

**I AM NOT A NONE:**  
**Lessons in Belonging from a Church-Going**  
**Commitment-Phobe**

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## A. OVERVIEW

### 1. About *I am Not a None*

*(From the Introduction)*

According to surveys released by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life in 2012:

- Of all adults 18 and over, 20% are considered nones; that is, they are unaffiliated with any particular religion (up almost 5% since 2007). While nearly 6% of this group describes themselves as atheists or agnostics, the remaining 14% don't use any label.
- Among Americans ages 18-29, the percentage of those unaffiliated with a particular religion increased to a whopping 32%.
- Interestingly, most religiously unaffiliated Americans think that churches and other religious institutions offer some benefit to society by strengthening communities and serving the poor. But they aren't looking to be a part of them.

It appears that the tides of American religion are going out to sea without me amidst the growing population of nones. The nones who do not identify with any religious tradition but the majority of whom still believe in God. The nones who think organized religion is obsessed with money, power, rules, and chastity. The nones who make up almost a third of my under-thirty peers.

I am not a none.

I am a twenty-eight year-old who wears skinny jeans, man boots, and Mac's Red Russian lipstick. I live in North Carolina but was born in Nashville, reared in Columbus, raised in Chicago, schooled in Ann Arbor, married in Charlotte, and awakened in San Francisco. I want to live in Seattle when I grow up, but these days I'm putting down roots in Durham. I call myself a Christian, and a feminist, too.

I believe in spiritual community. I believe in going to church. I just don't like to do it. I don't like when the old people say something racist even though I know I need their wisdom. I don't like it when the babies cry too loudly even though I know I need their innocence. I don't take well to authority figures telling *me* what to do. And yet I have a lot of opinions on what *they* should do.

I like Jesus; I just think he's been co-opted. I believe in tradition if there's a good reason behind it. It's just that I often can't get a straight answer about what that reason is.

I have a degree in theology but I don't want to hear your dissertation. I want the specifics, like how you picture God when you pray and what you say to the beggar on the street who asks for money.

I am interested in women and men who earnestly want to belong and are ready to do so with people who don't look and think and act like them.

The trouble is I have a hard time committing to these people because as pastor Lillian Daniel puts it, "In community, humanity is just way too close to look good."

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*I am Not a None* is my story of trying to belong to the Church, and to my husband, friends, and neighbors, too. It's a story about participating in community when it's messy and painful, and small talk suffocates and the pastor gives bad sermons and the suffering of others feels intrusive. It's about risking affiliation with all those things for which people critique the Church: hypocritical, repressive, and exclusive. My story is not meant to be a rebuttal to those who have found their identity elsewhere, but instead a plea for those who can and are called to show up with me and stand in the tension of belonging to each other.

## 2. About the timing

We are living in what some call a post-Christian, post-religious society. The God who was supposedly responsible for the last three centuries of American progress has become unappealing, unattractive, unbelievable, or simply irrelevant to growing numbers of people. In 2008, the [American Religious Identification Survey](#) documented how the percentage of self-identified Christians has fallen 10 percentage points since 1990, from 86 to 76 percent. The Barna Group's [State of the Church Report](#) in 2011 showed that during a similar time frame (1991-2001), church attendance among Christians also dropped significantly, by 11 percentage points for women and 6 for men. Similarly, the percentage of people who say they are unaffiliated with any religion at all has gone from about 15.3% to just under 20% in the last five years according to the recent [Pew Forum](#) poll in 2012. Add to these continuing trends reports of denominational decline in North America ([such as this one](#)) and the hope for new company among regular church attendees seems dim, especially for the under 30 set.

A culture of fear –fear of losing control and looking foolish– has monopolized the imagination of many church and civic leaders. The perceived threat of social issues such as homosexuality, abortion, and the “feminization” of religion have seemingly caused a knee-jerk return to fundamentalist fervor. Certain young adults, such as the self-professed New Calvinists, are clinging to movements that provide answers to their uncertainty. Many, after all, fit the profile of their millennial generation by being rule-following,

people-pleasing, authority-loving achievers (See David Brooks' sketch of [The Organization Kid](#) in a 2001 issue of *The Atlantic*).

Complimenting this culture of fear is one of mistrust, wherein it is better to find self-fulfillment in one's independence rather than risk the potential for disappointment, or—worse—abuse, at the hand of another. Many young adults have forged their own pathway to enlightenment, choosing to be spiritual outsiders of a tradition rather than conforming to its rituals, as documented in [You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving the Church and Rethinking Faith](#) by David Kinnaman (Baker Books, 2011). However, while they may be less religious than previous generations, they are not necessarily more secular. (See Cathy Lynn Grossman's [summary of the phenomenon](#) in a 2010 article of *USA Today*).

*I am Not a None* is a timely articulation<sup>1</sup> of the vast middle ground between the hyper-religious who sometimes belong without questioning and the non-religious who often question without belonging. I suggest that this middle ground can be called “faithful rebellion,” also the theme of my blog at [www.HolyHellions.com](http://www.HolyHellions.com), and it signifies the desire to belong to communities of faith *while* living the questions (a sentiment that comes from Rainer Maria Rilke's [Letters to a Young Poet](#) in 1903). This has been my desire for as long as my memory reaches.

### 3. [About the Author](#)

Growing up Roman Catholic in a small town outside of Chicago, IL, I begged to take my first communion at the age of five, was homeschooled in catechism and confirmed by the age of twelve, and was barred by my parents' divorce decree from attending non-Catholic worship services until the age of eighteen. I, like many folks, had good reasons to find the Church an inhospitable place.

But God must have been set on keeping me tethered to the Church, because at twenty-two I married a Methodist man who made his living working in one. We lived in a small parsonage our first two years of marriage while I tried to understand what it meant to be “a pastor's wife” who wasn't keen on baking for potlucks or volunteering at overnights. When people asked me how I knew I was in love with this man, I said, “Because running away from him feels like running away from God.” I've come to realize this, too, is why I can't leave the Church.

After a stint in religious publishing, a degree in theology, and a job working with burnt-out clergy, I've given up trying to find the “right church” and instead I've decided to “love the church you're with.” For the first time since being married, I've started attending a church on my own, a small congregation that I can bike to on Sunday

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<sup>1</sup> I expect the manuscript will be completed by December 2013.

mornings when my husband is working all day as a youth pastor elsewhere. It is here, at an evangelical, Presbyterian Church, that I stand shoulder to shoulder with strangers; that woman who talks too long during announcements, that man who looks past me when I shake his hand, that preacher who uses only sports analogies.

Of course, sometimes God is a stranger to me, too, but through these strange people in this strange place, I am learning how to become what my friend Enuma calls “hospitable to the holy.”

In addition to my own complex narrative in learning to belong, I also bring to this project:

- *A background in theology and gender.* What does one do with a Bachelor’s degree in Anthropology and a Master’s degree in Theological Studies, both completed with a certificate in Gender Studies? You’re looking at it. My education at top academic institutions not only gives me a firm grasp on the existent discourse on religious affiliation, but it also gives me credibility with a skeptical readership of believers and doubters alike.
- *A foot in the door of evangelical, mainline, Catholic, Quaker, and spiritual but not religious communities.* I regularly attend an evangelically-minded Presbyterian church, am married to a die-hard Methodist, go to mass with my Irish-Catholic father, work for a Quaker-based nonprofit, and am on the board of the local Resource Center for Women in Ministry in the South that serves spiritual women from all walks of life. These varied experiments in community give me a wide-ranging perspective that can touch readers on many paths.
- *A skill set for publicizing and marketing books.* I have worked in book publishing for the last five years. I understand, as I told so many clients myself, that an author is his or her own best publicist. And yet I believe that publishing a book is not possible without a highly strategic and supportive team.
- *A sense of (her own, at least) humor.* Christians are not known-round-the-world for their ability to get a laugh. Such a stereotype needs not be perpetuated. We’re dealing with serious stuff these days. Personal writing, like the kind I produce on my blog, should beg to be read aloud, over and over, to the howls of friends and colleagues.
- *A balanced perspective.* I believe in building bridges, in having dialogue, in saying something conservative in one breath followed by an out-in-left-field hypothesis in the next. I also believe in the very real possibility of getting this God stuff wrong. It is, after all, God stuff.
- *A practical emphasis.* Theorizing is entertaining but in the end I want concrete examples. My commitment to giving nitty-gritty details without the overly-vague proscriptions of a self-help guru will give readers language to think through their own beliefs about God and Church. I can foresee corresponding articles and study guides being possible and plentiful.

- *A growing platform of influence.* I have built a steady readership through essays on TheThoughtfulChristian.com, FaithandLeadership.com, UnitedMethodistReporter.com, TheOtherJournal.com, FeminismandReligion.com, and my own blog, HolyHellions.com. I have also co-edited an anthology with author Enuma Okoro set to come out in Fall 2013 called *Talking Taboo: American Christian Women Get Frank about Faith* (White Cloud Press) through which I've developed relationships with 40 contributors under 40. I will also be able to reach out to media contacts I made while working as an in-house religion publicist at Jossey-Bass, as well as those who are connected with my local community of Duke Divinity School and Durham, NC. Lastly, my work developing and facilitating programs for the national Center for Courage & Renewal, founded by Quaker author and activist Parker J. Palmer, gives me a platform to “walk my talk” as I continue to work with clergy and people of faith who are lonely, isolated, and longing to belong like me.

## B. COMPETITION

I've listed three categories of books below that approximate, but ultimately miss the mark of *I am Not a None's* style and message.

### 1. Memoirs from Young Christians about the Church

Perhaps the closest comparison to the type of work I'm describing is Rachel Held Evans's [\*Evolving in Monkeytown: How A Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask the Questions\*](#) (Zondervan, 2010), although her book focuses more on the case for doubt than the case for community. It also reads more like an apologetics for those who were brought up in a more fundamentalist environment such as herself, while my experience is quite different. I was shaped by a Catholic father and a charismatic mother who taught me from an early age to understand both the Church's limits and freedoms. In a way, I want to speak most pointedly to those who have left the church or feel ambivalent about its necessity for spiritual formation. My close friend Enuma Okoro's memoir [\*Reluctant Pilgrim: A Moody, Somewhat Self-Indulgent Introvert's Search for Spiritual Community\*](#) (Upper Room, 2010) is closer to the kind of focus I expect my book will have but I seek to include commentary on the sociological phenomena that are driving my peers away from the church and what experiences have the potential to draw us back in. Another friend who has made a strong case for Christian community is Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove in his work [\*The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture\*](#) (Paraclete, 2010). However, I see *I am Not a None* addressing the institutional experience of the Church as people press up against its structure of exclusion and disappointment. The hopeful nature of Jonathan's work, however, will be akin to mine. Lastly, I should mention the newly released book by pastor Lillian Daniel called [\*When "Spiritual but Not Religious" is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Place, Even the Church\*](#) (Jericho Books, 2013). I anticipate my book would both draw on a similar audience of folks looking to salvage something of organized religion and expand upon

that audience to include readers like me who are younger and non-ordained clergy. My book will also be rooted in a year-long narrative rather than piece-meal anecdotes.

## 2. Memoirs from Christians for the Spiritual-But-Not-Religious Set

Everybody wants to be the next Donald Miller, author of the Christian memoirs [\*A Million Miles in a Thousand Years: How I Learned to Live a Better Story\*](#) (Thomas Nelson, 2011) and [\*Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality\*](#) (Thomas Nelson, 2003). Or have the kind of cross-over appeal to the spiritual, but not religious audience that Anne Lamott especially enjoyed with her memoir [\*Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith\*](#) (Random House, 1999). While the narrative portion of *I am Not a None* is stylistically similar to these books, it's not a classic Christian memoir in the sense of it being the story of "how I found God." I have a more explicit agenda to highlight the role of church community and how it can be faithfully critiqued and experienced by someone who finds glimpses of God in organized religion; Spiritual memoirist Lauren Winner (a past professor of mine) has struck this balance expertly in many of her books, including the most recent [\*Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis\*](#) (Harper One, 2012). While Christian authors like Don and Anne tell a good story, they fail to take a more critical view of how experiences of religion can both oppress and liberate the faithful rebel. Susan Campbell's [\*Dating Jesus: A Story of Fundamentalism, Feminism, and the American Girl\*](#) (Beacon Press, 2009) comes close, but she writes from the perspective of an older woman who has given up hope that there can be any real transformation of the sexist God in Christianity.

## 3. Memoirs from Christians Who Have Left the Church

Memoirs from this group tend to come from Christians, especially feminists, who no longer find regular Church attendance worthwhile or necessary. Barbara Brown Taylor's [\*Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith\*](#) (Harper One, 2006) is perhaps the most popular of the genre, as is Sue Monk Kidd's [\*The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine\*](#) (Harper Collins, 1996). I admire Sarah Sentilles, a young woman who no longer identifies as a Christian, and her memoir [\*Breaking Up With God: A Love Story\*](#) (Harper One, 2011) and the way in which it weaves her experiences growing up in the faith with palatable theology and real-world examples. She also clearly still loves the Church, even as she cannot abide it. All of these women end up leaving the church and making an argument for alternative communities outside the bounds of institutional religion. I can't and won't argue with their experiences. Instead, I want to make the case for why organized Christianity has been so meaningful and disciplining and life-giving for me. I don't mean to say that this kind of Christianity can only come to one who regularly attends Sunday worship services, but this is the regular pattern of life to which I find myself being called.

## C. MARKET ANALYSIS

### 1. Who will buy this book?

*I am Not a None* is for people who love the church, hate the church, have felt excluded by the church, or don't understand the church. They want to engage, argue, and wrestle. They want to belong *while* living the questions.

### 2. How big is the market for this book?

The target market for this book is broad and deep. *I am Not a None* will strike a chord with anyone who has ever felt put-off or left-out by one-size-fits-all Christianity, especially those ages 18-35.

According to surveys done by the Pew Forum:

- Around 73% of adults over the age of 18 self-identify as Christians in America. Add to that group another 14% who describe their religion as “nothing in particular” and the potential readership for this book could be as many as 87% of the American population, Christian and non-Christian alike.
- Even more striking is that among Americans ages 18-29, the percentage of those unaffiliated with any religion is a whopping 32%, compared to 20% of all adults over 18. Many of the arguments for Church, or institutionalized religion in general, have not yet come from my age group.
- Surprisingly, most religiously unaffiliated Americans think that churches and other religious institutions do benefit society by strengthening communities and serving the poor. But they aren't looking to be a part of them. I want to explore why this is the case.

My discussions with friends, colleagues, and strangers on my blog have shown me that this topic is widespread: devout Christians weary of easy answers; questioning young adults in need of spiritual community (and better friendships); women and men who have felt excluded from full expression in their religion; and even teens who want so badly to rebel but sense there is something to this God stuff. This book is for anyone seeking to understand and explore their relationship to God and the Church.

### 3. What void in the marketplace will this book fill?

What's missing from the marketplace is a book from a young Christian (and one with such a varied relationship to religious traditions) that addresses the yearning of folks to belong, to find community and purpose and meaning in life, to not fall into corrosive cynicism or irrelevant idealism but to gain the courage to stand in the gap between the

broken system of the Church and the transformative nature of Christ's body. Doubt is popular. Certainty is popular. Living in the in-between is messy, hopeful and humble.

#### **D. PROMOTION & PUBLICITY**

For six years, I have been a book publicist. I understand that promoting a book is a full-time job, which is why I intend to make it mine. I am willing to invest the time, money, and energy to market my book and market it well. Not only will I continue to write for relevant media outlets, I will actively pursue speaking gigs across the country. I am confident, articulate, and comfortable addressing an audience.

##### 1. Promotional Angles

- *I am one of the few self-identified Christian feminist women under thirty in the media*, which is unusual and garners more interest in my message. I can be the go-to gal on faith and feminism for publications targeting 18-35 year-olds.
- *I am married*. This increases my credibility with male readers, as my husband will make numerous appearances in the narrative as a faithful rebel himself (although perhaps he's 'a little more faithful' to my 'a little more rebel'). He can accompany me to select promotional efforts.
- *I work for an organization that helps clergy and congregations develop more faithful and resourceful communities*. As an Assistant Program Director for the Center for Courage & Renewal, I walk my talk when it comes to facilitating church communities that are open, honest, and hospitable to "otherness."
- *I have a theological education*. My connection to the world of academia gives me leverage to speak about the book with students, professors, and community members of universities.
- *I have a unique perspective as a publishing insider*. I already have connections with journalists and writers around the country at both secular and religious publications to whom I could pitch op-ed pieces on the media landscape as a whole for young people in general, as well as young Christian women. I find that readers (who have seen one too many movies on the glamorous life of publishing) are always intrigued by the industry.

##### 2. Publicity Hooks

A book for folks who either love or hate the Church but long to follow Christ in community will never go out of style and, thus, will be a strong backlist book for the publisher. Below are the broad strokes of its publicity angles.

- *Book Tour (real and virtual)*. I will actively set up speaking engagements across the country where I have connections at book stores, community organizations, and college campuses. Conferences like [Reveal](#), the [Young Clergywomen Project](#),

- and even the Evangelic and Ecumenical Women's Caucus [Gathering](#) would be obvious venues in which to meet my readers, but I'd also like to branch wider (and be more inclusive of men) by speaking at more evangelical events like the [National Youthworkers' Convention](#) (which my husband attends annually). However, I realize the bang-for-your-buck that can be garnered by virtual gigs these days. Attending virtual book clubs, conferences, and blog tours after the pub month would also be on my to-do list.
- *National Broadcast Media.* My youth, animation, and humor make me an easy pitch for television and radio, particularly on shows like the *The Today Show* (which showed its interest in young Christian women when it interviewed Rachel Held Evans last year), *Speaking of Faith*, and NPR's *This I Believe* or *On The Media*. Religion demographics, as well as gender politics in the church, are always interesting, controversial topics and my life story and perspective would make for great dialogue.
  - *National Print/Online Media.* There is an incessant fascination in the media with Christians, Millennials, and trends in religion. Top blogs like WashingtonPost.com's "On Faith" or the CNN "Belief Blog" (both at which I have contacts) would also be great fits for a more journalistic approach to current tides in religion. Religious publications like *Christianity Today* and *The Christian Century* would be interested in my unique perspective on being a young, Church-going feminist. Women's magazines like *Bust*, *Bitch*, or *Ms.* would be more interested in the spiritual feminism angle which has had very little play (or sympathy) in mainstream media (See [Bust's](#) Feb/Mar 2011 article on Dirty Girls Ministries for a typical portrayal of Christian sexuality). Feminist websites like Jezebel.com, Feministing.com (I know editor Courtney E. Martin), and Feminist.com would be great forums for guest articles/posts on how women of faith have often been excluded from feminist communities and vice versa. In fact, I can create a host of essays, how-to's, and satirical quizzes based off the book and timed for the crucial six month period after the book's publication.
  - *Local Media.* I am located in a market that is comfortable with religious dialogue; Durham and Chapel Hill have quite a few venues for giving lectures and workshops. I am connected to a host of women's groups in the area, including those tied to Duke University like the Women's Center and the Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South. In addition, my book is well suited for discussion on local talk radio such as WUNC's *The State of Things*, and for profiles in the Lifestyle sections of *The News and Observer*, *Independent Weekly*, and *Durham Magazine*.
  - *Social Media.* My own blog will continue to be an interactive hot spot for readers to engage the material. I will also set up a fan page on Facebook and continue to use the already branded [@HolyHellions](#) twitter handle for giveaways, promotions, and networking.

3. Potential Endorsers  
\* I know personally  
# I know through a colleague
- Lauren Winner \*
  - Parker Palmer \*
  - Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove \*
  - Donald Miller \*
  - Sarah Sentilles \*
  - Mark Labberton \*
  - Enuma Okoro \*
  - Rachel Held Evans #
  - Lillian Daniel #
  - Brian McLaren #
  - Nadia Bolz-Weber #

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## **F. CONTENT SUMMARY**

*I envision each section being made up of a handful of shorter, unnamed chapters. While the focus of the book is belonging to the Church, I expect my chapters to also reflect on belonging in general, why it's hard and what we feel like we're giving up by giving in to its demands.*

*The narrative starts during my last semester of graduate school (age 28) when I realize how completely inept I've become at belonging to Christian community despite being loosely immersed in one my entire life. I decide to get serious about choosing and committing to a church. It is harder than I imagined, especially as I go it alone for the first time without my husband. The book tracks the first year of my commitment to a particular community and tries to wrestle with the common questions of resolve that arise with each step: showing up, testing the waters, going deeper, gasping for air, and doing it*

*again. The theme of belonging takes on particular significance this year as my husband and I find ourselves in our “first third year” in a city and begin to entertain the idea of adopting children into our lives. The book ends (age 29) when I decide not to become a member of the church I attend. The decision reflects my desire to reclaim a part of my Catholic identity and a commitment to unity amongst the Church writ large; denominationalism continues to have little significance to me, but affiliation with the local church remains hard and rewarding.*

*The common fears and desires of belonging to the Church body are surely present anytime we share our life with another, whether in marriage or friendship or community.*

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### **Section I: Longing to Belong**

Driving across the state on 1-40, I once saw a billboard advertising “a church for people who don’t like church.” Funny, I thought to myself. Isn’t that who every church is for? Sanctuaries around the country had to be full of young people like me; bored by the churches’ lack of imagination, burned-out by their lifeless buzzwords, and bitter about times they have made us and others feel like we didn’t belong there.

The news on religious affiliation, especially for the under-30 set, is that we are growing wearier of belonging to any specific belief system. I can relate. I grew up Catholic, found Jesus with the evangelicals, became a feminist in college, married a Methodist, work for Quakers, and currently attend a Presbyterian congregation. I’m a commitment-phobic rebel like the rest of them. But despite all this, I can’t quit the Church. This is the story of why I’ve stayed—through ageism, boredom, sexism, and loneliness—and the practices that keep me showing up.

### **Section II: Showing-Up**

Woody Allen famously said, “Eighty percent of success is showing up.” I imagine the same is true for community. If I can slip out of my pajamas and into the pew on Sunday morning, I am eighty percent more likely to meet God in the sweaty handshakes and shaky voices of the strangers beside me.

At the beginning, I intend to set the premise for the book: God promises to show up in the form of the Church where people stand shoulder to shoulder in worship in order to make an invisible God visible. So, too, then does belonging to this community, any community, require from me the discipline of showing up.

Surely this idea will sound simplistic to some. To show up in a place of worship is no guarantee that transformation will happen, that I will live differently as a result, that I will

be made well by prayers, that I will find a community that cares, I agree. But by showing up, week after week, my body bears witness to my need for all these things. It says, “I cannot do this alone, even though I may try.”

When I started attending Whitehall Presbyterian Church, it was a sort of dare to myself. Did I actually believe my own hype about the blessing of community, and if so, how long could I really stick it out?

### **Section III: Testing the Waters**

It was perhaps a bit audacious of me to begin my involvement at Whitehall by attending an intergenerational marriage class. This seemed like taking a vegan boyfriend to a southern pig-picking just to start a fight. As a feminist, gender relations in the church had always been a source of keen interest and deep wounding for me. It didn't help that the book we were assigned to read was Pastor Tim Keller's *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*. It also didn't help that I showed up each week without my husband Rush in tow.

Isn't this what we do as children finding our place in the world? We test how strong the bond of family is by daring them not to love us. It is what I did when I was dating my husband. It is what I did when I was dating the Church. And for some reason God's acceptance of me felt bound up in my ability to belong and receive love from both. I began to wonder, After years of resisting commitment and conformity, could I even let myself belong to others?

### **Section IV: Going Deeper**

Piss or get off the pot. This is one of my favorite sayings. It was what a counselor told Rush and me when we were contemplating marriage and wondering about the “right time” for engagement. And it was what I was feeling after being a part of Whitehall for almost half a year. At some point, I had to realize that no community would be perfect, and no time would be perfect to dig in deeper.

I had been having similar questions about going deeper with friends in town. We had been in Durham for almost three years and I still felt awkward trying to make and sustain adult friendships. It was my husband who suggested vulnerability might be one of my “challenge areas.”

The truth was I hadn't always been able to figure out how to take the next step toward belonging required of deep friendships *or* deep experiences of Church. To do so, I was going to have to expose myself in ways that felt needy and, well, gross.

I couldn't think of a better way to admit my need than by joining the new member's class at Whitehall. In all my years of church shopping and hopping, it was the only thing I hadn't tried: commitment.

I worried though. How much was actually required of me to belong? One service a week? A service and a small group? A service and a small group and a mission opportunity? And what if I felt like it was all just asking too much of me?

### **Section V: Gasping for Air**

I knew from the start that there were theological differences between Whitehall and me. For one, the liturgy was laden with masculine pronouns and imagery, while the sermons were full of sports analogies and odes to fatherhood. I tried to make like a good Catholic and remember that I was there for a taste of Christ's body, not some patriarchal pontificating. I had abided worse exclusion. In fact, I had come to realize that I thrived more in communities that disagreed with me than those with whom I was "preaching to the choir."

What I couldn't abide was the lack of real interest in not *working for* but *being with* the poor. This seemed a far greater affront to the true purpose of the Church than whether or not we called Jesus the King of Kings or a Royal Queen. My friend Bess who worked on staff at Whitehall had told me plainly that our pastor wasn't in favor of the "non-virtuous" poor. He had made that clear in a sermon in which he said that the beggars outside of our sanctuary walls were liars, however harmless.

How could I find my home in a place that wasn't a shelter for all? Were these theological differences only philosophical or was I complicit in how they bore down on our everyday practices? I suppose I came to the question that almost everyone must ask when entering the life of the Church: How does one discern between a toxic community and a human one?

### **Section VI: Do it Again**

I recently heard a prominent theologian suggest that repetition brings God delight. Richard Mouw, former President of Fuller Theological Seminary, told the story of his grandson who loves to see his old 'pa make funny faces. He obliges and the little boy claps and spits with glee. "Do it again!" he screams.

This, Mouw suggested, is something of the delight God takes in us, in our waking, our breakfast-making, our laboring, our playing, and our evening-praying. S/he says, "That's good. Do it again." So it is with going to church. It takes practice. We show-up, we test the waters, we go deeper, and we gasp for air. Again. And again. We ask the same questions in new contexts: Can we really swim? Can we take a break on the shore for

awhile? Or can we give up on the beach altogether, burned by the sun and with sand in our crotch?

After almost a year, I don't yet know the answers to all these questions for my involvement at Whitehall. I was not able, in the end, to become a certifiable member of the church. But I intend to keep living the questions of what it means to be a faith-full rebel, that is, one who gives into the demands of a particular community while not giving up on the unity of the faith.