

Loser-Sensitive Church

I want to live in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts. Sure, the place is probably stiff with Yankees and you can't spell the state's name, but they're into books.

Seriously into books.

A recent five-month biblio-binge, called "BookMarks: A Celebration of the Art of the Book," included twenty author readings in a single week—all in what the New York Times calls "arguably the most author-saturated, book-cherishing, literature-celebrating place in the nation." Bookstores abound and residents claim that this valley boasts a writer under every rock. Such a place may, in fact, be exactly where we belong, but my point is that I'd love to live ensconced amongst my fellow bibliophiles.

Now consider a very different kind of community, one based not on affinity but on addiction.

Delray Beach is a beachhead of sobriety Florida's east coast. The town bristles with halfway houses. Various twelve-step meetings draw upwards of five thousand members per week. They have a recovery motorcycle gang and coffee houses complete with therapy groups. Local businesses offer the low-wage jobs that a recovering addict can handle. Snobs and slobs share similar stories of stealing from friends and bunking down amongst cockroaches in ghetto shooting-galleries.

Drunks and junkies come to Delray Beach to get sober, and they stay in order to keep sober. Many sojourners take up permanent residence because they realize they need the support of their fellow strugglers in order to remain clean.

These two communities remind me of two ways of doing church. The first I call Affinity Church. I go to Affinity Church because I find the kind of people I like and the kind of activities I enjoy. The second I call Recovery Church. I go there because I recognize my need to live a new way and my inability to do that alone.

I choose Affinity Church because I like it and can always leave if my tastes change. I flee to Recovery Church because I need it and discover that it changes me.

I may have little in common with other members of Recovery Church, but our surface differences shrivel before the core commonality of our past enslavement to sin and our daily need to experience Christ. I like or dislike. I need and am needed. These spiritual benchmarks distinguish two kinds of church.

In the day of the niche-marketed boutique church, when seeker-hypersensitivity multiplies micro-congregations, it might be an act of sanity – not to mention good theology – if someone pointed out that Christian community exists not to cater, but to transform. If we dared speak aloud of people's need, we might resist the pressure to pander to their whims. If we told one another that we are sinners, we might quit acting like customers.

Hello, my name is Doug, and I'm a sinner.
Doug