

Guest editorial: Why I love the church

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My mother-in-law died 25 years ago. One of my wife's brothers, also a pastor, preached the eulogy. His title for his message was "How the Church Saved My Family."



Joel SniderHe described his mother's home life as a child. He held nothing back as he explained his grandfather was an alcoholic who abused his wife and two daughters, one of whom was his mother. It was a bleak description.

But he also told of a small neighborhood church that loved his mother and nurtured her through her teenage years. Did they know what went on in that house? No one knows. But they did love her and provided a sense of family and normalcy she didn't find in her own home.

When she married my father-in-law, it was after morning worship. Following the benediction, everyone sat down, the pianist played the bridal march, and my mother-in-law walked down the aisle, dressed in white. All the members of the church family were the guests.

God's love lived out

My brother-in-law explained how that little church saved his mother by their love. They didn't simply talk about God's love; they lived it. And because my mother-in-law experienced true love, she was able to provide a stable family life for my wife and her two brothers.

I still think it was the most profound funeral message I've ever heard. I've thought about it many times and reflected on how it applied it to my life. My mother died when I was 6. We lived a couple hundred miles from family, and my father could not raise my sister and me by himself. The family solution was for us go live with grandparents.

Once we had moved, our grandparents began taking us to church, where there was a network of people who looked after us, asked us to do simple jobs and made us feel loved. That church stepped into a void at an impressionable moment. Instead of feeling orphaned, I felt like I was home. Despite losing my mother, I never doubted God's love.

Me, too

I guess the church saved me, too.

It is often fashionable to be cynical about the church—to point out its failures and shortcomings. Even at a faith-based conference, you usually can get a good laugh by telling a joke about how the church disappoints in its effort to be a “royal priesthood” or how disqualified many church members are to be called “saints.”

We've had our failures, to be sure. Too often, our theology puts limits on our love for those different from ourselves, and our zeal for God makes us less forgiving instead of more so. We can be quite unpleasant in our disagreements.

Pause and remember

When we are tempted to think about when the church has been its worst, we need to pause for a moment and remember when it was its best. We need to remember when faithful church people took in the stranger, held the hand of the grieving, bound up the bruises of the injured, gave hope to the despairing, loved those who thought they were unlovable and found those who were lost.

We need to recall when members of the church family didn't simply talk about God's love; they lived it. Those moments are often hidden from our sight and—even more often—forgotten. But if we will take a moment to reflect, many of us will realize we have been the beneficiaries of them.

Maybe we will even realize there was a time when God used the church to save us.

Joel Snider, former longtime pastor of First Baptist Church in Rome, Ga., is a coach and consultant with the [Center for Healthy Churches](#).