

LAST CALL

From Serving Drinks to Serving Jesus

JERRY HERSHIPS

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INTRODUCTION

The Priest Club

I have been looking at this view for more than twenty years. In many ways, it has become a part of who I am.

I'm in my mother-in-law's den, overlooking Houghton Lake. It is the largest inland lake in Michigan. I have been coming up here every year for more than the length of my marriage, which as of this writing has been twenty-two years. It is one of the few places on the planet I can really relax and get perspective.

As I look on Carolyn's bookshelf, a book catches my eye: *Michigan Curiosities* by Colleen Burcar and Gene Taylor. It was the book my brother was writing when he died. He was 53. I'm 50.

When you "go home," things happen, whether you want them to or not. Your past collides with your future. You look for clues about where you are going next—if not the exact location, at least the direction. It is fitting that I am polishing up the last pages of this book here. I have returned to my past. It was at this desk overlooking the lake that I had the first discussion about AfterHours with key leaders back in 2011. I had a vision of a faith community where people could have a wider understanding of God and our relationship to him/her. I wanted to create a place where people could state what they believe and what they

struggle with. Freely. I wanted a community of people who know we don't all have to agree on everything.

I looked out on the water, having no idea if what I envisioned could actually work, but I truly believed it would. I knew I would have to work hard to sell it, but I thought if I got the word out, it would help a lot of people reconnect to God.

Three years later, we've grown to hundreds of volunteers, handed out Communion to more than 50,000 people and lunches to more than 100,000, gained multiple corporate partnerships, gone from one location to four every month, watched as people redefined what church is, and watched people's lives change from either serving or being served. But I'm still not exactly sure who is changing whom.

AfterHours doesn't have it all figured out. It is just one way of connecting to God. I think it is a good way. It is one model that will connect with a lot of people who have not found a way to "do" church.

I myself knew how to "do" church.

I grew up Catholic in metro Detroit. Went to Catholic School, mass six days a week, and was an altar boy. Whole nine yards. I didn't think much about it (I was a little kid), but early on I encountered something that would stay with me my whole life: banana splits.

Father Szczesny was a retired Navy chaplain and served our parish for a short time. On Father Szczesny's birthday, he gave away coupons for free banana splits. Free! To a third-grader, this was the most amazing thing I had ever heard of. Not only was he not asking for presents on his birthday—he was giving out presents! This blew my little eight-year-old mind.

I had a great experience being an altar boy. No horrific stories, no awful memories. Except that my altar boy

career almost ended before it even began. I damn near lit the church on fire within the first five minutes of mass.

It was my first time coming down the aisle as an altar boy, and I was to carry the candle-on-a-stick thing. (I'm sure it had a better name, but whatever.) It was going swimmingly well the whole way down the aisle: no tripping, no dripping, candle stayed upright, perfect. I even kept pace with the priest (harder than you would think; he would almost sprint going down that aisle). It was going great.

It wasn't till I had to actually get the candle *into* the candleholder that we ran into trouble. The base was old, and you had to jiggle the candle-on-a-stick to get it to go in. I must have missed that meeting. As I tried to force the candle-on-a-stick into the base, I came to the realization that everyone else was done and all eyes were on me. This didn't help. Finally, after much sweating, I was able to get it on the base, and it went in with great force—so much so that the heavy brass cap that was on the top of the candle flew off and went sailing across the front of the church. I chased after it, and after retrieving it, I put it back on top of the candle (which was now out with no way to relight it).

As I slowly took my seat and the adrenaline stopped, I realized just how embarrassed I was. I could feel hot tears slowly rolling down my face, which made me *more* embarrassed. It was hard to stop the tears but I dared not try to wipe them away, as that would cause even more attention. Mortified, I saw my altar boy career pass in front of my eyes.

In a moment of great compassion, I saw the priest lean over to the head altar boy and whisper something in his ear. He turned and whispered to the second-in-command. (I don't technically know if there was a second-in-command, but I knew I was on the bottom of the pecking order.) The second-in-command leaned over and whispered in my ear,

“Father says if you’re gonna cry, go in back.” (This is what we in the business call “pastoral care.”) I went in the back and cried.

This was my introduction to formal ministry.

Despite this, I pressed on. I enjoyed spending time with the other altar boys and hearing all I could about the church and the priest’s life. At this early age I got bit and got the bug.

I wanted to be a priest.

I assumed at this juncture that I couldn’t possibly be alone, so I approached my third-grade teacher, Sister Mary Ann. Sister Mary Ann was, as my dad was prone to say, a tough broad. (And my dad knew about tough sisters. He was raised by the priests and nuns at a boarding school in Canada from the time he was in third grade through twelfth. I can’t imagine.)

Sister Mary Ann asked me what I wanted. I asked her if I could stay after class to ask her a question. I was scared to death. (Once I saw her pick up a desk and hold it up over her head to empty everything out from under the seat because it was messy. Like my dad said—tough broad.) I told her about my desire to become a priest. Her look softened, just for a second, and then she asked what I needed from her. So I told her.

“Well, I figured if I want to be a priest, others must want to be a priest too. So I wanted to see if I could start a Priest Club after school.” She just stared at me. Then she said music to my ears: “If that is what you want, let’s do it.” I was so happy. For the next four weeks, I was allowed to go around to the other classrooms and announce, “Hi, everyone. My name is Jerry Herships. I want to be a priest. If you want to be a priest too, meet me in Sister Mary Ann’s room after school and we’ll talk about Priest

Club stuff.” I had no idea what “Priest Club stuff” was. I just knew there had to be some kind of stuff to talk about. For four weeks, I made the rounds, and for four weeks, I showed up after school.

No one came. Ever. Not once.

And that was my first attempt at trying to start a faith community.

Between breaking down in my first mass and logging a zero for attendance in the Priest Club, it wasn’t looking good. (Plus Father Szczesny told me I had to read the Bible and I couldn’t get married. I already liked girls.) This was bad news all the way around.

I didn’t entertain the idea of ministry again for thirty-two more years. I was a late bloomer.

At one time, I had bigger dreams than anyone I know—and they were crushed. I was going to be big—big enough that all those years tending bar to make ends meet would be just a funny sidenote in my Emmy Award acceptance speech. When those dreams came crashing down, I heard God calling me to ministry—a whisper in the rubble.

I barely got through seminary. I worked for my denomination’s biggest church in a five-state region one day, and the very smallest the next. I find myself getting pissed off at the church more days than not. I heard someone say once that the good news is that 100 million people go to church on Sunday, and the bad news is that 200 million people don’t. Here’s the real kicker: I am not convinced God cares.

Over the last ten years I’ve realized a few things.

1. Jesus never said, “Sing and pray and tell me I’m great once a week.” Can’t find it. I’ve looked.

2. Jesus *did* say, “Do as I do,” “Feed my sheep,” “Go now and do the same,” “Love one another as I have loved you.”
3. There are more than four hundred verses that ask us to care for the poor. I think this was a major talking point for the Good Book. God wants us to get this one. If highlighters had been around then, I think he would have used them on those passages.
4. It is easier for everyone, clergy and congregations, to put on great events on Sunday than it is to go out and care for the poor.
5. All these comments tend to really piss off people who go to church.
6. These comments never piss off those who don’t go to church and are often listed as among the main reasons they don’t.

I think it’s ironic that the more I talk to people outside the church, the more I realize they are just looking for something bigger than themselves. They want community and a way to serve the world and give back. They could not care less about our preaching, hymns, and fancy buildings. Declining church attendance and numerous polls are evidence that support this.

The very thing people want is (ironically, perhaps) the very thing Jesus told us to give them: Serve and love others. Create community. Follow Jesus. Instead, we give them boring sermons, music they don’t know (and don’t *want* to know), and—wait for it—building campaigns.

And we wonder why no one shows up.

Not only are we not giving them what they want, but I don’t think we are giving them what Jesus wants.

By most conservative measurements, I am a heretic. No question. They thought Jesus was too. And that’s why I got into ministry. I was told a long time ago that there was only one way to do the God thing and if you didn’t like it not to let the door hit you in the ass on the way out.

I didn’t let it. I left the church for nearly ten years. Never set foot in one.

When I found out there were a lot of ways to connect to God, my first thought was, “Does anyone else know about this?” I was pissed.

Looking for people who were actually talking about these other ways of thinking, I enrolled in seminary. There (and in many conversations since), I’ve learned that most pastors are actually more progressive than we think. Most of them don’t say what they really think in regard to hell or gay marriage or the Virgin Birth, or even their own struggles with depression or addiction, because they are afraid they will lose their flock—and a ton of money.

To hell with that.

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