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Commitments ✓
5 Simple ✓
Decisions
That Members
of Healthy and
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A Tyndale nonfiction imprint

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Crucial Commitments: Five Simple Decisions That Members of Healthy and Growing Churches Make

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Cover design by Faceout Studio, Tim Green

Interior design by Brandi Davis

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Printed in China

32	31	30	29	28	27	26
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

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Introduction

Going to Church Without Going Anywhere

I had never made a call like this one.

And I have to admit I almost backed out several times.

Lucas and Ava were getting married in five months. At the time, I was a pastor in St. Petersburg, Florida. Though I didn't offer marriage counseling myself, I required all couples to receive premarital counseling before they could be married in the church. I gave them a list of seven church-approved counselors in the community so they could choose one.

But I kept putting off the recommendation. I knew why I was hesitating this time: I lacked the courage to make the call.

You see, two days earlier, Lucas had stopped by my office just to chat. He didn't have an agenda—he was an extrovert who loved talking about almost anything, especially college

football, which happens to be my favorite sport as well. Even better, we both cheered for the same college team.

Though I'm an introvert, I find conversations about college football energizing. Before I knew it, we had talked for forty-five minutes. I finally had to end our discussion, so I made a transition statement: "Lucas, I know you're excited about this upcoming wedding."

That's when he said it. His comment sounded offhand, but it took my breath away.

"I guess so, but if it doesn't work out, we're not locked into anything."

Did I hear him correctly? Did he just suggest marriage was no big deal? Was he putting divorce on the table before even saying his vows? And did Ava know he felt this way?

I asked him to clarify. Yes, I had heard him right. Marriage, to Lucas, was just another phase of life. He genuinely didn't expect his first marriage to be his last. He was preparing to get married without a full commitment to marriage. I should have confronted him more boldly before he walked away.

Shame on me.

From One Marriage to Another

Many years passed. This time, I was in a conversation with a woman named Jane. I was much older by then—hopefully wiser too. I was no longer serving as a pastor; my new role was dean of a seminary.

I was speaking at a conference about the importance of the local church and the priority of committed church membership. During a break, Jane asked if she could speak with me. She told me she respected my commitment to the local church, but her own views were different. I remember her exact words: “Jesus and I get along just fine by ourselves. We don’t need others.”

In other words, she felt it was legalistic to expect people to go to church.

Calling Lucas

Let me return to that dreaded call I eventually made to Lucas. I told him I would be honored to perform his wedding to Ava. But first we had to address his “contingency plan” for if things didn’t work out. Lucas was furious.

“There’s nothing wrong with being prepared for a divorce,” he insisted. “Especially since half of all marriages fail.”

I knew those numbers were inflated, but I also knew that it wouldn’t help to debate the issue.

I wish I could say the story ended well. It didn’t. Lucas’s anger escalated to profanity. Both he and Ava left the church. They held their wedding at a beautiful outdoor venue, with someone else performing the ceremony.

Their marriage lasted four years.

I can assure you, I took no satisfaction in being right.

Marriage to Each Other and Marriage to the Bride of Christ

Marriage is a sacred institution that God established from the very beginning. Genesis 2:24 establishes that “a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.” This verse underscores the divine design for human marriage—a bond of unity, love, and commitment that reflects God’s own faithful character.

In marriage, husbands and wives are called to mirror the profound love Christ has for his church. As Paul explains in Ephesians 5:25-26, “Husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean.” That sacrificial love elevates marriage from a mere social contract to a living symbol of God’s care and redemption.

Likewise, the marriage between Christ and his church is depicted as the ultimate celebration of love and commitment. Revelation 19:7 joyfully proclaims, “Let us be glad and rejoice. . . . For the time has come for the wedding feast of the Lamb, and his bride has prepared herself.” Here, the church is portrayed as a radiant bride, lovingly prepared for union with her groom—a union marked by purity, dedication, and everlasting love.

In both human marriage and the spiritual union between Christ and the church, God reveals his deep desire for covenant relationships. We are called to embrace selfless love,

intentional commitment, and a heartfelt dedication to reflect God's grace in every aspect of our lives.

And Then There Was Jane

There is more than a nuanced difference between my two stories. Lucas clearly rejected any long-term commitment to Ava. In fact, he believed the odds were stacked against their marriage—or any marriage—and felt he needed an escape clause. He left a back door open and eventually walked out.

Jane, on the other hand, sincerely believed she was committed to the church. Her definition of *church*, however, did not include gathering, worshiping together, or serving other members. It was more about her own experience—of being taught and feeling inspired. Preferably in the privacy of her own home. Sadly, Jane's understanding of church life is increasingly common today. She “goes to church” without going anywhere.

But a local church that doesn't gather is not a genuine community. It does not reflect a committed relationship with Jesus, who declared that he would build a church that the powers of hell could not conquer (Matthew 16:18). We cannot go to church without going somewhere.

In the New Testament, the church is a congregation of people who make some crucial commitments—to the Lord and to each other. Those commitments are the foundation for this book, and they reflect the truths of Scripture.

Being a part of Christ's church is not a solo endeavor. It is a vital connection to other committed believers, as together we follow our Savior and Lord.

Indeed, like any good marriage, the local church needs radical commitments to survive, much less thrive. It's simple, but it's not simplistic.

Let's find out why.

Part 1

The *Why* of Church Membership ✓

The death of my grandson Will was not unexpected. But we had only a short time to prepare for it.

A few days before Will's birth, my daughter-in-law Rachel began noticing some problems with her pregnancy. To this point, everything had gone well, and the baby was close to full term.

An initial call to her doctor relieved some of her immediate anxiety. He thought the problems were not serious, but he still wanted to see her.

But the problems were indeed serious, and the diagnosis was heart-shattering. Will had a condition that would almost certainly be fatal. The doctor said he would probably not live long after birth. Sadly, both diagnoses were accurate. After Rachel gave birth to her son, he lived exactly one hour as she and my son Jess held him close.

In many ways, though, the story was just beginning.

Jess and Rachel had been committed church members from the earliest days of their marriage. They loved doing for others. They loved serving others. In every church they'd been a part of, they were primarily known for giving and serving.

I remember a conversation I had with one of their former pastors. He laughed as he told me he had become hesitant to ask Jess and Rachel to help in any new ministry areas, because they always said yes.

“But you never got the impression they were serving out of guilt or obligation,” he added with a smile. “They found *joy* in giving and serving.”

This time, however, the roles were reversed. They were on the receiving end of the giving, serving, and doing. I watched with amazement as the body of Christ ministered to my son and daughter-in-law. I stood in awe as their fellow church members took care of every known need Jess and Rachel had—servanthood that continued unabated for weeks after Will’s death. I saw the body of Christ come together to bear the burden of others the way God intended.

I was in deep pain for my youngest son and his wife, and I grieved the loss of my grandson. But every day when I left the hospital—or later, Jess and Rachel’s home—I felt incredible comfort knowing they were in good hands. The church cared for them, loved them, and served them. I witnessed firsthand what it means to find purpose and meaning together in the local church. I saw clearly why God never intended for us to be solo Christians.

That local congregation was truly a caring body, functioning as the hands and feet of our Savior.

Significance and Purpose

Here is the central theme of this book: *Your best hope for finding significance and purpose in life is through your local church.* Members who live out that purpose in their local church will lead a transformation in the congregation.

I imagine that simple statement will evoke a variety of responses.

You may be nodding in agreement because you have discovered incredible joy and fulfillment in your church. You're not looking for something more; you've already found it in a church in your community. You can't imagine life without your church. Indeed, you can't imagine finding meaning and purpose apart from your church.

Or maybe you're not so sure. You're a member of a church and you attend somewhat regularly, but while you see good things in your church, you also see some things that aren't so good. It seems like a stretch to claim that a life of significance and purpose is found largely in the context of the local church.

Or maybe you were once consistent in church attendance, but not anymore. Perhaps the COVID-19 pandemic showed you a life outside the local church that *seemed manageable—maybe even comfortable.* You've started wondering, *Do I really need to get up on Sunday morning and go to church? Do I need to go every week? What's wrong with attending in person occasionally and watching online the rest of the time?*

Maybe you're skeptical. You're not convinced the local church is all that important. You've seen the ugly side, and you think that people outside the church often behave better than those inside it. Perhaps the idea that the local church could be the primary place to find significance and meaning strikes you as absurd. At best, you see it as just another cultural institution that is losing relevance. Maybe you're questioning whether you want to be part of a local congregation at all.

I understand. I've heard the full spectrum of responses. More and more people today are questioning the value of the local church in their lives.

But there's a reason God established the local church as his plan A for reaching the world with the good news of the gospel. And there's a reason he didn't give us a plan B.

Let's take a look.

Imagine That

Imagine for a moment that churches around the world truly made a difference. Imagine walking into a church and being accepted and embraced just as you are. Imagine that you could change the world through your local church. Imagine your life's purpose being fulfilled in the context of your local church.

If it's tough for you to conceive of such a scenario, would you consider a few examples of people whose lives have truly been transformed through their churches? If you'll bear with me, I'll share some stories about the life-changing power of the local church—stories I've heard directly from members.

Helping the Hurting

Westbend Church is one of thousands of congregations that meet near a beach or waterway in Florida. Indeed, the sun, sand, and surf attract millions of tourists every year. Add the favorable tax structure in Florida that draws a continual influx of retirees, and you can understand the state's appeal.

Yet the same beautiful bodies of water that draw the tourists and retirees are also pathways for illegal drug trafficking. The fentanyl trade is one of the deadliest and fastest growing illegal industries in south Florida. Fentanyl takes lives. Fentanyl overdoses challenge the medical system. Fentanyl trafficking changes tourist havens into areas to be avoided. And fentanyl destroys families.

Westbend Church has hosted countless funerals for victims of fentanyl. Members and leaders noticed a heartbreaking pattern at these funerals: The deceased were often young parents, leaving behind young children.

Madeline, a member of the church for twenty-seven years, explained, "I was part of the group at our church that started asking questions about these children. We wondered what their home life was like, especially if a parent was using fentanyl. And sadly, we guessed right: Many of these kids had a surviving parent who was not able to care for them."

With so many children in need and few foster homes available, the local child services system was overwhelmed. So

a group of Westbend members began taking foster kids into their homes. And because reunification of original families is not always possible, Westbend also became a place where many children were adopted.

Neither fostering nor adoption is easy. It's often quite challenging. Still, members of Westbend Church felt compelled to act. They believed this was the path Jesus would have them follow.

“Jesus had an obvious affection for children,” Madeline said. “We decided as a church that we could do more together than alone. We created a fostering network so we could help each other when someone needed a break. We started a prayer ministry—for the children, for their families, and for us as foster parents.”

Westbend has now been a hub of fostering activity for twelve years. “And we can see the fruit,” Madeline said. “We see changed lives. We see lives that have been saved. We have made a positive impact to counteract the fentanyl problem in our community. We set out to bless our town, but the blessing we've *received* has been far greater.”

Imagine being part of a church whose ministry is used by God to make a tangible difference in the surrounding community. Imagine how your sense of purpose would be renewed. Imagine being part of a church where your life is marked by profound significance.

The Power of Prayer for Families

Deerfield Community Church is located in the heart of an unincorporated community of 8,000 residents in central Indiana. A high school physics teacher named Daniel first noticed an unsettling trend: More and more of his students were coming from single-parent homes. Several parents of kids in his classes had divorced within the past two years. He was concerned.

A demographic study confirmed Daniel's observations. Divorces were on the rise, families were breaking apart, and the children were paying the price.

Daniel set up an appointment with his pastor, Bryan, who had been part of the Deerfield community and church for nine years. Bryan encouraged church members to bring ideas and solutions whenever they shared concerns, so Daniel knew he had to be prepared to discuss more than just a list of problems. So he suggested a simple but potentially powerful ministry: praying for families in the community.

"I've been seeing more struggling families and divorces the past few years than at any other time," Daniel told Bryan. "I did some research, and our divorce rate has almost doubled in five years. We're in a crisis."

Daniel outlined a plan with four major components:

1. A monthly prayer ministry, involving fifteen church members at a time. Each member would commit to

- one month of praying for ten homes. Over a year, that would cover all 1,800 homes in Deerfield.
2. A brief, handwritten follow-up note to each home, letting them know they were being prayed for and providing contact information for prayer requests.
 3. A dedicated prayer team to respond to any requests that came in. As the ministry grew, they expanded this team to five people.
 4. A connecting ministry. When someone visited the church because of the prayer outreach, leaders paired them with a church member or family who would invite them to lunch. Many of the guests accepted this invitation.

Daniel's excitement was palpable when he described the results. "We started by simply observing the rising divorce rate. Now we're part of a ministry to families, sharing the gospel and connecting them to resources such as marriage counseling. My own life has become so much richer through this ministry."

Imagine being part of a church that God uses to rescue marriages, share the gospel, and serve as a powerful conduit for prayer. Imagine discovering that your life has a purpose you never knew was possible. Imagine seeing entire families transformed—often right before your eyes.

Second Responders for Jesus

A tornado left massive damage in an Oklahoma community. Two lives were lost, and it could have been far worse. Most people had found shelter in time.

Still, the destruction was staggering.

That was ten years ago, and Marge and Ben remembered it vividly.

“I remember walking outside after the tornado passed,” Marge said. “*Our* home was fine, but within a quarter-mile radius, the damage was overwhelming.”

Ben recalled, “We were just two people, and we weren’t sure what we could do. While we were walking around, listening to the sirens of the first responders, I got a call from a friend at our church, the Church of Hope, who was also on the city council. He told me the high school was severely damaged, and he’d heard that the city wouldn’t have enough capacity to house all the displaced people. Since I was an elder, he asked me to contact the others to see if we could open the church as a shelter.”

The elders agreed immediately. Church members began securing cots, baby beds, clothes, toys, and toiletries. One group was responsible for meals and water. Three church members who were insurance agents worked to get adjusters out quickly.

“I’ve never seen our church mobilize like that,” Marge said. “The response didn’t slow down for days. Some of the men went door to door with chain saws to clear toppled trees. Others worked with roofers to get tarps on salvageable

homes. I started calling it a ‘second responder’ ministry. One of our members, Carlos, put up a sign: Second Responder Ministry of the Church of Hope.”

Within a few days, the immediate crisis ended, and most people had found a place to stay. Marge wrote down everything she could remember about their response efforts.

“Though I hoped we wouldn’t need it again,” she said, “I wanted us to be ready.”

Two weeks later, another tornado hit a town ninety minutes away. When a pastor there asked the Church of Hope for help, the leaders mobilized a response within two hours, sending a team to help the other church respond more effectively.

“It’s now been a decade,” Ben said, “and the Second Responder ministry is still flourishing. Sometimes we partner with other Christian relief organizations; sometimes it’s just us.”

“I’ve been the hands and feet of Christ in tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, and mudslides,” Marge added. Our whole church caught this vision. We’re on mission almost every month. My life has incredible purpose now. Many of us say the same thing: We couldn’t do this alone. We do it as the body of Christ.”

“I never could have imagined my life would be so rich,” Ben said with a smile.

Imagine being connected to a church that truly becomes the hands and feet of Christ. Imagine changing the world one disaster response at a time.

Powerful Sermons in a Powerful Church

It began with a conversation between Debra and her sister-in-law, Phoebe.

“I was getting tired of Phoebe telling me how much she was growing spiritually under her pastor’s preaching,” Debra admitted. “I decided to watch one of his sermons online. It was okay—nothing great.”

The next day, when Phoebe predictably brought up the sermon again, Debra told her it wasn’t that special.

“She just said, ‘Of course not. You didn’t get it.’”

Phoebe explained that she used to have the same attitude, but she started praying specifically for her own heart, asking God to speak to her through the sermons.

“It had never occurred to me to pray for myself regarding a pastor’s preaching,” Debra said. “But I was convicted and decided to try it.”

Debra also shared the idea with a few friends. Before long, at least a hundred people in the church were praying that God would speak to them through the pastor’s sermons. It felt like a movement was gathering steam.

“It’s now common to see a lot of people taking notes during the sermon,” Debra said. “There’s a hunger for the Bible and a desire to hear from God, unlike anything I’ve ever seen.”

After a month or two, Debra asked her pastor, Craig, how he felt about all the note-taking. He admitted he was confused at first—he didn’t know what was going on or who

to ask. When Debra explained her simple initiative, Craig began to cry.

“He told me he’d been dying a death of a thousand cuts from constant complaints. He’d even thought about leaving the ministry.”

In the weeks that followed, Debra noticed a renewed energy in Pastor Craig. By every measure, the church was experiencing spiritual growth. Many described the worship services as “a time when God is doing a powerful and obvious work.”

“It’s a movement of God,” Debra said. “I can’t wait for worship each week. My life is being transformed by God’s Word. And I know I’m not the only one. So many of us have discovered new purpose and meaning.”

Can You Imagine?

Imagine a church with a powerful ministry to help the hurting—where members come together and see real transformation in people’s lives. You notice your town is changing for the better as well. You wake up every morning with a sense of anticipation for what God will do. You see church members working together with focus and purpose.

Imagine that.

Imagine being part of a church that prays faithfully for the community. Many of the people who are prayed for are deeply touched. Some begin attending your church, and marriages and families are restored. You can’t wait to serve in

this ministry. You've found a life purpose you never dreamed possible. God is using your church in remarkable ways.

Imagine that.

Imagine you're on the front lines of disaster relief through your church. You've joined fellow members in responding to tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, and fires. Though the tragedies are heartbreaking, your life has taken on new meaning. You realize you couldn't do this alone. You're part of the body of Christ functioning as it should.

Imagine that.

Imagine the worship service at your church is a highlight in your week. You sense God's presence. You study your Bible more than ever before—and enjoy it. When the pastor preaches, you hear the Word of God in a fresh, powerful way. You're not alone—others are experiencing the same transformation. It's a movement of God that affects the entire congregation.

Imagine that.

Would you want to be part of a church with these qualities? Would you make it a priority if you could truly see transformation in your life?

Perhaps you're thinking there's no perfect church like that. I understand. But by the time you finish this book, I pray you will see your church in a different light. I hope you'll see that you really can find purpose and meaning through the ministry of a local congregation. In fact, I hope

you will come to realize that you will never find lasting purpose and meaning without a joyful connection to a local church family.

Yes, it's a bold claim. But walk with me through the roadblocks and problems common to local churches. Then let's see how God intends for us to flourish—together.

A transformed and transformational life through the local church? A life of significance and purpose found in the local church?

Yes.

Imagine that.

Three Questions

1. What are some characteristics a healthy church should exhibit?
2. Do you think most church members see their local church as a place to find purpose and significance? Why or why not?
3. What are some common characteristics of the churches we highlighted in this chapter?