



Join the Club

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Our trek held great promise. The report was in. The location was named, and we knew the way. With great anticipation, we drove to Grafton and the Lion's Den trail to search for what others had already found: a Scissor-Tailed Flycatcher. This wayward bird, normally found only in the South-Central US, would soon be ours to claim on our life lists.

We traipsed around the park where people were hiking, running, and walking dogs. We saw people admiring fish in the lake and families enjoying an outing. My husband and I, however, were the only people with binoculars. Though we spotted a good variety of other birds (merlin, indigo bunting, Eastern towhee), the Scissor-Tailed Flycatcher was nowhere to be found. Darn thing was probably looking down and mocking us.



Slightly disappointed, we headed back to the parking lot and our car. A young woman waiting nearby saw us approach with binoculars around our necks and asked whether we'd been birdwatching. She posed her question like an outsider – someone who didn't birdwatch, but who was curious about people who did. We gave a simplified, brief report, and she gave an amused nod and smile. She was perfectly polite, but I did feel like an oddity, as if I belonged to an esoteric club that held relevance only to its members.

Enter the church. According to a recent [Gallup poll](#), "Americans' membership in houses of worship continued to decline last year, dropping below 50% for the first time in Gallup's eight-decade trend. In 2020, 47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999." A [Lifeway Research survey](#) this month also offers a disturbing prediction: among Protestant pastors, 78% believe that having a denominational connection is vital to them and to their congregations, but 63% of pastors believe that importance will diminish over the next 10 years.

Being the church is once again counter-cultural, and that, in itself, is not a bad thing. When our biblical beliefs and values clash with the worst of society, we want to be on the outside, proclaiming a different message. The risk is what will happen to the church if it is no longer relevant because we've just become an esoteric club with importance only to its members. When that happens, people will find us quaint, giving us an amused nod before they move on. If we lose our ability to share the good news and why being a Christian matters to us, then we can't expect the church to grow, and the downward trends will continue.

This weekend, I could have shared with the young woman a picture of the elusive flycatcher and how rare it is to find one in Wisconsin. I could have shown my delight in the deep blue, orange, red, and yellow of the birds we'd seen, or the annoyance of the small birds who chased away the merlin. I could have tried to capture the towhee's song and the vibration in its throat when I saw it up close through my binoculars. I could have given her a taste of why we birdwatch. I didn't try; it didn't seem that important.

We don't have that luxury with the gospel. It was entrusted to the church that we might proclaim it -- not because God needs us, but because we need God.