Call and answer?

The art of altar calls in the twenty-first century

J Janzen

I never set out to be a paid pastor. That was partly due to my experience as a radio producer with Family Life Network,[1] where for nearly six years I led a team that created recording events with roughly sixty-five Anabaptist-Mennonite churches across Canada. During this time, I observed that many congregations did much the same thing: pews facing forward airplane style, thirty minutes of singing, announcements, a thirty-to-forty-minute sermon, the end. Meanwhile, church leaders lamented that attendance was declining, that people seemed disinterested in participating in worship, and that youth were ambivalent about Christian faith. In my view, what churches commonly offered up for worship was boring and theologically problematic.[2] To complicate matters further, I had the strong impression that churches were not interested in changing. I wondered why churches kept doing the same thing when the approach clearly was not working.

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1 Family Life Network is a Winnipeg-based media agency formerly known as Mennonite Brethren Communications.

2 In *The Medium Is the Massage* (New York: Bantam, 1967), Marshall McLuhan, a Catholic communications theorist, notes that *how* and *what* we communicate are equally important. For example, if a church says that everyone matters, but only the preacher and music leader speak into microphones, the actions (medium) contradict the message. Anabaptist theology holds that Christian faith is a lifestyle, not just a system of beliefs. Highland Community Church's worship is participatory so that our words and actions (medium and message) are congruent—people light candles and draw pictures at prayer stations, children raise hands in blessing, questions are asked during or after a sermon, and so on.

At the same time, I was producing segments for *GodTalk*, a call-in show on CJOB68, then the largest commercial radio station in Manitoba.[3] CJOB insisted that the *GodTalk* hosts were to be explicitly Christian but were *not* to "shove religion down people's throats." Nor were they allowed to say that all religions are equal or the same since that makes for boring talk radio. It became apparent to me that Canadian culture was suffering from church fatigue. Guests and callers repeatedly indicated a hunger to discuss spiritual matters but did not see Christianity as a viable option.

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For some, Christianity was passé: over-familiarity left people hungry for something novel. Others simply regarded Christianity as irrelevant: the spiritual fire insurance was nice, but Christianity did not seem to have anything to say about life here and now. More often, however, Christianity was repellent: church people were arrogant, argumentative, antagonistic. Indeed, Christians routinely phoned in to question the faith of our hosts because they did not tell people they were wrong, to complain that we did not warn people they were going to hell, and to demand that we preach the gospel more.

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By 2007, I was convinced that there were appropriate ways to talk about Christian faith in an evangelistic way in the secularized and pluralistic North American environment, but I doubted that the church was truly interested in being a place where that might happen.

And then God and a particular church surprised me.

In the fall of 2007, Highland Community Church invited me to be their pastor.[4] My wife and I initially declined. But the church responded,

3 *GodTalk* was hosted by David Balzer and Chris Wells.

4 Highland is a Mennonite Brethren congregation in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

"We didn't hear you say no; we just heard you say you're not sure. Let's try it for a year."

We accepted, and a year later, everyone agreed to continue together indefinitely. Because of Highland's flexibility, I stumbled into a role in a community with which I resonated deeply. Attitudes and practices and formational spaces existed at Highland before I arrived; I have simply tried to curate them by naming them, adding some, and adjusting others. What I have done is relatively basic: I have insisted that the most radical thing we can do is to do what we say what we are going to do, which is to help people to know Jesus, love one another, and cooperate with God's work in the world. I am happy to say that for the past twelve years, I have found myself at an intersection where people have met God in and through the church. Below I explain how we have done so.

Centered-set composure

Highland respects people wherever they are at in their faith journey. People are given room to grow out of some things and into others. This means that Highlanders tend to remain calm when someone has questions or doubts about spirituality or struggles with unhealthy behaviours. Highlanders do not assume that because something has gone wrong a person has lost his or her faith. Theirs is not an all-or-nothing perspective. Rather, they assume that all of us will find ourselves at different places at different times, and Christians often find themselves having to bear things they cannot help.

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This hospitable posture is consistent with a centred-set understanding in which everyone is called to an ongoing process of regeneration.[5] There is always more to learn, new ways to become more fully human in the image of the resurrected Son. So when I am having coffee with a sixty-year follower of Jesus or a person who has spent less than sixty seconds in a church, my question is the same: "What would it

5 See Paul G. Hiebert, "Conversion in Cross-Cultural Perspective," in *Conversion: Doorway to Discipleship*, edited by Henry J. Schmidt (Hillsboro, KS: Board of Christian Literature of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1980), 88–98; Paul G. Hiebert, "The Category *Christian* in the Mission Task," in *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 107–36.

look like for you to take another step closer to Jesus, or how might you turn more to the Light?"[6]

I have never been disappointed.

A non-Christian woman once said to me, "I was hurt by some Christians in my teens, and I've been angry at the church ever since. That's a lot of people to resent, and I don't want to live that way anymore. Can you forgive me?" Another time a mature Christian who is a recovering alcoholic expressed a desire to grow in prayer. Both of these confessions were moves toward the Fullness of Life (John 10:10). Because different people take different steps towards Jesus, when the denominational survey asks for the number of conversions at Highland in the past year, my answer is "Countless."[7]

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Contemplative-charismatic confidence

Tied to this centred-set approach is a contemplative-charismatic conviction that God's Spirit is present and active in *all* people's lives, whether they confess Jesus as Lord or not. Furthermore, we do not determine who is in or out; that is God's job. Nor do we need to defend God or argue people into the Kingdom. If God is who we say God is, then God is big enough to look after Godself. We therefore trust that the Holy Spirit will convict and convert. Our role is simply to tell our stories of how we have experienced Jesus and to interact with our neighbors, looking to point out where we see the characteristics of Jesus already present in their lives.[8]

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6 This invitation is practiced almost every Sunday. The worship leader brings the Christ candle into the congregation, stands by the Gospel reader and says, "The candle reminds us that Jesus is present in Spirit among us as a gathered community. Please stand and turn to the Light as we hear the Gospel."

7 The gospel is that Jesus comes to defeat evil, sin, and death so that all creation might be restored. Within that cosmic work of redemption, people are invited to experience salvation by following Jesus. As they do so, they become fully alive humans (as per God's original intent) in the image of the Resurrected Son. This understanding broadens the scope of evangelism to include steps of repentance and steps towards holiness (sanctification). In that sense, a "conversion moment" is any shift in the direction of God that leaves someone more Christ-like.

8 Lesslie Newbigin articulates this posture on the basis of John 16 in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 123.

Consider Phil. He arrived at Highland with his family ten years ago. Phil described himself as agnostic. He looks after our church's IT needs. He participates in our congregational meetings. He joined a small group, and we became friends. Eventually, we found ourselves together on my back porch. "Phil," I asked, "where are you at with this whole Jesus and God thing?"

"Well," he said, "I have a hard time believing that Jesus is God. But I want to integrate his teachings into my life, and I want my kids to live like Jesus, too."

"Let me get this straight," I replied. "You want to obey and imitate Jesus?"

"Yes," Phil said.

"Do you know what we call those people?" I asked.

Phil shrugged, "No."

"We call them Christians," I grinned.

"I'm going to have to think about that," Phil laughed.

A few years later, Phil participated in our sixteen-week season of baptismal preparation and received a prayer rope that he frequently uses to pray.[9] Phil has not made a verbal confession of faith in the form of the "sinner's prayer," yet his behaviour demonstrates the ongoing work of the Spirit. My role is akin to blowing on the embers of a fire; I often say, "You're looking more and more like Jesus, Phil."

Permissions rather than prescriptions

The attitudes, postures, and practices I am describing are not for the faint of heart. Forbearance is necessary because conversion is messy. Since the Truth is a living Person, we who point people to the Truth do not get to set the sequence or pace of redemption according to our preferences. What we think a person ought to focus on cleaning up may not be what the Truth has as top priority.

Indeed, if one listens carefully to my preaching, one will notice the absence of phrases such as, "It *must* have felt this way," or "You *need* to do (or not do) *x*." Rather, listeners will hear phrases such as, "I wonder what

9 Our process is designed for people considering baptism, people who wish to deepen faith by renewing their baptismal vows, and people interested in exploring faith. Participants are not required to be baptized. Our practice is an adaptation of the catechumenate at Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church in Seattle, Washington, which is profiled in Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2006).

it would look like" or "One possibility might be *x*." Some suggest that this open-endedness is too "wishy-washy"—a failure of conviction and the neglect of my pastoral responsibility. But I am being directive, just in a different way. Instead of dictating a one-size-fits-all approach, I am instructing people to focus attention on a goal—namely, Jesus. The ways by which people get to Jesus will be different, but *how* they arrive is not as important as *that* they arrive. I strive to give people permission to imagine, together with the Spirit, what a suitable response of faithfulness might be, given someone's particular circumstances.[10] For example, I teach people to pray. The mode might vary: meditating on an icon, speaking in tongues, journaling, chanting the Psalms. What matters is that people are praying.

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Holy indifference

The sorts of "altar calls" I am describing require a holy indifference vis-à-vis control and success. A few years ago, a member of Highland ate the Lord's Supper during a worship gathering. "As I came forward, I thought I

10 It is impractical to think that I could set out specific steps for everyone; that requires an omniscience that is not humanly possible. Instead, I tend to prescribe certain practices and postures, or offer good questions to ask that should lead to better answers, or provide a framework with some degree of flexibility that a person can apply to their daily circumstances. More important, I am not advocating relativism. For a worthwhile conversation to happen, everyone involved needs have some degree of conviction. To say that all religions are equally valid (or not) and all paths lead to the same truth (or not) is another arrogant form of bigotry that shuts down dialogue, just as it is equally unproductive to say, "I'm right, you're wrong, and you just need to toe this line." Genuine dialogue tends to happen when those involved say, "Our perspectives differ. You think your way is right; I'm confident that Jesus is the Way, Truth, and Life. Let's compare what we believe." As we discover similarities and note differences, the Christian can trust that the Spirit will convict and convert. And at the end, the Christian will have deepened her own faith, while also having dignified her friend by learning something about her deeply held beliefs.

was done with church," she said, "but when I walked away from the table, something had changed."[11]

No one foresaw that a mouthful of bread and juice would renew a commitment to the Body of Christ. But God delights in coloring outside the lines: appearing in burning bushes, a talking donkey, a baby in diapers, tongues of fire, emotions, and physical touch.[12] As a result, Highland experiments with multisensory worship experiences.[13] When (not if) mistakes happen, we try to learn.[14] When people dislike what is offered (some find our playfulness offensive), we do not get discouraged.[15] And when something good happens, we rejoice.

The fact that Highland has doubled in size in the last decade suggests that Highland's consistently open-handed invitation has proven to be winsome (rather than coercive) more often than not. More important, the fact that we have seen people "walking in the newness of Life" indi-

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11 I am aware of a second conversion experience like this at Highland. These transformative encounters in the Eucharist give me pause when it comes to an open communion table. At the very least, people (including children) ought to be warned that they risk being changed if they participate in the meal. See Annie Dillard, *The Annie Dillard Reader* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 38.

12 Lorlie Barkman, a Mennonite Brethren pastor and television producer, describes this as paraword communication: "Bibles with Jesus's words in red lead us to focus solely on what Jesus says. But read the Bible with a pencil and circle all of the things God *does*. You'll see God does much that is nonverbal."

13 For example, Christine Kampen, a pastor at Highland, used Rembrandt's painting of the prodigal son. She had people stand and place their hands on the back of a chair, posing as the father who embraces the son by his shoulders. Then people knelt and leaned their faces against the back of a chair, posing as the son before his father. The physical experience of Jesus's parable brought insight and healing to many.

14 Pierre Gilbert, a professor at Canadian Mennonite University, once suggested that the church should be like a science lab and experiment. If things blow up, clean up the mess and try something else. If a new concept proves effective, great! An experimental mindset also frees us to abandon something when it is no longer suitable.

15 In *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Image, 1986), Henri Nouwen teaches that if your self-worth depends on other people's behavior, you will run the risk of trying to manipulate others to satiate your emotional needs. People generally retreat from this unhealthy dependence. For there to be a healthy relationship, you need to let others have the freedom to be who they are (for good and for ill), while at the same time doing the work of having your sense of identity and worth centred in God. This sort of posture is necessary if Christians are to tell people that Jesus loves them and wants to be their friend in a way that is not manipulative. When I do not measure my faithfulness by the quantity or quality of responses of other people, then the invitation I offer has no strings attached, and it truly is a gift that one can freely accept or reject.

cates that *something*—better yet, *Someone*—is working. Much to our delight, our call is being answered. People are discovering what we hold to be true: that Jesus is the most precious treasure one can discover.

About the author

J Janzen has served as pastoral elder at Highland Community Church in Abbotsford, British Columbia, for twelve years. When not doing churchy things, J can be found writing the occasional article, coaching baseball, or camping with his family.