

A BOOK REPORT
“A PLACE TO BELONG (LEARNING TO LOVE THE LOCAL CHURCH)”

Title of Book: “A Place to Belong (Learning to Love the Local Church)”

Author: Megan Hill, BA, Grove City College and the author of “*Praying Together: The Priority and Privilege of Prayer in Our Homes, Communities and Churches*”, and of “*Contentment, Serving God’s Goodness*”, who is a Pastor’s wife, and who has served as an editor for the Gospel Coalition.

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First Impressions: As one who, probably arrogantly, fancies himself as being quite the lay person “good” student of theology and particularly of the field of Biblical Hermeneutics, and as one who has been asked to review (and report upon) a substantial number of weighty, academic books on these subjects, all written by eminent scholars and theologians, I picked up and read this book with a preconceived bias, thinking that I would be reading a book of the type of what I might, uncharitably, refer to as being a “good, good feeling ‘Christianity Light’ book”, or what is sometimes very unfairly and disparagingly referred to as “Christian Fluff”, or “Country Club Christianity”. At the outset let me say that I resent these stated terms of “Christianity Light”, etc. Good, very readable and understandable Christian books and devotionals are of great help to all of us, particularly to those who might be new to, or to be struggling with their Christian faith, or who are seeking to advance in or mature in that faith. Not all of us can arrogantly refer to ourselves as “Biblical Scholars”, and in fact many of us have no desire to be such, and most of us who might do so would be engaging in total self delusion. There are many of us who (and most of us should) want just want some good, common sense help with our faith journey. So we need books that many arrogantly refer to by the disparaging remarks set forth above. All of this said, what did I find in this book of Megan Hill, who does not sport a Masters or Doctoral Degree, or a long list of academic credentials, and who does not claim to her credit a long list of heavy, academic, theological books or papers? In fact, her main stated credential is that she is a “Pastor’s Wife”, and, as such, has had experiences in many Local Churches. I was truly, pleasantly surprised by what I found in this book. I found in it what I believe you will find in it, and that is that it is anything but “Christianity Light” or “Fluff”. While this book is very easy to read and absorb, and is obviously directed to Christians of every stripe, at every level of academic or theological training, and while it can truly serve the purpose of “light Christian reading”, it is also a theologically sound treatise on “the Church”, the “Local Church”, and what each of them is or should be. It is extremely well written, with virtually every declarative sentence therein being supported by specific (sometimes many) citations to Scripture and other literature. A mere glance at the “Notes” which appear at the end of the book will convince you that its author wrote it only after doing a substantial amount of Biblical and Literary research in order to properly form and support her stated conclusions. So this book is not at all what I thought it would be. It is a wonderful, beautiful, well written and Biblically supported, theologically sound exposition on subjects which are both theological and down to earth

practical, and which should be near and dear to every Pastor, Christian Leader, and day to day Christian, including the subjects of: 1) What the Church is, 2) What the Local Church is or should be, 3) How the Local Church Should work, 3) Why it is important, if not in fact Biblically compelled and critical for every Christian to belong to, and to strongly participate in a Local Church and its work, mission and affairs, 4) How the essential characteristics of the Church and of each Local Church are those of "unity and mutual dependence" among the individual members of that Local Church and among all Christian congregations, and 5) Why corporate prayer in Local Churches is absolutely essential to the advancement of the Gospel and to one's individual Christian Maturity and "Holiness" (the author's term), as "Holiness is a community effort".

As perhaps a subset of the subjects which are deeply covered by this book, one can just refer to its title "*A Place to Belong (Learning to Love the Local Church)*". Clearly this title indicates that the book deals with a subject which should be near and dear to every Pastor and Church Elder, who, obviously, wants to attract people to his or her church and the message of the Gospel, and then wants those who are so attracted to become vital, strongly participating church members. Pastors and Church Elders want people in the pews and they want them to be full participants in, and supporters of the mission of their respective congregations. Well, all they have to do is to look to this book, and to get their people to look to this book in order to obtain guidance as to what a Local Church should be, why people should want to belong to it, and what they should be doing once they do so belong. This book also provides sound advice which can be used by the leaders of struggling local communities of faith. What better, more practical guidance can a Pastor or Elder seek? What better reasons can an individual Christian find to participate in a Local Church?

Now I have to make a personal confession in order to avoid being a hypocrite. Your Reviewer is currently in a season of some distress with his local church, which has fallen into distress for a number of reasons. His church attendance has, recently, been anything but exemplary. So this book has afforded to him something like a breath of fresh air and has renewed in him the strong conviction that he must renew his commitment to a Local Church, and must participate in the affairs of that Church and of its members. Now if I can just follow through on that commitment, because, as our author states (and I summarize): "true commitment to a Local Church, a Gathering of God's Beloveds, is a commitment that will subject you to inconvenience, having less free time and less money to spend for yourself." As our author urges, commitment to a Local Church is not a commitment that should be lightly undertaken. It is a commitment which, much like a marital commitment, will bring both joy and heartache, convenience and inconvenience, good times and bad times. I now find myself having to pray for a renewal of such a commitment to a Local Church, because I am persuaded that such a commitment is required of all Christians.

Your Reviewer would also add another personal note. He, like each of you (and probably almost every Christian Pastor and Church leader) has heard people (in fact friends) make statements such as: "I am a Christian, and have accepted Christ as my Savior, but I don't need to go to church or to be in a church." If we read this book, we have to conclude that such a statement is false at worst, and very misleading at best. As our author would urge, being a Christian involves both an individual commitment and faith, and a participation in a Gathering (a

Local Church) with God's other Beloveds (the term used by our author). Advancing in Holiness (i.e. becoming more like Christ, or what is referred to as "sanctification") is, as our author urges, a "community effort". Our author would persuasively argue that Christians mislead themselves, possibly with devastating consequences, if they are of the opinion that they can be followers of Christ, and yet have no regular participation in a Local Church. If a Pastor or Church Leader reads this book and absorbs what it teaches, and then keeps it in his or her personal library for future reference, then he or she will be abundantly equipped to demonstrate just why statements, such as that quoted above, and beliefs that one can be a true Christian without participation in a Local Church are, at best, misleading and at worst dangerously false.

Your Reviewer would also urge that this book can serve as an excellent "help book" or practical "guide book" for Pastors of start up Local Churches or of struggling Local Churches, or of Local Churches which seem to be failing, or of Local Churches which (like many of ours) seem to be afflicted with members who we might refer to as being "disruptive" or as being harmful to church unity. This book is as practical as it is theological.

In summary, your Reviewer's First Impressions as to what he thought that this book would be, just "Christianity Light" (which it can very usefully be) were flat wrong, and he found this book to be a book that can be dramatically helpful to every Christian Pastor and Leader, and, in fact, to every Christian. This book is highly recommended.

To What Audience Is This Book Directed: This book is clearly directed towards every Christian Pastor, Christian Elder and Local Church Leader and Board Member, but it is also directed towards every individual Christian, particularly those who might be struggling with issues such as: 1) Should I belong to Local Church?, 2) Why should I so belong?, 3) If I do so belong, what is my Local Church supposed to be, what is it intended by God to be?, and 3) What is my role, and what are my obligations in seeking to help my Local Church be what it is intended by God to be?

Overview of the Book's Contents/What is the Author Doing with what the Author is Saying/What does the Author Seek to Accomplish With This Book?: Obviously the author wants to encourage all Christians to belong to, and to fully support and to vigorously participate in a Local Church and its mission. These are the author's overriding goals for her book. The book's title clearly so states, as does virtually the entire book. However, the author goes beyond these goals, and in a chapter by chapter approach expounds on subjects which are of critical importance to every Local Church, and their Pastors, Leaders and Members. In these respects, she supports every opinion and conclusion which she states, and every declarative sentence which she writes, with citations (sometime many citations) to Scripture and other literature. So while you can read this book in a rather "non-meditative" (if you will) manner, as it is written for readers of every stripe, you can also read it as a book with a strong theological content. Some of the subjects dealt with by the book's chapters are as follows:

1) What is the Church (Meaning the Church Universal), and What is it Made up of?: The Church is a huge multitude of believers in God and acceptors of the Gifts of Jesus Christ, all of whom, every one of whom is “Beloved by God” and all of whom and each of whom should, therefore, be deeply Loved by each of us. The Church is, therefore, the entire body of God’s Beloveds, all of whom and each of whom is to be Beloved by each of us.

2) Called: Each of us is Called by God, as one of His Beloved, to the Church and to a Local Church, with all of the members or congregants of the Church Universal and of our respective Local Churches sharing “One Testimony”, a “Common Testimony”, as, in Christ there is “but one body and one Spirit, and one faith, one baptism and one Lord, one God and Father of all, who is over all.” Each of us, therefore, shares a common calling and a common testimony, and we are called to love God and each other as God has loved us.

3) The Local Church/What Is It?: Each Local Church is a “Gathering” of God’s Beloved. It is a Gathering to which each of us is “Called” by God. It is a Gathering of people, each of whom, regardless of how ordinary he or she might be, is Beloved by God and is, therefore, to be Beloved by each of us. When we worship in our Local Church we are, in some respects, participating in a place of Heaven, where there is and will at the end of times be a Gathering of God’s Beloved People of every nation, tribe, and language.

4) Flock/Receiving Care From Our Shepherds/Qualifications of Shepherds: In our Local Church we are, in some respects, part of a flock of sheep who require shepherding from our shepherds, the chief of whom is Christ, but who include our Pastors and Leaders. The qualifications for our shepherds are Biblically defined. We are to be guided by our Shepherds who are so qualified and we are to pray for them and seek to support them and encourage them. We are to be taught and guided by them.

5) One Unified Body with No Unimportant Parts: Every one of the Beloved who Gathers with others of the Beloveds in a Local Church, from those we might think of as being the “most all together, gifted, successful” individuals to those we might think of as being the most lowly of persons, is a unique individual, who is valued by God and is a Beloved of God and is endowed by God with certain gifts, strengths and abilities, even if it is an ability to simply clean the church facilities. Each of them has a unique ability to serve God and the needs of his or her Local Church. Together they form a unified body, comparable to the human, biological body, each of the parts of which is essential to the health of the whole body. All of them are expected by God to use their individual abilities and resources, whatever they might be, for the common good of the Local Church and of each and all of its members, and for helping it to advance the message of the Gospel for the good of the community. Together with other members of their Local Church, and with all of the Beloveds of the Church Universal they establish the fullness of Christ. A Local Church is made up of people who are both “unified and mutually dependent upon each other”. It is our role, as a member of a Gathering of God’s Beloveds to mutually encourage, pray for and help each other, and, if required, to admonish each other and accept admonishment from our fellow Beloveds.

6) Holiness is a Community Project: True, when one accepts Christ he or she is automatically accepted and adopted by God. While acceptance of Christ as one’s redeemer and Lord makes one “Holy”, we are called upon by God to advance in “Holiness”. We are to seek to

become more and more Holy, as we are called upon by God to “be Holy as God is completely Holy.” We advance in Holiness as we progress in our walk with Christ, meaning that we become more and more like Christ. However, advancement in Holiness is both an individual and a community project. It requires participation in our Gatherings of Beloved Christians in our Local Church. It requires community prayer, mutual caring for each other, and shared sacrifice of treasure, time and our personal convenience. Advancement in Holiness requires participation in the Family of God and God’s Beloved.

7) Gospel Partners/All Local Congregations Are Partners With Each Other In A Shared Mission For The Advancement Of The Gospel And For Mutual Assistance Of Each Other: Each Local Congregation is a member of the Church Universal. It is a partnership with other Local Congregations. Local Congregations should act with each other as “partners”. They, or at least their Pastors and Leaders (but strongly preferably their members) should meet together, regularly, to share stories of successes, failures, current challenges and needs. They should work with, and help each other. If a Local Church needs helpers, then the members of other Local Churches should provide those. If a Local Church is going through financial stress, then other Local Churches should provide help. No Local Church “is in this alone.”

8) Multitude/We Are All Part Of Something Bigger, But Something Made Most Manifest In Our Local Church: As stated in Revelation 7:9, in the end a great multitude of every nation, tribe, peoples and languages will gather together before the Lamb, and to the extent that our Local Church can work to bring about, today, currently, this beautiful end, however incompletely in this broken world, it must do so. It is charged by God to do so.

In summary, this book of Megan Hill is one of both immense practical application for Church Pastors, Leaders and Christians of every stripe, and yet it is one of substantial theological value, which can be used in dealing with theological issues about the nature of the Church Universal and of each individual Local Church. It can be used, both for practical, day to day guidance and instruction, and for theological discussions about the Church and the Local Church.

How Should This Book Be Read? The answer to this question requires an answer to another question which is: “Why Do You Want To Read This Book?” If you want to read it, simply to get some practical advice on a given topic confronting your local community of faith, then look at the “Contents” and find the chapter which seems to most appropriately address that topic and then read that chapter. If you want to just get an overview of the book’s contents, then read the Introduction, and look at the “Contents.” If you are a Pastor and just want to find some topic for a Sabbath message, with some appropriate quotations and Scriptural Support for same, then you can look to a Chapter which seems to address your specific need for your message. I think that a Pastor can find many topics for his or her Sabbath messages in this book, and that he or she can also find both “quotable passages” and Scriptural support for his or her messages in this book. However, if you want to really read this book, really be benefitted by it and instructed by it, then you need to read it in its entirety. Such a reading should not impose a burden. This book is an

easy read. The author's writing is clear, and is easily read by Christians at any level of theological training, and by those with no such training. If I were a Pastor or Church Leader, I would want to read the entire book, and make some notes about its contents for future reference, and then put it on my shelf for future use. I assure you that unless you have a highly unusual, perfect in every way Local Church or Community of Faith you will need to refer to this book throughout your journey as a Pastor or Leader.

How Can This Book Be Used In Classes Such As Those Offered by ECLI/TEI?: Frankly, I am not sure that it can be so used in most of our classes as we do not have class which concentrates on the Church and the Local Church, which might be an unfortunate failing on our part. If we had a class or course which had a substantial focus on what a Local Church is and what it should be, and how we might go about trying to bring about a good, healthy Local Community of Faith, then this book would provide an excellent text for such a class or course. It has, at the end, substantial Study Questions which are of great value. All of this said, we recently had a class discussion in one of our classes about the Church Universal and the individual Local Church. Had I read this book in advance of that class I would have been much better equipped to address the topics of the class. The essence of this book can really be summarized fairly easily, and such a summary would have greatly facilitated our class discussion in which I was a very poor participant.