

'Faith in the World' Prize 2011

Winner: Senior Category (ages 18-21)

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Is believing more important than belonging?

God was there when I gingerly opened my eyes after a pitiful four hours sleep. He was there as I cut a solitary figure down to the dining room and he was still there as I wandered about campus completely clueless as to where I was supposed to be going, the map in the freshers' handbook not matching in any way anything around me. But I felt completely lonely, isolated. Donne may have said that no man is an island but, at that moment, I was the exception to the rule. This was the morning after the night before; my first night at university, when excitement and terror collide and you wish it possible to grip God's hand or that he had the comforting scent like that which babies seek from their nursing mothers. That morning I believed in God – but I did not belong in that strange place. But I knew where I could go to find a place where I belonged: church.

The church has always had a prominent role in British society, even in the 21st Century when it seems to be a prominent figure of derision. The concept of church is hard to clearly define, however. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus is referring to Quahal YHWH, which was the meeting of the twelve tribes of Israel to discuss policy, and the word 'ecclesia', from which the word church is derived, refers to a 'calling out.' Both Quahal YHWH and ecclesia are political terms and this sets the cornerstone of the church's work as an active force. In the past, this active force meant the church was the centre of daily life and a brief tour of the countryside will testify to this as it is rare to visit a village which does not have at least one church. Today, church attendance in the UK is declining, but that does not mean that everything the church stands for is in decline. Every night of the week, it seems, there is at least one church in the city where I live which opens its doors to the homeless and destitute, offering a warm place to relax, filling food to enjoy and, more crucially, a place to belong. It is in these moments where one can know all the theology they like, but it is worthless in comparison to the hand of friendship and the sympathetic ear. Jesus called us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked but, when that is practically applied, it is far more successful when undertaken by a group of believers who can pull together far more resources than just one believer. One believer can reach a person's heart, but a community of believers shows a person what a changed life, a life confident and secure in love and friendship looks like.

In Colossians 1:16-17 it says, 'All things were created through [God] and for Him. He is before all things and in Him all things hold together.' For a Christian, belief in God is of the utmost importance. God is higher and greater than all things, church and church-esque groups included; but this does not mean that belief is necessarily more important than belonging. To go back to my lonely figure on the first Sunday of freshers' week, I remember calling after a person in a bright green t-shirt which said in bold letters, 'Welcome Team'. I thought I had found someone who would rescue me from my predicament of being completely lost, someone who would be sympathetic to my cause and lovingly guide me to the meeting point for which I was headed. Alas, I got a disgruntled sigh and a half-hearted point in the direction of a dead end. After more agonising minutes of searching, something caught my eye – a rainbow coloured WWJD wrist band. Saying a quick prayer of thanksgiving for Christian gimmicky marketing, I headed towards a group of smiling people and towards a group where I knew I would belong. God had got me through the previous night with all the alcohol and loud music and somewhat frightening grinding-passed-off-as-dancing, but it had still been a physically lonely night even though it had not been emotionally. The Christian life is not an easy life to live. It is a life which condemns you to mockery, ridicule, persecution and isolation. That is why it is vital to belong to a community of believers so that support and comfort can be sought. I did not realise just how important church could be until I found myself several hundred miles away from home and feeling so very very alone.

Growing up in a multi-denominational church, I experienced first-hand the almighty mess of church politics. No wonder church attendance is in decline. I always wondered what visitors thought of twenty-minute notices about the Alpha course followed by a rebuke from the proponents of the Christianity Explored course. Church seemed like a place where you would only reluctantly admit to belonging to, much like with political parties when you basically support them but really wish they did not have that particular backbencher. For my belief in God, church did wonders to help it grow, just not in the way it might have wanted. Church meant petty squabbles over whether the communion bread was in wafer form or Tesco Value variety; it meant picking and choosing which single mother to accept and which to scorn – it meant double standards. Church was not immune to the rest of society with its cliques and snobbery and prejudices and I could not see how God could condone people behaving in such a way in his name. Belief in God offered grace, church membership offered people who desperately needed grace. Church or any kind of group of believers is not perfect and will never be perfect which is why it is imperative to remember that God offers far more than a human-controlled organisation can. But when a community of believers is focused on the one in whom they believe, then belonging flows joyfully from belief.

I admit that I applied my own prejudices that sunny Sunday morning back in freshers' week when it came to choosing a church to go to as part of the Christian Union's "church search". The church I wanted to go to after the excellent advice of a Google search did not meet until the evening, so I was left with a choice of three represented churches. One of them had a weird name, another was advertised with the line "we talk in tongues and stuff", and the other was an Anglican church. I decided I would rather be bored and safe and that an organ would provide a bit of culture. And anyway, I assured myself that the ideal church for me I would visit that evening. The problem is that when belief in God is the centre of your life, you are drawn to where you see him at work, both practically and in the hearts of those who also live their lives in him. As I stepped into this new church with its peculiar Church of England smell, I was astounded by what I saw. Growing up in church I had endured many an all-age service as both a small child being frightened by a puppet acting out Bible stories, and as a teenager waiting impatiently for the end of service biscuits to gorge on to recover from the mind-numbingly boring puppet shows. But I found myself in a church I did not want to go to, in the type of Sunday service I loathed, surrounded by people I did not know, but feeling completely like I belonged. Everyone was smiling, genuinely smiling; there were no forced smiles to be seen. And there was a sheep puppet being used to tell the Bible story, but it transcended past the entertaining of little children and the sermon reached all the adults too. But what struck me most of all were the prayers. I had never heard people speak to God with such adoration before. For the congregation, regardless of age or upbringing, their belief in God defined their lives and resulted in an outpouring of joy which they celebrated together as a community of believers. They were a community who freely received a host of frightened freshers into their church which the media would have us believe is dying. But as long as God is living in the hearts of people, then so will the church live. Belief inspires belonging. It is so easy to view church as a cultural practice which is now dying with materialistic and individualistic times but, in reality, church is the uniting of joyful hearts which seeks to have all participate in that joy.

Without belonging to various Christian groups, I do not think that my belief in God would have disappeared, but it would certainly have suffered. When confined to yourself, it can be easy for your faith to stagnate because you lose the opportunity to see God in action. Even Julian of Norwich, who was holed up in a cell as an Anchorite, had contact with others. One of her only windows looked out to the chapel where she could see the other worshippers and see what God looked like lived out in the world. My belief is intrinsic to my identity, it defines the way I live each day, but I have learnt so much about God through witnessing the way people at church and at my university's Christian Union live their lives. I always professed that God is love but I did not truly understand what that meant until I was invited back for

lunch after that first service or until I was invited for coffee later in the week or until I received a text from someone I had met with an encouraging verse which equipped me to face the agonising homesickness I was feeling. One of the most important aspects of belonging to Christian groups for me has been the opportunity to wrestle with what I have learnt as part of my theology degree within the safe environs of other educated Christians. Left alone with conflicting statements about the Bible or the reality of a triune God, my mind would have been in turmoil and prayer would have felt insufficient to my impatient and troubled heart. Therefore, belonging to a group of Christians studying theology means I can air my worries in a loving setting where I will not be ridiculed for not being academic enough or rebuked for daring to challenge God. It also opens up so many different world views about God and that is one of the most enriching experiences a believer can be fortunate to receive. This does not necessarily mean that I have to hold the same views of God and other areas of Christianity as my other Christian friends, but it does mean that we feel secure in our churches, our student groups, our Christian Union to air our different views, confident that we do so in mutual love and respect. Like it says in Hebrews 10:25 'let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching'. In belonging, whole new areas of faith are opened up, some incredibly challenging, but all very rewarding.

Whilst church and Christian Union has stretched my faith and offered me a pseudo-identity within university, it has offered me something far more valuable: a family. Family has always been a tainted word for me; it used to hold only painful meanings before I repressed them and it then came to have an empty meaning. But through belonging to a church which practically lives the gospel every day, God has convicted me of his relational pattern for life and the importance of being part of a family. Joyously, I belong to an enormous family – a family in Christ. Believing has brought me freedom from my past; belonging has provided me with a future full of deep and meaningful friendships. Furthermore, for the first time in my life I am accountable to people who love me so much that I can turn to them at any moment for help. As part of a family, each person discovers how they relate to one another in the family. Currently as a fresher, I am the baby of the family, but as I mature into the realms of second year, (and even more terrifyingly, third year), I shall progress within my relationships with my church family, hopefully offering big sisterly love and advice to next year's freshers. The greatest thing about truly belonging is you do not have to do anything to show that you belong. I flaunt the fact that I belong to the Choral Society by flouncing about campus in a branded hoodie, proclaiming to all and sundry that I belong. But my flatmates and course mates know I belong to a church because I cannot walk anywhere without running into someone from my family in Christ or because my phone is constantly ringing with texts of

encouragement or because I invite them along to events and they are astounded that so many people come to talk to them. Most of all, they know I belong because they see my faith in action. It is easy to silence belief in God – it is far harder to silence a life lived in God. Not belonging to a church would not make me any less a child of God, but it is far easier to understand what that means in the context of a church family.

Ultimately, belief is more important than belonging but, in reality, the two cannot be separated; rather, belonging flows from belief. To belong to a church, or if you are of another faith to belong to another religious group, is to live your life in such a way that you can experience the reality of what it is you profess to believe in. I believe in a God who is love and I can see this in the actions of my church and my Christian Union, and I hope my non-Christian friends can see it in the way I live my own life. For the Christian, belonging to a church does not provide them with their identity. Instead, their identity is in God and it is in his family where they belong. The name given to that family is, in most cases, church. That first Sunday in freshers' week, I was a believer, but I did not belong anywhere. But because of the practical workings of the faith of other people in God, I found belonging in a family where I not only met people who loved God, but I met again God who loves so much that he inspires those who love him to look out for the least, the last and the lost, and to bring them into his family – the best place to ever belong.