

Has our nation developed a case of Church Allergy?

For the summer magazines.

Dear Friends,

For many, this time of year is a real delight; the days are longer and the sun is warmer, the skies display more blue than grey, and flowers adorn the gardens like explosions of colour upon a beautiful backdrop of varied greens. Others of us get hay-fever. I'd love to be able to say that I unconditionally love this time of year, but actually, my experience of itchy eyes, runny nose and sneezing does rather take the edge off my enjoyment! Fellow sufferers will understand and sympathise. Readers who are hay-fever free just won't.

It's the same, I guess, with those who suffer from other allergies. I've heard people begin to wheeze when they've spent any time at my house because of our collection of furry creatures, and I know others experience severe itching if they come into direct contact with certain animals. I have seen their distress and know they're not making it up, but I genuinely can't imagine what it must be like.

Then there are food allergies. (I am reminded of the film "Hitch.") Some food allergies can be really quite serious. In one of the schools our girls attended, there was a ban on any child bringing peanut butter sandwiches for lunch because one pupil suffered such a terrible reaction to peanuts that he could not be in the same room as a peanut without requiring hospitalization (even a room the size of a school hall). It must be awful to live with this.

I suspect there is a condition best described as church-allergy. A widespread attitude in our society is well articulated by something that Mick Jagger apparently once said; "Jesus, yes. Church, no." A lot of people profess to be Christian, or at least to believe in God, but are reluctant to get involved with the Church. As one who doesn't suffer from church-allergy, I confess I find it difficult to understand the reactions of those who are afflicted with this sad ailment. But I'm keen to learn and to help people overcome it because I believe the blessings of church involvement seriously outweigh any minor personal inconvenience.

Just like we see with other allergies, I am sure people react differently to church-allergy, and there are different strains of it. Consider these two examples for a start:

- people who would genuinely like to be involved with the church but experience some significant irritants (e.g. the music, the language or the time of services), or
- people who have had a negative exposure to the church in the past (e.g. being forced to attend Sunday School) which has made them react by avoiding church (even though now it may actually be nothing like their past experience).

I suspect that for many people, their professed allergy to church is not actually an allergy to what the Bible means by church at all, but a reaction to something quite different. Therefore, if some aspects of our churches' ministries are causing any form of irritation, maybe it's because we're not being quite authentic – the thought occurs to me that perhaps church-allergy sufferers could help us get it right by talking about their experience...

Will you help me research this condition and therefore help me serve you more effectively? Please call me or see our website for details. Thank you very much!

Mark Dunstan