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## Book Review: The Unauthorized Guide to Choosing a Church by Carmen Renee Berry

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## The Unauthorized Guide to Choosing a Church

Reviewed by Danny R. Von Kanel

Berry, Carmen Renee, *The Unauthorized Guide To Choosing A Church*, Grand rapids, Michigan; Brazos Press, A Division of Baker Book House, Co. 2004, 400 pages, \$15.99

Carmen Renee Berry is a former therapist and the best selling author of *Girlfriends*, *When Helping You Is Hurting Me* and *Daddies and Daughters*. She has traveled extensively speaking and leading seminars on relationships and mental health. She has appeared on Oprah, CNN, and countless other radio and television programs.

*The Unauthorized Guide To Choosing A Church* is a very practical, and entertaining guide to finding a church. With the proliferation of churches and denominations, numerous post-modern Americans are at a loss as to which spiritual community to belong.

Berry answers the questions: How do you know which church is right for you? What can you expect when you walk in the door? What exactly do these people believe anyway?

Berry steps out of her niche market with this book. The idea for writing *The Unauthorized Guide For Choosing A Church* came after she said to her agent, "I started going to church." Her agent responded, "You should write a book on that!" Berry admits, "this was the most complicated and challenging that I've ever worked on."

In answering the question, "What does church have to do with spirituality?", Berry shares her own spiritual pilgrimage. She admits that once what took her out of church (human frailty), now compels her back to spiritual community. She says, "I had

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overlooked one essential factor—that I am as finite and flawed as everyone else.”

Berry evaluates churches in five categories: kind of church, church structure, worship style, Trinity affinity, and clout continuum (claims). Under clout continuum (the amazing claims of each) she gives church descriptions the order in which these three forms of Christian clout are valued: scripture, tradition, and experience.

Berry does a credible job in helping seekers find a church. Her suggestions to check out the denominational website, visit the worship service three times, review printed materials, visit a Sunday school class or small group, and talk to the pastor(s) are extremely helpful and practical.

The section about spiritual abuse shows a little of Berry's past rejection of religion and cynicism. Sub heads of: the pastor is a control freak, the congregation is mean and nasty, guilt is used as a spiritual motivator, the church is a financial mess, and the church teaches a distorted view of God, show her past disappointments with religion ... though admittedly they ring true in many church situations.

*The Unauthorized Guide To Choosing A Church* is well laid out. The “just the facts” section gives year founded, members in USA, churches in USA, headquarters address, phone, and address. The snippets of what each church believes is concise, correct, and informative.

In the “what to expect when you visit section” for each church she gives suggestions on appropriate dress, worship style, and what the worship service contains, including who they welcome to communion.

I was surprised how accurate Berry characterized each church and denomination as a Southern Baptist myself, her description of the SBC was right on target, although she avoided mentioning the recent factions in our denomination.

Berry also does not dwell on any other debates related to homosexuality in certain denominations. She does give some church and denomination views on the subject—acceptance or rejection.

Berry gives a wise, approachable, and humorous guide that is practical and compassionate to help people make an informed decision in choosing a church.

From a church growth standpoint, the book is valuable to anyone is actively seeking a church or is disillusioned at their present church. Surveys, sidebar, a glossary, and an index makes this unique guide interactive, user friendly, involving, informing, and entertaining.

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Reviewer

Van Kanel, Danny. Danny has been involved in ministry, freelance writing, and church growth consulting for more than twenty years. He has served congregations in several states, and currently serves as the Ministry of Music at First Baptist Church in Franklinton, Louisiana. Danny has recently authored *Built By The Owner's Design: The Positive Approach to Building Your Church God's Way*.