

Welcome to a full-service secular church



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

For a number of years my uncle Paul and aunt Vera managed a Standard service station in Billings, Montana. One summer, my parents drove my sister and me from Seattle to visit them. I don't remember going to their service station but I do remember a scary lightning storm and a whirlwind of jokes, puns and teasing from the Highland brothers.

The younger generation probably doesn't know much about a "service station." There was gasoline, of course, but much more. Some may think I'm making this up, but pulling your car into the station you'd be met by an attendant – maybe my uncle – dressed in a nice white shirt with his name embroidered on the pocket. He (always a male in those days) would come to your window, smile and greet you. "Fill 'er up?," he'd ask. As the tank was filling, the attendant would wash your car's windows all around. "Check the oil?," he'd offer, raising the hood to bring the dip stick over to show the oil level. If you asked

him to check the air in the tires – "Sure thing." "Anything else?," he'd ask as you handed him a few dollars to cover the gas. If the car needed any repairs you could pull into the work bay and have it looked at by a mechanic.

While you were waiting, you could use the (unlocked) restroom before stepping inside the small shop and buy some water, gum or a map. If you needed directions, a friendly employee would gladly explain the route or show you on a map. Most of the time you could trust they were accurate. They wanted your business and encouraged you to "drop by" again.

That's a "service" station. A place to stop and rest (the original "rest stop"), stretch your legs, feel that people are glad you drove in – where you sense you are welcome, even important. "We're here to serve," was an unspoken motto.

Uncle Paul, like his three brothers, had a great sense of humor and a contagious laugh. In fact, for several years after seeing Paul I would mimic his unique kind of contagious laughter. I have no doubt he made many customers smile if not break out laughing with his teasing, puns and practical jokes.

What does a gas station have to do with church or any religious congregation? If you have to ask, I wonder how

many "services" you have attended. I would be curious if your congregation has any of the elements of a service station. If there is assistance to "fellow travelers" on the road of life, how do you present that? Do you want people to become members of your "service station" or help them continue on their own journey?

When driving to a neighborhood gas station this morning to put air in the tires, I thought of uncle Paul and how he would react to paying for air. I think he would laugh with disgusted disbelief: "Pay for AIR?!" As I drove up, ready to pay the usual dollar to fill the tires, I noticed a fancy new machine with a computer screen and credit card slot. It took a long minute to find where to put the coins – a dollar-fifty! The price of air went up by fifty cents since I was there last. Paul might pay, but then figure out a way never to return. I'm sure, like my Dad, he would drive all over until he found Free Air. I wouldn't blame him, even if the cost and time might not be worth the effort.

I never saw an "attendant" this morning. No smile of greeting; no one to wash my windows or check the oil when I filled up with gas. If I had needed any "service," where would I go? If I needed directions, who would show me on a

map, take the time to help?

As I envision it, a "secular church" would be a lot like a service station. People who make you feel welcome no matter who you are or what you need ("top off the tank" with an encouraging word; "clean the windows" for clearer vision; invite to stop, rest and be refreshed). The secular service station would offer practical help, "repairs" if necessary (counseling, referrals to local assistance).

It would get messy sometimes. My aunt Vera was a quiet sort, but I do remember her graphic description of cleaning the bathrooms at the station. Service isn't always pleasant.

If I was a manager of a secular service station I would probably laugh with folks, listen to them, teach a few things, learn even more, and join people in the joyful exercise of freethinking. I'd happily give them some breathing room, and ... free air.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. His latest books are "A Freethinker's Gospel" and "Broken Bridges." Learn more at chighland.com.