
What Do Bars and Churches Have in Common?

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

What do bars and churches have in common? Well, these days, I group them together whenever anyone asks me when the Cathedral might enjoy intimate and up-close and in-person worship services again.

When can we safely resume praying together? My answer has become: "Whenever it is safe for people to resume congregating in bars, it will also be safe for people to congregate in churches!" Of course, if it is up to me, I reverse the order of precedence: "When it is safe for people to resume congregating in churches, it will also be safe for people to congregate in bars!"

Yes, the outward experience and appearance are the same. When people gather in bars, we are there for the time of extended community, for relaxation and for excitement, for community and for close conversation. I have enjoyed many an hour in bars myself! And, of course, there are plenty of people who gather in bars who do not drink alcohol. In a similar way, when people gather in churches, we also gather for extended communion, for peace and inspiration, and for close conversation with God and with each other.

I guess some people have met God in a bar. I guess some people have met God in church, too! We certainly meet lots of our fellow pilgrims in those places. Bars and churches can both be places where we are open to meeting new people, and where we sustain our relationships with familiar friends. Being close together in bars and churches often means we are sharing things together. We are sharing breath and food and drink together! Often those things we share are the deep nourishments of life: support from our friends, support from our God, love, and community.

But, with that closeness, bars and churches are also where we have shared things that are dangerous, things like viruses (and sometimes things like untrue rumors! They are dangerous!). For all of us, it has been especially devastating that churches may be among the last places that fully re-open safely, though I suppose that sports events, music concerts, and other large gathering venues will also be among the last to resume full and open operations.

In the Bible, the people of God were not afraid to be found gathering in such bars and churches. You might remember that several biblical heroes found their spouses at springs, at watering holes! We might consider that those wells were similar to our present-day bars. People gathered there for social community, and they often met a special person there! Isaac and Jacob both found their wives, Rebecca and Rachel, at the local watering hole. One of the most important conversations of Jesus' ministry occurred at a well, at Jacob's well, where Jesus engaged the Samaritan woman.

We need those occasions and places of social community. God works through our patient and complicated relationships with other people. Of course, I claim that churches are always places where that relationship and community happen. I also admit that bars and watering holes are also suitable occasions for holy relationships to occur. But, in the long run, churches and places where congregations of faith gather – those are the places that will strengthen both body and soul. Faith is strengthened and edified by congregating! By congregations!

So, I long for the time, the healthy time, when we all can return to places where we share breath and bread, drink and food, together. At the Cathedral, we can not return until we know that our public health is a bit safer and well. We will watch and listen to the news and medical reports. When it is safe to resume gatherings in bars and watering holes, it will also be safe to resume our beautiful hours of community and communion in

church!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Sam Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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