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A View from the Pew: Hugs and Kisses

Church in the time of COVID-19 is such a different experience that seminary students will be writing dissertations unraveling its impact on people of faith for years to come.

Among the many differences in church life during the pandemic is the absence of physical touch during our gatherings. The omission of handshakes and hugs leaves us feeling more isolated, even when we are together. Last Sunday as I set up in the parking lot for my church's outdoor, in-person, socially distanced worship, I was suddenly aware that a wave and nod was as much of a physical manifestation of my care and concern as I could display. My smile was even nullified by a mask.

Churches have coped with the pandemic thanks to a number of technological innovations, but there is no virtual replacement for the hugs and kisses we have exchanged at church gatherings for centuries. I fear when we emerge from this pandemic we will have lost it forever. Even after we have a vaccine and COVID-19 is just another of the viruses we navigate each year, it will take years for us to reach out for a hug without hesitation.

Like most elements of our lives that make a subtle difference in our state of mind, it's easy to miss the impact of a hug until it's suddenly removed from your life. As a more reserved hugger, it represents an openness I'm not often willing to express. By giving and receiving a hug at church, I am affirmed and opened to the work of the Holy Spirit in my life and relationships. Hugs mean openness.

There is plenty of concrete evidence that we need to respect people's physical boundaries for a host of good reasons, including a person's past experience with abuse or a non-pandemic-related health challenge. But some of us need the invitation to open ourselves to other people in ways that are safe and healthy. This kind of openness happens best in a loving and supportive environment like family or church family.

Until it's safe, we will have to forego the emotional and spiritual affirmation of a hug or what the Apostle Paul called in 1 Corinthians "a holy kiss." I want the memory of not hugging to be imprinted on me during this time, so that I become more open to the embrace of others post-pandemic.

In the meantime, do all you can to stay safe from COVID-19, and when this is over, save a hug for me.

Lance Wallace is a Baptist layperson and member of Parkway Baptist Church in Johns Creek, GA.

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