationship with the couple is certainly a major reason officiating is meaningful, but there is an even greater

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reason. I am getting to take part in God's model for his church: a husband loving his wife as Christ loved the church.

At the beginning of the ceremony, after I welcome the guests on behalf of the bride and the groom, I remind the wedding guests that they did not simply fill out an RSVP form and choose chicken, beef, or vegetarian for their meal at the reception. They are not merely spectators. By attending this wedding, they are witnesses to God's grand design, affirming that they approve what is taking place. The bride and groom are participating in what God has made, and the guests get to affirm this grand plan.

Another grand design for God's people is the church. I believe Christians should see local church membership as the great privilege of getting to take part in and belong to the design God has given specifically, uniquely, and specially for his children, his people. Unfortunately, many who claim the title of Christian do not embrace this design. Data from a study conducted by Christian researcher Ryan Burge finds that

the number of self-identified evangelicals who attend church regularly continues to drop, with 26.7 percent saying they seldom or never go to church. About 13.5 percent of self-identified evangelicals say they go to church "yearly," bringing the number of

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evangelicals who go to church once a year or less to about 40.2 percent. About half of self-identified evangelicals attend weekly or more, with the other 10 percent saying they attend about once a month.²

Making the church a priority in the lives of Christians is dwindling, and even nonexistent for some. Yes, church is somewhere we physically go, but much more, it is something to which we belong as members of the body of Christ. Our membership in the body of Christ is universal, applying to believers throughout history, across the world, past, present, and future, and it is expressed locally through specific congregations. To be a Christian and not have the church as a significant part of one's life is either to deny or neglect God's design. It is not an exaggeration, then, to call the trend of an unchurched Christianity a crisis. But before we dive into an overview of what the church is and what it does, I want to cover some potential reasons the unchurched Christian is a reality.

Yes, church is somewhere we physically go,
but much more, it is something to which we
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UNCHURCHED CHRISTIAN

Some have not been told.

After first coming to faith in Christ, I went all the way through my teenage years without anyone teaching me about the significance of the local church in the life of the believer. I thought it was just something you did on Sundays with your family because that's what people do in the South. I believed the gospel and had converted to Christianity, but I received discipleship from a parachurch ministry. I thank God for that ministry and believe the Lord used it to put the gospel in front of me and allow me to grow in my faith as a young high school student, but it was not the local church. That does not make the parachurch ministry bad or wrong, but it wasn't the ultimate design for God's people to experience discipleship and community and be on mission together. Parachurches are a tool, a type of extra "hook in the water" for specifically focused evangelism that targets particular groups of people—in my case, student athletes. These organizations were never meant to be a substitute for the local church. I did not know the church was the plan of God for the spiritual forming and flourishing of his people, so my concern for it was minimal.

WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH CHURCH? DO I HAVE TO GO?

Far too many believers today are in a similar situation, perhaps without even realizing it. What changed the game for me was being taught (through the Scriptures as a college student at a Christian university) that there is not a category or context for an unchurched Christian in the Bible. I am convinced that one of the reasons we see an increasing unchurched Christianity around us is because people have not been disciplined to have a biblical framework as to why church matters. This is first and foremost a discipleship issue. It is important that anyone with influence over the forming of Christian disciples needs to provide a healthy emphasis on the significance of the local church. People cannot know unless they are taught. I believe some are hesitant to teach it because it may feel legalistic or come across as fostering disunity among believers to suggest that the parachurch is insufficient. “We are all on the same team,” one might suggest. And yes, Christians should seek unity as the big family of God, but that unity and family are to be expressed through local churches. So, if you are part of a ministry outside of a local church, please equip those under your care with the knowledge that finding and committing to a Bible-believing, gospel-preaching church is for their absolute good. Model it yourself!

I am convinced that one of the reasons we see an increasing unchurched Christianity around us is because people have not been disciplined to have a biblical framework as to why church matters.

Some have been misled.

Growing up in the Christian subculture of the 1990s, my peers and I were regularly told that what mattered most was our personal relationship with Jesus. That was the emphasis of seemingly every sermon, testimony, Bible study, and Christian conversation. It was about you and Jesus. I am thankful that God invites us into a relationship with him, but looking back, I can see how my generation may have wound up believing church is not that important. It is normal to hear a professing Christian say, “I have my own relationship with God,” or “the church isn’t a building.” Again, true. But we cannot forget that “the church is a people who gather together.”³ The New Testament letters are not addressed to random, isolated people in the first century having their personal moment with God out on a sheep pasture, but rather to Christians who were part of local churches. Many of those met under an actual roof,

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with established leaders, and a set time to meet for prayer, to hear the apostles' teachings, to take the Lord's Supper, and to sing spiritual songs together. To the person who has been taught that all that really matters is your personal relationship with Jesus, the author of Hebrews would remind you not to neglect gathering together, "as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching" (Heb. 10:25).

Do not be misled. The local church is essential. The church is understood as "we" significantly more than it is understood as simply about "me." People enter the Christian life as born-again individuals (John 3:3), but we live that life corporately as a community. The community we see in the Scriptures is centered around churches. The local church is the best thing going because it is God's idea. Jesus told his followers that he is the one building it (Matt. 16:18). How amazing it is to be part of that!

The church is understood as
"we" significantly more than it is
understood as simply about "me."

Some are out of the habit.

Every New Year I make a resolution that I am going to start being a “regular” at the gym. I am sure I am not alone in that. A friend who owns a fitness studio in my community told me they have more new clients at her gym in January than they do in the next six months combined. The gym only stays crowded with the new clientele for two to three weeks. Admittedly, and embarrassingly, I was one of the “two weekers” more Januarys than not. I had the best intentions, but I never got in the habit. I paid the fee for the special they were running, but never made it a priority in my life.

Then, one August, I realized that my health was important and that I needed some routine exercise. I signed up for three days a week with a trainer. I knew that every Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday I had a session at the gym at 8:00 a.m. It became not a matter of will or a New Year’s resolution, but a scheduled part of my life. If it was important, it needed to become part of my routine. I knew when I went to sleep on Sunday night that I had the gym scheduled at 8:00 Monday morning. It became built into my week.

I do not know anyone who would discourage someone from establishing the healthy habit of a gym routine, so how much more important are our spiritual routines? Paul wrote: “The training of the body has limited benefit, but godliness

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is beneficial in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (1 Tim. 4:8). If habits are good for physical health, how much more important are they for our spiritual health? The reason some have lived an unchurched Christian life is not because they had a wrong understanding of the local church or had an improper theology; some just got out of the habit.

I post on my social media accounts on Saturday evenings that “Sunday morning church is a Saturday night decision.” I type those words each week to help people remember that deciding you are going to church the next morning is a healthy habit. It is too easy to get out of the habit of doing anything. We must be intentional. Many churches saw much smaller numbers coming back after the COVID-19 pandemic (when many churches went months without meeting in person) than they had the week the doors shut at the start. Many people just established a new Sunday morning routine apart from the church. Some, frankly, have still not walked through the church doors since. When the writer of Hebrews encourages the believers to continue gathering together in chapter 10, he references those who had gotten out of the habit. They needed to be reminded again of the significance of the church. Those who had neglected the church did so because it became their “habit” (v. 25).

Some are stubborn.

“I’m a Christian, but I’m against organized religion.” That is something I hear people claim far too often as they dig their heels into the ground. These are the people who adamantly claim that you do not have to go to church to be a Christian. It may even be the biggest conviction they hold out of all of their claimed “Christian” beliefs. Someone who holds this view may claim that he lives his life better than people he knows who go to church every week. He will usually point to a devotional he reads on his phone, insist he is a good person, and inform you that there is nothing in the Bible that says you must go to church. See reason number one for part of the problem.

Some had a negative experience.

It is important to err on the side of sensitivity and grace when it comes to those who claim to be Christians but no longer go to church because of what they have personally experienced on the inside. Sadly, in a sinful world full of brokenness, local churches are not exempt from ungodly behavior, mistreatment of others, selfish ambitions of leaders, and other troubling acts of ungodliness. But God’s design is not the problem; sin is. Sinful behavior does not negate the truth that God has given us the church. Because some marriages

sadly end in divorce does not mean the institution of marriage is the problem. Once again, sin is the problem.

My hope for those avoiding the church because of a past negative or hurtful experience is that they will realize they are missing a critical component of what it means to be a follower of Jesus and can prayerfully return with the intent to connect with a local church that seeks to honor Christ in unity. One can act out the gospel story of grace by forgiving the people Jesus died for and recover and pursue God's good design for their Christian life. As my friend Jared Wilson once posted on his social media: "If grace is real, you can begin again."⁴

Of course, the responsibility cannot rest solely on the victims here. Churches and church leaders need to actively offer resources to welcome and care for people who have experienced pain in church settings. We should keep in mind that people walking in our doors may have a wide range of experiences surrounding the church and for some it has not historically been a safe place. However the course of healing looks, the goal should be eventual belonging to a safe and biblical local church.

Some are not actual Christians.

Church can remain off the radar for some people because, by claiming to be a Christian in today's world, one can simply

mean that he is a generic theist—meaning he is not an atheist, agnostic, or a member of another world religion. James states in his epistle: “You believe that God is one. Good! Even the demons believe—and they shudder” (James 2:19). Basic theism does not save one from their sins or bring one into the family of God. If one’s answer to why he is a Christian does not depend on the work of Jesus Christ, he is most likely not a Christian (Matt. 7:21–23). The self-given label of *Christian* can be cultural rather than convictional, meaning it has nothing to do with what one believes about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Cultural Christianity exists inside the church, but is also a reason one who would write “Christian” on a form would also refuse to go to church. Why would they go to church if they have no real connection to Scripture or the gospel? It is nowhere on their life radar. The issue with the cultural Christian is not that they are unchurched, but rather that they are unconverted. More than simply getting to church, the cultural Christian needs to be saved.

Some have competing interests.

Many options in the world today compete for our attention, time, and loyalties. It is not uncommon to hear someone say they are just “too busy” to be regularly involved in church. If a family finally does have a Sunday off from travel, a prior

commitment, or a kid's baseball tournament, they want to take a day to stay home, relax, and then get some things done. Whether errands, home improvement, or kids' schedules, there is always something that can win over going to church, let alone being committed to serving in one. Not too long ago, it would have been unheard of to have sports practices for kids on a Sunday, even outside of more traditionally religious areas of the country. But today, church is not even a factor in consideration when something is scheduled. This is the new reality for unchurched Christianity.

CONCLUSION

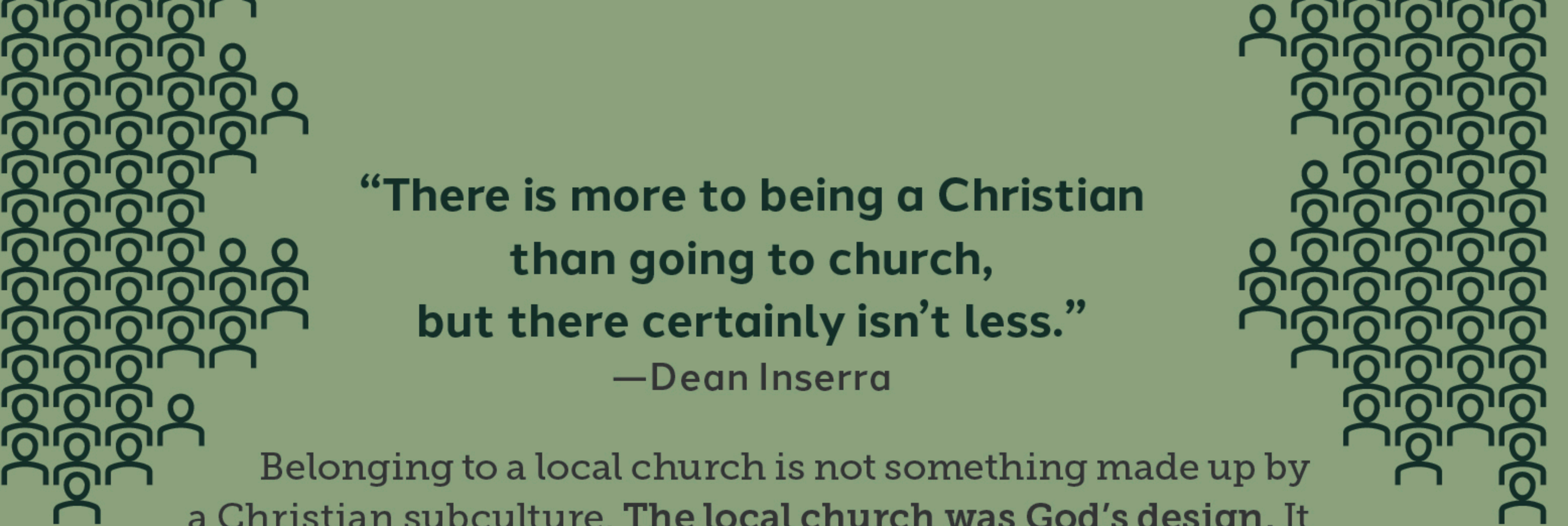
If you find yourself in one of the categories above or feel surrounded by people in your family, community, or even church body who fit in these categories, I pray that this book serves to ignite a passion for what the local church is designed to be. And if you are already enthusiastically serving the local church, I pray this book better equips you to answer the *why* for various elements of healthy church practice.

I believe in and love the local church and want to see everyone come to commit to and love it. This book aims to point us back to the beauty of God's clear design for his people that we call the local church. When that is established as a biblical conviction in the hearts and minds of believers, they get to

enter the grand design God has gifted his people for his glory and our good. As Jesus builds his church, we get to join him in the amazing story of how God continues to gather and send his people, as he has designed them to function, and to flourish as those “for his possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

DISCUSS AND REFLECT

1. Why is it not exactly true to claim “you don’t go to church, you are the church.” How has confusing that hurt people’s view of the local church?
2. In your experience, what is the main reason professing Christians do not go to church?
3. What are the primary reasons the church should matter in the life of a Christian?
4. How does our individualistic society carry over to how some Christians view the church?



“There is more to being a Christian
than going to church,
but there certainly isn’t less.”

—Dean Inserra

Belonging to a local church is not something made up by a Christian subculture. **The local church was God’s design.** It is his grand idea to display his glory and provide the avenue for his people to flourish as his missionaries to the world. When one begins to see the church as God’s plan, the mindset shifts from going to church in order to claim Christianity to seeing oneself as a participant in what God has given his people as a gift.

There is a purpose, design, and reason for why the church functions in the manner she does. Consistent practices that may seem as merely tradition upon first glance are prescribed by God for his people to practice together until Christ returns. **The local church, congregated together, is the Lord’s primary plan for discipleship, fellowship, and mission for the Christian life.** *A Short Guide to Church* is intended for the hands of every prospective and current church member. This book will help the body of Christ, expressed locally, to see the purposes and plans of the local church for their life of faith, and why it truly is the best thing going.



DEAN INSERRA is the lead pastor of City Church in his hometown of Tallahassee, Florida. He is a graduate of Liberty University and Midwestern Seminary. Dean has previously authored four books and frequently works with the Send Network of the North American Mission Board. He and his wife

Krissie have four children and are big fans of the local church.

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