

Osaka International Church
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Title: "Find your niche"

Key verses: 1 Corinthians 12:27, 4-7 (ESV)

"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

"There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

Good morning, everyone. It's good to see you all here today. For the past two years, Pastor Alistair has had me deliver the sermon here once every few months, so I am standing here again before you with today's message. In my recent sermons, I have been sharing with you some of my favorite verses and Biblical themes. The last time I spoke here, my theme was on *Running the Christian race* – that is, turning away from our old life of sin and following Jesus. Today, I would like to expand on one of the thoughts I shared with you in that message: getting involved in church life.

But before I do, I want to tell you a little story. About thirty-two years ago, I became a member of a Baptist church in California. As usual, during the Sunday morning worship service, there was a little ceremony introducing the new members. After the service, a lady who was sitting behind me tapped me on the shoulder and told me something I have never forgotten. She said, "I'm so glad to see you join the church. Welcome! Next, here's what you do: Find your niche! Find your niche, the place where you fit in at this church."

And that is the title of my sermon this morning: "Find your niche." Find that place in the church where you fit in. It might be in a fellowship group or a Bible study ... it might be a place of ministry in the church ... it might be serving elsewhere in the Christian community. There are many opportunities to find a spot where you could fit in to the life of the Christian community, a place where you can learn and grow and serve. In my last sermon on *Running the Christian race*, I thought about including this story and discussing involvement in church life, but I decided to share these thoughts with you in a separate message, and so this is my topic for today.

Well, before I continue, I would like to define that word "niche" (/nitʃ/; or, some people pronounce it /niːʃ/). In literal terms, the dictionary defines a niche as "A shallow recess, especially one in a wall to display a statue or other ornament." I am sure you have seen such things before.

The dictionary goes on to give another definition, a reference to "one's niche." Here is the description: "A comfortable or suitable position in life or employment." Hmm. A comfortable or suitable position in life or employment. Or, we might say, a comfortable or suitable position in your church or your community. This is the idea I am aiming for when I use this word. Find your niche ... find that spot in the Christian community where you fit in. A suitable spot. A comfortable spot – well, maybe not always a comfortable spot. Sometimes, we need to go outside our comfort zone and be stretched when we attempt a new enterprise. I will return to that idea later.

Let me take a moment to look at *the church*.

The New Testament refers to *the church* as "the Body of Christ."

Colossians 1:18a – "And he [Christ] is the head of the body, the church..." (ESV)

1st Corinthians 12:27 – "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (ESV)

Now ... you, the congregation of believers (maybe this refers to the local church, or maybe to the worldwide body of Christian believers; either way, we are talking about **a group** of Christian believers) ... you are the “Body of Christ.”

There are several aspects to this idea of a Body. One is that that we – together – we individual believers are collected together into **one body**, sharing the *same faith* in Christ – our belief that Christ was crucified for our sins and that He was raised from the dead to give us hope for eternal life. Another aspect of this image of the Body of Christ is that Christ is **the head** of this body of believers – He is *our leader, our guide, our lord*. Yet another aspect is the notion that although we are all different individuals, we are each members of this one body. Unity: **unity in diversity**.

Again, 1st Corinthians 12:27 – “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (ESV). The New International Version says, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” (NIV).

We are each different ... we each have differing personalities, differing gifts, differing abilities. And we each have a part to play in the Body of Christ. We are each given something from the Holy Spirit *in order to play our part in the church* – we often call these “spiritual gifts.” I am going to spend much of today’s message discussing these spiritual gifts, and then encourage you to play your part in the life of the Christian community.

Here is what 1st Corinthians 12:4-7 says – “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (ESV)

There are varieties of *gifts*, varieties of *service*, varieties of *activities*. It is the same God who gives these variety of gifts to the variety of persons who have become followers of Christ. And for what purpose? It is “for the *common good*.” Each of us is given a different manifestation of the Spirit, but it is not something you hoard for yourself but, rather, it is something given to you by God to be used for the benefit of the common good, for the church or maybe for the wider community.

When I ponder this topic, I don’t limit my idea of *involvement* to just involvement in the local church. I often think of young mothers who spend much time at home taking care of their little ones – these women sometimes don’t have much time to devote to church ministry per se, but they are doing a crucial service *for the family*, influencing the next generation during their formative years. My mother was a housewife who devoted herself to her four kids and got us involved in the best Sunday School in town and also in the Boy Scouts. She also gave me my first Bible and taught me how to navigate through chapters and verses.

When I ponder the variety of gifts we are given to exercise *for the common good*, I think not only of involvement in *the church* and *the family*, but also in *the wider community*. I think of professionals like doctors and teachers, who might not spend much time serving at church, but who nonetheless influence others in important ways in the wider community. I think of my high school science teacher who was a Christian in a secular public school and who never explicitly stated to us that he was a Christian. But as I look back on some of the subtle ways he was able to share his values with us, I am amazed at how much he left his mark on me.

Find your niche. God has gifted all of His followers with certain gifts ... to be exercised for the common good ... in church or community or family. Each Christian is gifted in *something* (or maybe more than one thing) ... and *somewhere* in the Christian community there is a place where you and your gift fits in. It might be a big role or it might be a small role. It might be a very public role or it might be a task done quietly behind the scenes. Each task is important in God's eyes.

Next, I would like to take a look at these individual spiritual gifts. There are four places in the New Testament where we find a listing of spiritual gifts:

At the beginning of 1st Corinthians 12

At the end of 1st Corinthians 12

In Ephesians 4

And in Romans 12

When we take a look at these lists, you will notice that each list is rather different. Many Bible commentators say that it seems that these lists are *representative* of the types of spiritual gifts that exist and that none of the lists are exhaustive. Perhaps other gifts exist that are not specifically mentioned. We are going to read through all four of the lists – I will comment on some of the gifts, but I am not going to try to define each one. My main aim is get you to see the variety of gifts and some of the various ways each of us has been empowered by the Holy Spirit to play our part in the ministries of the church.

Let's begin with the end of 1st Corinthians 12, verses 27 and 28 – “Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. ²⁸And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues.” (NASB)

God has “appointed” ... in “the church” ...

First: apostles

Second: prophets

Third: teachers

Here we see the foundational ministries. In the pages of the New Testament, we read the story of how the apostles and prophets spoke the words of God and founded churches in Jerusalem, Judea, and the Roman Empire. Then, various teachers in these churches continued build on that foundation teaching the essential truths of the Christian faith.

I am reminded of Ephesians 2. In verse 19, Paul calls the church “the household of God,” and then in verse 20 he says that this household is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.” (ESV). Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of this building, and the foundation is the apostles and prophets.

[Unspoken in the sermon but appearing on the power point screen is verse 21: “in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.”]

“Apostles, prophets, teachers.” After these three, Paul lists other gifts, all of which you can find being exercised at one point or another in the Book of Acts: “miracles ... gifts of healings ... helps ... administrations ... various kinds of tongues.”

Let's look at Ephesians 4, starting with verse 7 – “But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.” The gift is given by Christ, by His grace.

Verse 11 – “And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers.” Again we see the apostles and prophets at the top of the list. Next

are the evangelists – they are the ones who share the gospel with others and bring people into the church. Then are mentioned the pastors and teachers – these are the shepherds, these are the trainers and teachers of the disciples who have entered the church and made it their home. This list focuses again on the most foundational ministries of the church.

And what is their main purpose? Verse 12 – “For the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.” Their purpose is this: *equipping the saints for the work of service, building up the church*. Who are *the saints*? The saints ... are you and me. This word “saint” doesn't mean super Christians – this is Paul's term for all Christian believers. The word “saint” means simply those people who are “set apart” or “holy”: set apart from the pagan world and now set apart to God, belonging to God.

So, the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers have the task of equipping the saints – you and me – *to do the work of service in the church*. It is we average church members who are doing the work of “building up the body of Christ.”

The next two lists of spiritual gifts we will look at tell us some of the various types of gifts that you and I are given for the building up of the church.

In Romans 12:4-8 we read this – “For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.” (NIV)

It is interesting to me that in the Ephesians 4 list, the gifts are listed in the form of certain *offices*: apostle, prophet, pastor, etc. But in Romans 12, the gifts are listed as *activities*: prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, etc. I think these are activities that any one of us could be doing, not just our topmost leaders in the church. (Well, be careful with that gift of prophesying – some Christians have imagined that they have heard some special word from God, but it turns out they got their own feelings confused with promptings from God; so be cautious if someone claims to have that gift). However, with serving, teaching, encouraging, and the other gifts, any one of us could be exercising some of these activities to one degree or another.

It is interesting to me that serving is listed before teaching. Serving is crucial in the life of any community. We need people to serve in various capacities for the orderly functioning of church and community. The original apostles found that out in Acts chapter 6, when they realized that they needed help in ministering to the widows in the church: they assigned seven men “full of the Holy Spirit” to take care of these practical needs of the church community.

There are many different ways *you could serve here at OIC* – there are a wide variety of tasks that need doing. There is the setting up of this stage and this Hall in the morning before the worship service. There is operating the sound system in the balcony before and during the worship service. And then there is taking everything down after the worship service is over. There is the usher table outside, and task of ushering during the service. There is the set up of the fellowship room upstairs. And, of course, there is the worship team – both singers and musicians to play the instruments.

Serving. The next thing listed is teaching. This activity goes beyond just the pulpit ministry of delivering the sermon. This could cover leading a small group Bible study ... or teaching Sunday School.

I noticed this slide during the Announcements time before the sermon. Currently, OIC is seeking people to get involved with set-up, tear-down, the sound system, and Sunday School teachers. Wow – Sunday School teachers. I have shared with you before how, as a child, my mother sent her kids to the best Sunday School in town – it was at the Lutheran church. There I got a great foundation for my Christian life – in fact, I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say that one major reason why I am where I am today is because of the foundation I received at that Lutheran Sunday School. So, I'm a big fan of Sunday School. Please consider getting involved in Sunday School – as a teacher or as an interpreter translating the lesson into Japanese.

And the Discipleship Program that Pastor Alistair designed. We all need to learn the basics of Christian living, of Christian discipleship. There's another area of ministry you could get involved in.

There are many ways, big and small, where you could get involved in ministering at OIC.

And not necessarily in a formal assignment as a teacher or usher or worship team member or council member. Some of the gifts listed in Romans 12 don't require a formal position – for example: the gifts of encouraging ... or giving ... or showing mercy. I'm not a pastor, but I have sometimes visited a fellow Christian in the hospital.

In this list is the gift of encouragement – in some other English translations, this word is rendered exhortation. Encouraging and exhorting our fellow Christians.

This reminds me of one of my favorite verses, one that I memorized during my college years. Hebrews 10:24-25 – “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (ESV)

Any of us could be doing this. In fact, we all ought to be doing it to one degree or another. “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.” Don't neglect meeting together. Encourage one another. Do you remember what I said about Ephesians 4:12? You and I – the saints – are doing the work of service, *building up the body of Christ*. Encouraging and exhorting one another is a part of *building each other up*.

This reminds me of a story I heard from a seminary professor – actually, he was a seminary president. He told the story of how he went to church once for the Sunday evening service and there was a young preacher giving the sermon that night. And that sermon was, quite frankly, really awful. This seminary president was really upset at what a waste of time going to church was that evening, because of this worthless sermon. But then after the service he noticed that his wife was giving a word of encouragement to an old lady. The wife was telling this lady how much she appreciated seeing her come to church, even though it meant walking several blocks on a chilly winter evening. The seminary president said he learned a lesson that night: that church is more than just the message from the pulpit. It's also about encouraging one another, “stirring up one another to love and good works,” building up the members of the body of Christ. I have never forgotten that lesson.

Well, there is one more list of spiritual gifts to look at. This one is actually the first list the Apostle Paul wrote down. Let's go back to the first part of 1st Corinthians 12. I already read for you verses 4 to 6 – there are varieties of *gifts*, varieties of *service*, and varieties of *activities*. Verse 7 tells us, “To each [member] is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

Then verses 8-11 say, “For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.” (ESV)

This is an interesting list – we don't often talk about some of these gifts. That first one, an “utterance of wisdom,” brings to mind the times a Christian brother or sister has spoken to me a word of advice that I thought was especially wise and insightful and helpful. The second item here, “utterance of knowledge,” might be related to the gift of teaching. And in verse 9 we see that there seems to a special gift called “faith.” My ESV Study Bible makes this comment about this gift called faith: “This is not the faith that all Christians have in Christ ... It is probably a special endowment of faith for accomplishing some task.” Maybe it's related to the “faith to remove mountains” mentioned in 1st Corinthians 13:2.

Well, this marks the end of my overview of the spiritual gifts. Here is a chart from my ESV Study Bible of the four major lists of spiritual gifts. As I said earlier, these listings are probably not exhaustive of all the gifts, but are rather representative of the various ways the Holy Spirit empowers us for service in the Christian community.

ESV Study Bible: Spiritual Gifts in Paul's Letters

1 Cor. 12:28	Eph. 4:11	Rom. 12:6-8	1 Cor. 12:7-10
apostles	the apostles		
prophets	the prophets	prophecy	prophecy
	the evangelists		
			distinguishing between spirits
			utterance of wisdom
teachers	the pastors and teachers	teaching	utterance of knowledge
		exhorting	
miracles			working of miracles
gifts of healing			gifts of healing
helping		service	
administrating		leading	
various kinds of tongues			various kinds of tongues
			interpretation of tongues
		giving	
			faith
		mercy	

Many years ago, I had discussions with our former pastor on this topic of spiritual gifts. Many people are seeking to know what their gift is. Some groups have drawn up fancy questionnaires you can go through to discover what your spiritual gifts might be. I have taken such a “spiritual gifts test” before – once in my 20’s and once in my 40’s. Both times I was a bit wary of the way the questionnaires were constructed. I found that my former pastor was likewise rather wary of such tests. He thought the best way to find your spiritual gift was just to try various ministries in your church and see which ones you have some success with – as well as getting feedback from your brothers and sisters. Don’t be afraid to try one area of ministry and if you find you are not suited to that task, there is no disgrace to discontinue that one and to try something else.

Thirty-two years ago in California, a lady welcomed me as a new church member and advised me to “Find your niche,” to find the place in the church where I could fit it. I was already enjoying attending the Singles Group and their Tuesday night Bible Study, as well as Friday night volleyball. But I started thinking of where I might *serve* in some ministry in the church. Well, there was a need for volunteers in the church’s Awana program. Awana is a kind of Christian Boy scouts and Girl scouts – based in churches and with a Bible-centered curriculum. A major part of the program is Scripture memorization, and volunteers were needed to listen to children reciting their Bible verses. So, that was my first experience of ministry at church: listening to children reciting the verses they memorized. Later on, the pastor of our church asked me to help organize the men’s retreat, so I got more experience in ministry.

Some day, I will tell you how I ended up in Japan – it’s a long story and it will have to wait for another time. In 1992, I settled in Osaka, got a job in a high school teaching English, and started attending Osaka International Church. And little by little, I have gotten involved in various ministries here. Back in those days, there was a Singles Group at OIC, and I got involved in planning the monthly outings for the group. Later, in 1996, I taught the Wednesday night Bible Study for a few months when we were without a pastor – although it was a bit intimidating, I volunteered for the task, since I saw that there was a need for a teacher and I felt I could perhaps fulfill the task adequately.

A few minutes ago, I recommended to you that a good way to see where you might be gifted is to simply try out one of the ministries here and see if it suits you. In 1996, I saw a need for a temporary Bible Study leader and I volunteered for it ... and I discovered that I liked doing it. Later on in the 2000’s, I again often led a Bible study.

Soon after OIC moved into this auditorium in 2004, I volunteered to help with operating the sound system. I don’t have very good ears, but I am detail-oriented and I come from a family of engineers, so I thought I could handle it. I’m not perfect, but I get the job done.

These days, you sometimes see me in this spot delivering the sermon. A few years ago I would not have thought I could do such a thing. But somehow two years ago when I was asked to give the sermon, I calmly said yes. I don’t have seminary training, but I have been a serious student of the Bible since my college days – studying the Scriptures, reading Christian books, listening to recording of sermons ... by tape and by iPod. I have had a lot of input over the years, and now I am sharing some output. This is where the pastor would have me serving the church these days.

“Find your niche.” Your niche will be different than my niche. Each of us has differing abilities, differing giftings. But, with the Holy Spirit’s enabling, you should be able to find a place suitable for you. Don’t worry if you’re not perfect. Don’t be discouraged if your task seems small or insignificant – each task is important to God. I hope that you all find your niche somewhere in the Body of Christ.

That is all for today’s message. God bless you.