
The Friendly Church Behind Taco Bell

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The church I grew up in was nothing like the Cathedral of St. Philip, at least not at first glance. Nobody went there because the building was beautiful—it wasn't, unless you happened to love mid-century modern. The artwork above the altar did not portray scenes from the Bible; rather, it looked like someone had dropped a handful of sharpened pencils on the floor, then preserved the moment in stained glass. There were majestic long leaf pines on the lawn outside, and late on a winter's afternoon, the sight of the sun on them could take your breath away. In 2013, however, a devastating tornado felled those pines, reducing half the church to rubble. The congregation rebuilt, but it took several years of worshipping in the cinder block parish hall and selling plates of barbecue on Saturdays to get there.

Not many members of my childhood church were prominent or well connected. It was a small congregation and tended to draw those who did not fit in elsewhere—people like biologists from the local university who had been told by other Christians they weren't welcome so long as they embraced the theory of evolution. Or the young widow and her children who visited the church food pantry for powdered milk and cereal one day and were surprised when they were invited to stay for worship.

It's amazing they found their way in the first place. Plenty did not know our church existed, or, if they did, they couldn't remember its name. Tucked between a service road and the fast food restaurants of the town's main drag, it didn't call much attention to itself. Our pastor once shared how, as he was trying to tell someone about us, the person with whom he was talking suddenly exclaimed, "Oh, now I know—that's the friendly church behind Taco Bell!"

What makes for a good church, a healthy, vital church, one that attracts people to it? Those who study congregations, their growth and their decline, might answer this question by naming some obvious assets: a desirable location, well-tended buildings that can accommodate a wide range of activities, interesting programming for all ages, uplifting worship services, an engaging and committed staff, maybe even delectable treats served at coffee hour!

We here at the Cathedral are blessed with all of these and more. The beauty of our building and grounds never ceases to inspire. Our vibrant farmers market attracts patrons from across the city each Saturday for fresh produce, good coffee, and lively conversation. Our children's ministries are both faithful and fun. Our top notch music program fills the nave and makes our hearts soar with its ethereal sounds. These are just a few of the things that draw people to the Cathedral, this is what brings many through our doors. But what makes people stay? What makes you stay? Maybe it's one of the things I've just mentioned. Maybe it's not. Maybe, as it turns out, it's something less "marketable" but no less meaningful.

An usher patiently helping an elderly man with a walker get safely to his pew, week after week after week. An email from someone you barely know telling you she has been praying for you in the wake of your sister's death. An offer from a member of your Bible study to care for your pets while you recover from surgery. An older, well liked kid coming and sitting next to your awkward tween because she knows it's her first time at EYC. Worshippers of different generations, backgrounds, and ethnicities passing a fussy baby around during the sermon, rocking and cooing and bouncing as if they're all related, because, in a way, of course, they are.

Some might call this friendliness, others, faithfulness, still others, hospitality. Whatever it is, The Friendly

Church Behind Taco Bell had it in spades, and the Cathedral of St. Philip has it, too—which is an awfully fine thing in this complicated, conflicted, and ever changing world. Storms arise, both real and metaphorical; sometimes they topple things over. Traditions evolve and expand, making room for something new. Myriad transitions occur in the life of a parish. Down the street, a Taco Bell gets replaced by a Chipotle. As for love and the People of God, though? They endure.

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