2933 12.98
ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008
Noncommercial reproduction permitted

IS **WEEKLY CHURCH-GOING** (CORPORATE WORSHIP) OPTIONAL?

This letter is both personal (ie, to an actual individual) & open (expressing [1] my personal chagrin & confession of failure & [2] concern for the widening gap between private "spirituality" & the social practice of "religion"). To keep the letter closed (so the addressee will not be recognized by any of my readers) I have not included a particular day in the date.

Dear _____,

I just heard you are going in for surgery today & am praying that all will be well with you. To make it easier for us both--in case you may want to talk with me about this letter sometime, I've numbered the sections.

1 First off, I've a confession to make. Though we are fellow-members of South Church, I haven't thought of you for many months! I haven't seen you for many months. As the old saw has it, "Out of sight, out of mind."

2 Since Sunday public worship is a mark & duty of the Christian, each Sunday (or, as it is in some churches now, Saturday evening) every worshiper should be aware both of those present (who, ideally, all get greeted by everybody) & those absent (whom one should be concerned about, as to why they are not today fulfilling what some churches call "the Sunday obligation"). Christians, in relation to that second class, the absentees, should reverse the old saw. We should be sensitive to (as it were, present to) absence: "Out of sight, *into* mind."

3 The positive reason for this special awareness is that we are the Body of Christ, & it should pain us when we have parts missing: with parts missing, the Body is crippled. (NOTE on "the Body of Christ": [1] The Big Body, the *ecclesia*, is made up of all Christians ever anywhere & on both sides of death; [2] The Little Body, the *ecclesiola*, is South Church, any particular congregation anytime anywhere.)

4 Extensive research & testing, such as by L.E.A.D. Consultants, indicates that it takes only three successive Sundays to become a dropout from the Little Body if the Body (in the person[s] of pastor or parishioner) gives the endangered member no attention to discover why the non-attendance. Did South Church thus fail you & your family? I know only that I failed you: I've not talked with any of the others. I confess before God & apologize to you & yours.

5 No excuse for any congregation to fail to attend the absentees. When churches had designated pews, pillars (those so faithful they hold the church up, as its pillars its roof) could stand at the rear & jot down the absentees. In these days of promiscuous seating (if that's a good word for freedom to sit anywhere), taking attendance by pew-sheet (one sheet per pew) is doubly useful: (1) the church office Monday can tell who wasn't there; & (2) the person sitting where the sheet returns to after the signing can check for the names of any fellow-sitters he/she does not know or has forgotten. Again, some pastors are so perceptive & retentive that they know, & can recall after the worship, who wasn't there--but that's a rare bird; & anyway, the whole burden of noticing & recalling should not be on the pastor.

6 Some excuse for us octogenarians! Our memories & energies are declining. I don't feel very guilty about not having noticed your absence, but enough to be writing this letter (primarily) to you. Some excuse for males, too: we (most of us) are just not as conscious about human relationships, presences & absences, as (most) females. To fight off my personal deficiences (age & sex), I'm usually about the last one to leave Fellowship Time after worship. (Fellowship Time is, in the week, the only regular time for the members of the Little Body to care for one another all together, to pastor one another & to greet strangers in our midst.)

7 We call "new-comers" those strangers in our midst, & we try to see to it that many of us greet them: let no one ever fairly say of our church, "I went to worship there, & nobody greeted me." Maybe we should call people like you, the recent dropouts, "new-*goers*." Remember the classic film "The Treasure of Sierra Madre"? The miners kept putting gold-dust into their leather sacks; but by the time they reached their destination, all the gold had leaked out.

+

8 I don't know, don't need to know, all the reasons all your family are dropouts (defined above as those missing worship three Sundays in succession). You have no obligation to me to argue for the reasons you've been thus absent, though I'd be eager for a conversation with you on this. L.E.A.D. Consultants says that when confronted, dropouts usually say "We just got interested in other things." (It takes only three Sundays away, says L.E.A.D., for dropouts to [1] have acquired other habits & [2] have rationalized, to the satisfaction of their egos, their changed behavior.) I do know, from personal experience, that most dropouts I as pastor & then as parishioner have confronted are embarrassed by excuses they, in the conversation, confess as thin, even shabby. Are your reasons/excuses thick & well-dressed? (That's none of my business unless you choose to make it so.)

9 Please do not read this letter as only accusative. It is also a cry for help, a plea that you enlighten your Little Body. As long as you have not discontinued your membership, you are obligated to be the best news for South Church that you can be. And as a dropout, you can see things we faithful can't. For example, should South Church add Saturday-evening worship? (Some dropouts would lose their jobs if they refused to work Sunday mornings.)

10 The Little Body, the congregation, the local church exists by Sunday worship as a fire exists by burning: to skip church needlessly is to vote for its demise. Accordingly, to ask how important is Sunday worship is to ask how important is South Church (& its properties): the 1st dies, the 2nd dies. To put it positively, every time you come to worship you are voting for our church (& its ministries local & larger, at home & abroad) to continue....Think of the question *historically*: (1) Centerville couldn't be a legal settlement till it got a settled pastor; (2) Centerville residents couldn't vote in church or town hall (which, in most early N.England towns, met in the same room), & couldn't vote in town if disbarred from church (as a man was in 1816 [as I read in our church records]: suspecting him of adultery, the church put a tail on him & caught him: in the house under surveillance, the lamp went upstairs--& the culprit didn't come out! Called before South Church court, he repented, was declared restored to good standing, & could again vote in church & town. Two years later, Congregationalism ceased being Mass.' established religion.)....And think of the question *existentially* (in your own personal existence): Christianity is something you **do** & is only derivativately from that something you **are**: stop doing Christianity & you stop being a Christian. If you say that you can do Christianity without doing "church" (regular Sunday worship), I must reply that doing church is the only distinctive mark of the Christian (the only thing Christians do that others do not, though of course there are additional nonoptionals to being a Christian, additional ways to obey the Lord Jesus' double commandment that we love God & our "neighbor"--including our enemies!). Some people "get it" only if it's put sharply: You're not a Christian during a week that began with your not going to church, & you may become a Christian again the following Sunday (only if, of course, you go to church).... And consider your influence....

11 Notice here the separation between being good & being a Christian. Being a Christian is (1) knowing that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," (2) repenting of one's sin, (3) believing that through God's own self-sacrificial love can one be "justified by faith apart from works [ie. one's own goodness]"--phrases from Romans 3.21-28. No "good" people in church: only "bad" people, sinners grateful to God for forgiveness & new life in Christ, "get it."

12 We all live in imperfect bio-bodies, & every Little Body (congregation) is imperfect, as then is every public worship. Church-goers have a choice: (1) Concentrate on what you're there for, to worship God; or (2) Be picky, letting the things you don't like distract your attention from what it's all about. Want to be miserable? Perfectionism will get you there anytime anyplace. But it's stupid, & sinful.

13 If you've thought you could be a Christian without church-going, you were wrong (along with millions of other Americans!). Here are a few scriptures to think & pray about: Hebrews 10.25 CEV: "Some people have gotten out of the habit of meeting for worship, but we must not do that"; Mark 16.2; Acts 20.7; 1 Corinthians 16.2; Revelation 1.10. Sunday, Jesus rose. Every Sunday is for resurrection joy!