

Wednesday June 26, 2013

## **Paying people to attend church**

By Jim Taylor

Years ago, when the horizons of my life were largely circumscribed by church publications, I read about a congregation that made a really determined effort to attract new members. They hired an advertising agency to design and produce several thousand brochures. They bought newspaper ads. They had a professional quality video made, extolling their ministries. They organized a door-knocking campaign, handing out brochures and videos to anyone who showed the least interest. They even rented billboards at major intersections in their area.

The campaign would have cost the church – in today’s dollars – about \$20,000.

The result? Two new families attending church regularly.

Yes, there were a few one-time drop-ins, who never returned a second time. I never heard any reasons why they didn’t come back. Perhaps somebody snubbed them. Perhaps they didn’t like the church’s theology. Perhaps they didn’t like the coffee...

But just two new families.

I remember thinking, at the time, “Wouldn’t it have been a lot easier to pay a couple of families \$10,000 each to start attending church?”

Now that’s anathema. Unthinkable. We don’t pay people to go to church. They come to church to pay us, don’t they? To help us balance our budget, or to support our outreach ministries, or to pay off the mortgage faster – right?

## **Choose the best applicants**

But something rebellious in me asks, “Why not pay people to come to church?”

It would be like hiring an employee. You don’t simply accept whoever walks in the door. You advertise a vacancy in the Help Wanted ads. You set up some job specifications. You define the payment, perhaps \$100 for each Sunday service that people attend.

That’s all they have to do – attend church. And one other duty, which I’ll get to, later.

Then you invite people to submit applications. What qualifications do they offer, that would make them the best candidates for this position? What experience do they have? What references can they provide? How much effort have they made to get to know the organization that will be paying them?

Theatres and orchestras make hopefuls audition for their roles. There’s no reason a church couldn’t ask applicants for its weekly payments to audition for this particular community. There’s no reason why a church shouldn’t choose the best qualified candidates, instead of just taking anyone who shows up.

Suppose the successful applicants attended every week, with two weeks off for holidays. They’d take home \$5000 for their year of service.

Oh, yes, that one other qualification – the successful applicants have to sit on the committee that picks next year’s winners. That means they’ll have to do some serious thinking. About what makes belonging to this church worthwhile. About what kind of people this church wants, or needs, and why. How newcomers can fit in, and how they can make a difference.

If they take that task seriously, I would think they’ll sell themselves on the value of belonging. And they’ll continue to attend, even after their weekly incentive starts going to someone else.

And if they can’t or won’t take that task seriously, they’re not worth hanging onto anyway.

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## **YOUR TURN**

Well, that was a turnaround – after 24 letters the previous week, only two people took up the theme of last week's column, on how passing through the portals of life affects our memory of what went before.

Jack Dreidger wrote, "I would think that after having gone through a door, then not being able to get out on his own when he needs to get out would make Joey think twice in the future about going through a door, or is that too demanding for a cat brain?"

I know I'm going to get into trouble for this, but there are times when I think that "cat brain" is an oxymoron.

Stephanie Keer has a dog with the same name as our cat, Joey. She wrote, "He, like your cat, found a closed door an insult and a challenge."

Then the concept of being in or out provoked her to send along a joke:

"Once upon a time, a skunk had twins and she called them In and Out. Because her house was small and poorly ventilated, whenever In was in, Out was out, and whenever In was out, Out was in.

"One day, Out was sent to find In, who had been out for a long time and wasn't answering his mother's calls. Five minutes later, Out returned with In. Mother Skunk was surprised that Out had found In so quickly.

"Out looked modest and smiled. 'It was easy,' he said. 'In stinked.'"

Fran Ota's letter was a response another letter, last week: "I really identified with the comments of Charles Hill. Some people cannot live with uncertainty at all. I see it often in congregations when a minister is leaving -- some rise to the occasion and take on leadership themselves, others panic with the result that they just have to have a warm body in the pulpit. As Charles says, in needing certainty we end up with scriptures which are literally true, and an anthropomorphic male God -- and that becomes a God with whom I can no longer identify.

"I am finding it harder and harder to work with congregations, because so few can actually move into the uncertainty of the future, and embrace the notion that God might actually have something new in mind. Congregations (on the whole) don't want something new. And for me that calls into question their claim that they believe in death and resurrection. If as Christians we believe in resurrection, why are we so afraid?"

In a second e-mail, Stephanie Keer went back to the previous column, about the "Great Whatever", by recalling, "I spent a period of time addressing prayers To Whom It May Concern. I re-discovered that it was of very great concern to someone who cared with a terrible, unremitting, relentless love."

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## **PSALM PARAPHRASES**

Psalm 77: 1-2, 11-20

- 1 Like an infant isolated by its incubator, I wail.  
But no one responds.
- 2 Like a worker laid off after 30 years of loyal service, I roam the streets restlessly.  
But no one responds.
- 11 Still, I will not give up hope;  
I will not stop trying.
- 12 Even if you are not around, I remember you.
- 13 You did not give up, when we let you down.
- 14,15 You opened the mysteries of nature to provide for our needs.
- 16 When we needed metal, you taught us to mine.  
When we needed irrigation, you supplied lakes and rivers.  
When we needed energy, you led us to oil.
- 19 We took the credit;  
we told ourselves it was all our own doing.  
And we fouled your world with our wastes.
- 17 But your winds still wipe the grime from our skies;
- 18 your rains still renew our fields;  
your seas still sustain our climate.
- 20 Then how can I doubt you?

For this and other paraphrases, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, [info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com) or 1-800-663-2775 in Canada.

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#### YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca), or send a note to [sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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