

Goldilocks's Guide to Church Hunting

by Dean Anderson

Once upon a time, Goldilocks went to college at Fairytale University in the Big Woods. Up until this time, Goldilocks had always gone to her parents' church, the Grimm Brothers' Church of the Safe and Cozy, but now she had to look for a church of her own. The first church she visited was too big. There were not only a lot of people there, but there were also bears. You can guess how she felt about bears. No one said "hello" to her except a big, bad wolf that she ignored.

The second church she went to was too small. She arrived a few minutes late, and everyone stared at her. Then, because she was the only visitor, Pastor Rumpelstiltskin asked Goldilocks to stand up while everyone in the congregation tried to guess her name.

The third church was too cold. The Ice Queen shook her hand at the door, and Goldilocks spent the entire service trying to thaw out. The last church was too warm. On her first visit the Pied Piper asked her to join the choir, and a woman asked her to lunch at her Gingerbread House.

Goldilocks couldn't find a church that was just right, so she gave up.

Back to Real Life

OK, you know this example is just a fairytale. But the problem is real for girls who have to look for their own church for the first time. Remember, God wants you to be with other believers. Hebrews 10:25 says, "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."

Many people have the fairy tale dream of finding a church that's "just right." But that's not always possible. People aren't perfect, so no church is perfect. Someone once said, "If you find a perfect church, don't go — you'll probably spoil it."

So how do you find the church God wants you to be in? Start with prayer. Ask God to direct your steps to the church He has in mind for you. Ask others to pray with you, too.

Next, ask people you trust for advice on churches. If you're moving to a new area, ask your pastor or youth pastor if they know of any good churches in the area you're moving to. If you're going to a school with on-campus ministries such as Campus Crusade, InterVarsity or Navigators, ask leaders and members of the groups for advice on churches in the area.

If you don't have a talking mirror to consult, you'll need to look at a phone book and/or the Internet. Visit sites such as www.netministries.org or www.churchangel.com to

locate churches, then call in advance to learn more info about the church and to check on service times.

It's also important to make a list of the things you want in the church you'll attend. Here are some elements to consider.

People

Goldilocks wanted a church that had neither too many nor too few people. There are advantages and disadvantages to churches of different sizes.

A large church is more likely to offer a greater variety of programs and groups with people your age. But initially it may be difficult to avoid being lost in the crowd.

A small church may give you an opportunity to become involved more quickly. In a small church you may be able to get to know people of different ages. It can provide a good opportunity to learn from the wisdom of older people and to enjoy families with children. But, you may feel awkward because everyone already knows everyone else.

As you hunt, you'll find churches with a couple dozen members, some with thousands of members and many churches of sizes in between. God uses all churches, but you need to find the one where He wants you to be.

The people who attend a church will be a key component in your choice. You might select a church because you have friends who attend it. You may also end up in a place where you have to make friends. Would Snow White have dreamed she would get along so well with seven small men?

Music

You may remember the battle between Jack and the giant over the golden harp. That fight was nothing compared to the way Christians have fought over music.

In Psalm 150, God calls His people to worship with music, yet what God made to be good often becomes a source of division. Some people claim the only true way to worship is with the grand old hymns of the faith, and other people argue that only praise songs express worship from the heart.

Different music styles are similar to different languages. Some people decide to become multilingual with more than one worship language. Others want to stick with the language they know.

Decide how important the aspect of music and worship style is to you. Is one style your top priority? Or are you willing to adjust to another form of worship? Someone I know who loves music attended a church that included only one hymn sung after the sermon.

Even though he would have enjoyed more music in the service, this guy stayed at the church because there were other things about it that he valued.

Service

When you're church shopping, don't just consider how a congregation can minister to you; also think about how you can minister in the church. Are there opportunities for you to serve? Is there a youth group you can work with? A ministry to the poor? You may decide it's more important for you to find a church where you can be useful than to find a church that's useful to you. You never know how much you might enjoy bringing baskets of goodies through the woods to the elderly.

Teaching

This is a biggie. What does the church you're visiting teach about the reliability of the Bible? About salvation? About Jesus? These are important questions that'll help you learn if the church is a solid choice.

If the church is part of a denomination, some of your questions about theology (religious beliefs) will be answered easily. You may already know the specifics of denominations such as Baptist, Presbyterian, Nazarene, Methodist and Lutheran.

Most churches also have a statement of faith to read. If one isn't available at an information booth or church office, ask a church leader for a copy. If the church doesn't have a printed statement of beliefs, you'll need to set up an appointment with a church leader to ask the questions yourself.

You may want to consider questions like, "Is there a way for a person to be saved outside of believing in Jesus as his or her personal Savior and Lord?" and "Is the Bible true in all that it teaches?"

There are other issues to ask about too: teachings regarding the Holy Spirit, baptism, roles of women in the church and the second coming of Christ. Think about which issues are important to you, and ask about them.

It's also important to see if the preaching turns you into Sleeping Beauty and to watch out for growing noses. In other words, is the teaching interesting and true?

It's not always fun to look for a new church (although it very well might be), but it's certainly important. God will be faithful to lead you to a place where He can work in your life and use you to encourage others.