

Missing potlucks and singing, but not theology



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

There seem to be growing numbers of clergy who have reached the point of no return. Like me, they sense that it's time to "come out," "come clean" and speak up out of honesty, integrity and frankly, sanity. I'm talking about those who discover, in their rational "hour of decision," that faith and freethinking have a tense relationship, and the freedom to choose not to believe the same as past

generations can be a great relief, truly liberating. None of this is easy, and many clergy end up resigning, getting fired or just break down and burn out.

I asked a minister who has served for years as a chaplain and counselor how he would frame the development of his religious views. He responded with a description of his journey from being an evangelical Christian in the South, to a moderate Christian in college and seminary, before choosing to be ordained as a liberal-minded pastor. Serving in ministries with adults and children, he says quite poignantly and pointedly: "I gravitated to being a liberal thinking Christian and then a fed-up Christian." I was glad he had more to say about that! "I

was fed-up with self-serving exclusivist and exceptionalistic theology that excludes people in the name of God and the Church." Sensitive to the exceptionally poor treatment of others, especially those outside the institutional church, he witnessed people "being shunned, marginalized, and downright hurt, if not traumatized." I find it significant that he didn't become a church-hater, or angry anti-religionist. He chose a more positive, constructive path forward. As he says: "I wanted to be connected to people, to serve people, and be connected to some way of thinking and living bigger and better than me."

Through this former minister's exit from faith he found a "good fit" in Bud-

dhist psychology and philosophy but couldn't settle into calling himself a Buddhist (and "atheist" just seemed "too combative"). Agnostic didn't apply either. A closer look at science and the research that shows we "live at our best" in healthy relationships and community, led him to Humanism. Identifying as a humanist guides him to be "actively involved in and have responsibility in the relationships" with others. "Humanism is the best of what the Church community is supposed to be about [such as loving your neighbor] without the bad theology of exclusion, judgment and [salvation]." He adds a phrase both hu-

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morous and truthful: “I do miss potlucks and singing in four part-harmony, though.”

I asked him what has been inspiring in his post-Christian life. He responded: “Journeying alongside others in hard places and going through hard times.” He speaks out for those who are judged and excluded. This relates to another question about challenges he’s faced.

He points to “The ongoing exclusivist...thinking of the church...the outdated, anachronistic theology of the church [that] has done more to hurt those in the LGBTQIA+ community and those who believe in either another religion, nothing at all, or humanity itself.”

As a long-time chaplain myself, I was particularly interested in his chaplaincy experience. He worked

with vulnerable children “who suffered a multitude of traumas” as well as with people of all ages who have felt “shunned by a traditional faith community” where, as he notes: “traditional theology tends to only work for those in traditional theological communities.”

The worn-out theology of God’s plan of grace for everyone “falls apart in the midst of tragedy and trauma and devolves to an attempt to make God look good and human beings to look sinful, stupid, and disobedient — and blames us for our own or others suffering.”

The compelling story of this “new humanist” made me wonder if he feels comfortable going public with his emerging beliefs. He responded: “I don’t talk about it unless specifically asked...I find there are few safe spaces to openly and honestly talk about it.” Not only do some assume he’s a Christian because of his past ministry, he has heard people call him “Christlike.” He finds that both complimentary and ironic. He simply wants to “journey” alongside others who seek the same peaceful, purposeful life he does.

In response to my last question about what concerns him the most, and what he is most hopeful about, he replied by emphasizing the hurt caused by old theologies, violence toward children, Christian Nationalism and treatment of the poorest. He is hopeful more of us are leaving harmful theology behind to include and accept those who are different; he is encouraged the more he sees people doing good in their community, not because a god commands it, but because it’s right.

Though some of us may miss potlucks and singing with a choir, we also need more of this open and honest truth-telling.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (www.chighland.com).