



How Responding to People's Needs Hurts the Church

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A CARTOON I SAW A FEW YEARS AGO IN THE *LOS ANGELES TIMES* SPEAKS to a problem that exists in the church. In the cartoon a woman stares at a display of fine jewelry. You can almost hear the sigh that accompanies her thoughts: "I hate it when 'need' and 'want' get all mixed up in my mind..."¹

Human beings are prone to confusing their wants with their needs. Defining the church's ministry by responding to people's needs is a common notion, but because of the blurred line between want and need, no matter how much we speak of needs or perceived needs, it puts the church in the position of being defined not by its faith or history but by people's wants. This trivializes the church, its mission, and its outreach. A pastor colleague once called me, frustrated with an evangelism article she'd read. The author described how congregations could survey the residents of their surrounding communities to determine their perceived needs and design programs to address those needs as outreach. Held up as an example was a church in a community with young families whose survey process resulted in the creation of a course in potty training.

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Such trivialization is tragic. It eviscerates the heart of the church's message and cuts the church off from its identity as the people of Christ. But the attitudes engendered in people who come to congregations expecting the church to make meeting their needs (or, more likely, their wants) a priority also harms the church. Simply put, when we say the church is to meet people's needs, many people personalize that message. They hear, "If I go to church, those folk will take care of me." In selling the church as a place where people's needs are met, we draw people for whom there is, at least in their perception, an implied promise that if they come to the church it will provide them with what they *think* they need. The measurement of a congregation then becomes personal: "Is it meeting *my* needs?" These needs are not limited to the basic needs of food, safety, and shelter. In all but the poorest congregations, members tend to meet those needs on their own. More often people turn to the church for emotional and spiritual well-being. They envision the church providing what they think they need to ensure contentment and satisfaction. Their confusion between needs and wants means their attitude often becomes not "Is this congregation meeting my needs?" but "Is this congregation giving me what I want?" They come believing the church will have as its priority, in terms of time and effort, taking care of whatever they feel is important. They require the church to respond to them personally.

They believe it is the church's job to listen to them, act on their ideas, and support their beliefs. Other aspects of the congregation's life, other things it might be doing, are strictly secondary to the parts that impact them directly. So, if their concern is children's ministry, they aren't interested in outreach to singles or empty-nesters. If their interest is in traditional music, contemporary hymns or a praise service will be deemed unimportant. At best, they will treat such activities with disinterest. At worst, they will see such endeavors as detractions from their concern that should therefore be eliminated.

What happens when these people feel their needs are not being met? That is, what occurs when they do not get what they want? They believe the church is letting them down. It is failing to do as promised, which they see as a breach of contract. In response, they may leave or they may challenge whatever is happening and whoever is in charge until the promised care-taking and attention are provided.

Let me insert a disclaimer here. I don't believe such attitudes are held by all who come to the church as a result of our emphasis on responding to people's needs, nor do I feel it is the only cause of disruptive behavior. It is, however, a contributing factor with dynamics worth looking at because it gives people permission to make requests and demands for services that are often unreasonable or outrageous, and gives them permission to be disruptive and to challenge church leadership. Sometimes it can even result in misplaced support for a leader's misconduct.

A Sense of Entitlement

Jesus said, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."² He also said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."³ Christian faith has always been about giving, not receiving. Those who expect the church to respond to their needs—no matter what—frequently have little interest in doing for others. They came to be cared for, so they see being asked to help others as changing the rules. The signs of declining commitment noted by many pastors—lower rates of worship attendance, pledging, and other forms of participation—indicate this emphasis on receiving. So do the requests, ranging from minor to impossible, that people feel free to make of congregations and the often extreme reactions they have when a congregation does not do as they desire.

All pastors have their stories. I still remember the stranger who walked into my office, demanded that the church pay his rent, said that if the church would not do so he would hold someone up at gunpoint, and insisted that if anyone was hurt it would be the church's fault. In another congregation, a member asked for the elderly deacons, many in their seventies and eighties, to provide her with around-the-clock care so that she could return home from the hospital rather than go to a convalescent center. Several years ago, a Los Angeles paper described a conflict between a local congregation and a woman upset that her son had been asked to leave the youth choir. (Although not stated explicitly, the impression given was that the mother had contacted the newspaper to express her dissatisfaction with the congregation's action.) The article revealed that the boy had been included for years despite cognitive, language, and behavior disorders that caused disruptive outbursts. Indeed, he required medication for his behavior. The mother would drop him off at practice without taking time to speak with leaders, observe rehearsals, or assist in any way.

She would even ask choir leaders to administer the boy's medicine.

In each of these cases the underlying thinking appears to be the same: The church is supposed to care for my needs, so I can ask whatever I desire of the church. It does not matter whether or not the congregation knows me, nor does the difficulty of my request matter. I do not need to cooperate or be flexible. It is the congregation's duty to respond, giving me what I want the way I want it.

A Source of Disruption

Paul writes, "Mend your ways, heed my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you."⁴

The increase in both the frequency and the viciousness of church violence has been amply documented elsewhere. Kenneth Haugk's *Antagonists in the Church*, M. Scott Peck's *People of the Lie*, Lloyd Rediger's *Clergy Killers*, and other works all make it clear that churches include people who are not only troublesome and disruptive but who also feel free to attack, diminish, and destroy church leaders, including and especially pastors. A portion of the blame for such disruptive conflict must rest with the needs definition of ministry. As mentioned above, when people believe the church is to care for their needs and it is not doing so, they feel free to become increasingly disruptive until they get what they want. The same expectations for personal response are applied to church leadership: If I believe the congregation is to care for my needs, then so are the congregation's leaders. They are to visit me when I want to be visited and stay away when I don't. They are to share my concerns and interests, make sure the kinds of programs I want are available when I want them, and design worship to include the kind of music I like. The expectations are even greater for pastors: Pastors should preach sermons I approve of. Their prayers should be neither too long nor too short, and should cover the topics I consider important. They should be

available whenever I want them. One woman illustrated such attitudes when she said of her pastor, "I know he has a right to a family of his own, but he spends so much time with his kids that you get the feeling that if he had to choose, he'd choose them. How can you trust a pastor like that?"

Conflict develops because, just as the measure of the church becomes personal, so does the measure of the pastor. The question is not "Is he or she doing God's work?" It's not "Is he or she taking care of the church?" It's not even "Is he or she doing a good job overall?" The question becomes "Is this pastor meeting my needs?" In reality it often is "Is this pastor giving me what I want?" No one can meet such expectations for every member of the congregation. Sooner or later the congregational leadership will disappoint someone. When that happens, the disappointment is again treated as a breach of contract. The church is failing to do what it is supposed to do and the disappointed member feels free to challenge the guilty leaders until they capitulate.

Misplaced Loyalties

One of the ironies is that, while some pastors are attacked no matter how much they do, others are defended despite misconduct. Indeed, there are almost always members strongly championing their pastor even in the face of extensive evidence of egregious misconduct. Part of this is the natural denial of grief. When misconduct is first discovered, it is hard to believe. As the evidence mounts, however, the support continues. In a case with strong evidence of significant financial

misconduct, one member stood at the congregational meeting that had been called to accept the pastor's resignation and asked, "Why must we lose our pastor over this? Look at all the good he's done for this congregation. He helped me raise my children. Why must he resign just because of this problem?"

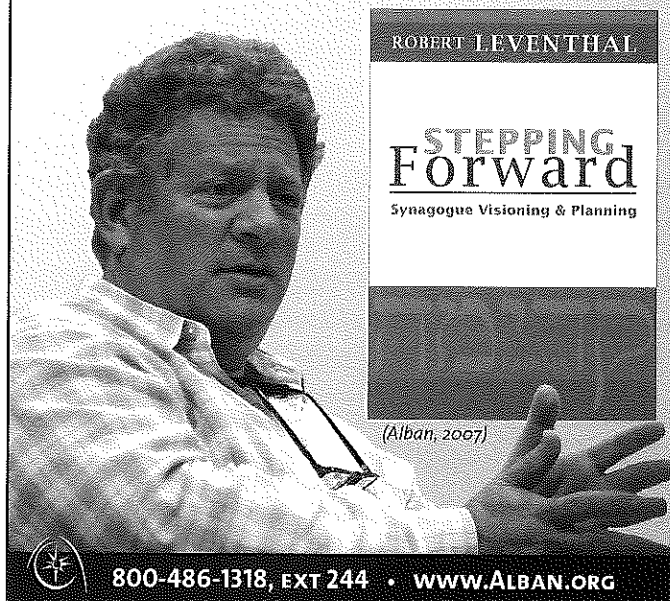
Because the needs mentality encourages people to measure pastors by what they personally receive, it encourages such misplaced support. Just as it does not matter what a pastor is doing *for* others if my needs are *not* being met, so it does not matter what a pastor is doing *to* others if my needs *are* being met. Misconduct thus becomes unimportant when it does not affect me directly.

Tolerating misconduct, however, undermines the church. The Roman Catholic Church continues to struggle with the aftereffects of covering up priests' sexual misconduct. Individual congregations take years to recover community respect after flagrant misconduct. In the long run, tolerating misconduct undermines us all.

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Changing Our Language

To counter these trends, a shift in thinking is called for, and this shift must be reflected in our language. There are other, richer ways of speaking about ministry and mission than just talking about needs. Congregations that move beyond that language find that their self-understanding expands. As a denominational representative, I worked with one congregation that had been through a disastrous two-year pastorate. As we talked, I asked them who benefited from their existence and how. They answered solely in terms of trying to respond to community needs—providing a preschool to help young families, and helping the homeless who came to their door. We then spoke of what tied them together as a church. They spoke of shared bonds of fellowship and growing together in faith, of the importance of worship in their lives. The word “need” was never mentioned. I pointed out that they had just described two different kinds of pastors, and that pastors whose primary emphasis was responding to community needs used their time differently than those whose primary concern was nurturing a community of faith. As we reflected on the priorities of a pastor focused on needs, one of the congregants spoke up. “That’s what we just got rid of,” he said. From this conversation and others, the congregation came to realize that the center of their life was not to respond to community needs but to be a commu-

nity of faith. They changed their self-description and pastoral expectations, resulting in their next minister being a better fit. They still have the preschool and feed the homeless, but now they do it as an expression of their life as a community of faith.

Looking at spiritual gifts is another way to move beyond the “needs” mentality because it reminds people that they have much to give. One congregation I worked with as an interim pastor had a 12-week new members’ class. From the very first session, new members were asked how they would share their gifts. At the last session they were not only asked to fill out a financial pledge card but also to complete a spiritual gifts inventory and describe where and how they would be involved in the life of the congregation. The whole 12-week program was designed to remind them that they were becoming participants in the church, not just recipients of it.

I’ve heard of other congregations in which new member classes are asked to do something for the congrega-

tion as a whole, in celebration of their membership. It can be something as simple as painting a classroom or as ambitious as starting a new outreach or education effort. The point is that by celebrating their membership with a gift, the new members recognize from the beginning that they are not simply receiving what the church offers, they are joining a community. In the congregation I’ve been serving most recently, it was new members and not-yet members who instigated a series of movie nights both for the congregation and as a way to reach into the community. They also took it upon themselves to repair and reupholster a number of chairs so that moviegoers, AA members, and others coming to the church would have a comfortable place to sit.

Reclaiming the language of call is another way to inspire a new awareness of purpose. As an interim minister, I often introduce congregations to Frederick Buechner’s comment, “The place where God calls you to is the place where your deep

Correction

On page 7 of the winter issue, in “Reclaiming the Story: Narrative Leadership in Ministry,” it was inaccurately stated that Jews celebrate the founding story of the Exodus in their homes each Sabbath. The sentence should have read “each Passover.” *Congregations* regrets this error.

gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."⁵ The wonder is how much this quote changes congregations' understanding of mission. They stop trying to duplicate what another congregation does well and begin to consider what they can do. They stop looking for someone to tell them what to do and start generating ideas themselves. Best of all, ministry moves from being something they are supposed to do to being a celebration of their own call. The ideas vary: One congregation started a medical clinic on its property. Another built senior housing. An urban congregation runs an adult day care program. And a rural congregation created a volunteer-run mission program that helps people sign up for low-cost medicine, gives rides to older folks, and provides what aid they can to whoever needs it.

The congregation I recently served rejoiced in realizing that it does best leading with its heart. When I first arrived they were drifting, worn out from past conflicts, and going through the motions without excitement or enthusiasm. The first spark came when the chair of worship asked to do a Blue Christmas service for those facing the holidays with loss. Although only 12 people attended—half not members—the decision was made that night to do it again because it touched people. The next year 30 people participated. When a homeless man attended church one Sunday, a member slipped me a 20-dollar bill to pass on to him, saying, "Better it come from the church than from me."

In my end-of-the-year report, I shared my observation that the congregation was most excited when responding to people's hurt. Slowly I began to hear comments like, "You've recognized us," and members began to voice ideas. One challenged the congregation, which has fewer than 100 voting members, to give 1,000 hours in direct service over the course of the year. They did it in six months, and are still

going. One member takes his dog to visit hospital patients. Another entertains hospitalized children, dressed as a clown. Yet another is coordinating working with a local relief organization to sponsor a homeless individual or family. Many others help sick neighbors by shopping for them or taking them to their doctor's appointments. This year's annual meeting included a visual presentation of the variety of things the congregation does, including organizing a team for the Breast Cancer run/walk, taking up special collections to combat world hunger, helping residents of a ski town devastated by lack of snow, supporting a church in India with a project to build a dorm for families of hospital patients, and keeping in touch with and praying for those who are ill.

"Need" is an elastic term. Many congregational ministries could be placed under it. If the needs aren't physical, they are emotional or spiritual. The problem with the idea of ministry as responding to people's needs is not in what congregations do but in how people come to think about the church. It reduces the church to a service provider whose clients/recipients are free to complain whenever they are dissatisfied. Lost is the idea of people being and becoming the church. Lost is the understanding of the church as a community of faith whose members struggle together to draw closer to God and to express that closeness in how they live and interact with the world. ♦

NOTES

1. Jerry Van Amerongen, "Ballard Street," *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 2001.
2. Matthew 20:28.
3. Matthew 14:24.
4. 2 Corinthians 13:11.
5. As quoted in <http://necessityproclivity-anddelight.wordpress.com/2006/07/31/buechner-on-vocation/>.

Questions for Reflection

1. What is a need? What is a want? How do they differ? What causes people to confuse them?
2. When you think about the church dealing with people's needs, what kinds of needs do you consider? Are there needs you do not think it would be appropriate for the church to address? How do you identify those needs?
3. Have you encountered instances where individuals expected or demanded that the church deal with their concerns in ways you felt were inappropriate? Why do you think they believed their requests were acceptable?
4. Ministries are often evaluated by how many people's needs were met. Can you think of other ways to measure the importance of a ministry? What else would be important in the life of the church?
5. How does looking at spiritual gifts shift the emphasis of ministry and outreach? Who is the focus when we speak of needs? Who is the focus when we speak of gifts?
6. How does speaking of one's call, or a congregation's call, change the understanding of what the church is about? What does the Buechner quote say to you about the work of the church?