

Swimming Beyond the Flags

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Imagine going to a beach for the first time and observing people swimming and playing in the water. They seem to be enjoying themselves enormously and are obviously proficient at swimming. After a while you get to know some of the swimmers and they offer to teach you to swim so you too can enjoy the water. Seeing what they have encourages you to join them. Swimming turns out to be a great success and for the next few years you enjoy swimming at the beach as part of the club. Eventually you become a swimming instructor yourself. You are challenged by the opportunity to help others learn to swim between the flags and enjoy the sea as you have learnt to do.

One day standing on the beach you wonder what it would be like to swim further, to go exploring the rock edges, or maybe to dive to the depths of the bay out beyond the flags. The yearning to stretch out beyond the beach doesn't simply go away but appears to get stronger and builds within you. Around the same time you notice that you are becoming increasingly self-conscious about going swimming. It doesn't seem as important, or as much of a challenge as it used to.

Thinking about this makes you realise you don't enjoy the swim club like you used to and you're becoming critical of all the swimming and playing near the beach. But then socializing with a group of deep sea fishermen each weekend and hearing their stories of fishing trips adds fuel to your desire to go beyond the flags. As time drifts on, dislike turns to resentment and you tentatively mention to some of the others at the beach your desire to go beyond the flags. The coach gets to hear of your comments and warns you of the dangers of swimming outside the flags. He tells stories of people who went out there and have never come back. Instead he suggests that you go to a swim-meet to rekindle your enthusiasm.

The swim-meet seems to do the trick at least for a while, but then standing on the beach one day the yearnings return, this time even stronger than before. On swim days you find it harder and harder to get yourself out of bed and are aware of making all sorts of excuses as to why you shouldn't swim that day. One swim day you wake up realising you haven't been to the beach for three or four months. You wonder what to do next. Should you go back or not?

Eventually you come to the conclusion you don't ever want to go back again. All you do there is swim backwards and forwards and play in the waves. It was fun, even exciting for a number of years and you thought swimming was all there was to life, but not now. Now you want more. Of course, you remain a swimmer; after all, no-one can deny your experience of the sea. But you're rarely seen at the beach between the flag.

For many church leavers this story has a high degree of resonance as they too end up leaving the 'club' which has been very important to them. Leaving brings with it a mix of feelings and reactions; partly a resentment, disinterest or critique of the style of church they have been involved in and yet at the same time a sense of loss and a desire to go on to something else.

When people consider leaving the church because they have become bored with what seems to be on offer they typically are unaware of the journey of faith beyond the flags. The spiritual equivalents of scuba diving, snorkeling, deep sea diving.

Exploring these options does not necessarily mean losing or diluting your faith, but finding Christ in new ways. It can be a journey to greater personal conviction and commitment to Christ, and a more holistic and relevant faith. If you or someone you know is swimming beyond the flags or has a growing longing to do so, some of the resources of the Spirited Exchanges network may be worth following up.