



Congregational Life Centre

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Hillhurst is Hospitality, Spirituality & Social Justice

An interview with John Pentland, Hillhurst United Church, Calgary

The church sanctuary was already quite full when we arrived 15 minutes early. We joined the line for coffee then took our seat. Before long the ushers were bringing in chairs to line the aisles. The band was playing Elton John's music, a special request of the young adults who were being confirmed that day.

John Pentland is the minister at Hillhurst United Church in Calgary. He reports they average 250 on a Sunday with lots of kids. Special days like Easter mean two services. It was not always that way. Five years ago when he arrived there were 39 people on the roll.



What has made the difference? From what we observed, two things - passion and leadership. John Pentland has a passion for sharing God's love. That means reaching out to the community - putting the community first. It also means being passionate about developing the congregational leadership needed to make it happen.

John has a way of putting people at ease with his relaxed informal style. Behind that however lies a commitment to relate to our culture - sometimes challenging it, sometimes celebrating it, but always using the language of today.

Staffing

Staffing is the key, John affirms. "When I got here there was me and a 20 hour-a-week secretary. Now there are nine staff." One of the new ones is Joanne Anquist, the Worship Animator. The bulletin we were handed on Sunday had full colour pictures and biographies of each of the young people being confirmed. As they came forward, their photos were projected on the video screen. Worship often uses video clips, John told us, and worship animation involves finding the right clips. Joanne does a musical once a year involving many of the congregation. They played to 500 people over two sell-out nights. For baptisms she creates an insert featuring a picture of each baby along with the child's biography.

"When I got here," John told us, "we were not going to have a Sunday School. Then a couple of kids showed up, and I said let's hire somebody ten hours a week. Let's just do it!" They now have two people each employed for 15 hours a week with responsibilities for youth and Sunday School.

The Office Administrator Marsha Mah Poy has moved to 30 hours each week. There is also a music director, an accompanist and a janitor on staff. They are in the process of hiring an information technology person 20 hours a week. The focus is on hiring competence and those who fit the organization's culture.



The Board

John is a fan of Jim Collins' book Good to Great. The book says if you want to grow from an organization that is good to one that is great, you have to get the "wrong people off the bus and the right people on the bus."

Getting the "right people on the bus" applies to the Board as well as staff. They look for people with the right qualifications. "Faith is number one," in John's mind. He wants people who "are not afraid of faith conversation. They have to show up at church. They are good in their field, highly competent."

The property person, for example, is a Dean of Veterinary Medicine, a busy guy. He sorts issues out by e-mail, but the work gets done. They have not had a Worship Chair for six months because they have not found the right person. Getting the wrong people off the bus is something different - but you have to do it. Last summer John had to remove a person from a position where they did not fit.

Lisa MacBeth is another one of the "right people." She does the announcements and has over 80 people in the 25 to 35 age bracket on the church Facebook page. They do a pub night once a month.

The Board starts their meeting at six and are done by eight. Every Board meeting starts with a meal together. The Board Executive has met earlier and "taken all the junk off the agenda." Every other month they go for beer after the meeting.

Inspiration for the Board agenda comes from the book Governance as Leadership. The first ten minutes handles all the Fiduciary detail - anything to do with budgets and money. Next to be dealt with are Strategic items - current issues, where we are at, the building. The most time goes to what is termed Generative - the big, long-term issues. Where are we going? What do we need to look at? John says this is what is exciting. He does not want to ask anyone to come on the Board unless they are going to have a good time. "We don't want to bore people."

Values

The congregation has identified three values that guide its activities: hospitality, spirituality and social justice.

Hospitality certainly happens in the sanctuary on Sunday. The coffee is good and the welcome is genuine. The church serves lunch every week following the service, except in the summer when there is breakfast. "It's real food served by people in the church," John commented. We saw Bill Phipps, former moderator of the United Church, in the kitchen serving hot dogs the Sunday we were there.

John told us a story that underlines their commitment to hospitality:

Marsha Mah Poy is our Administrator, but she is hospitality like no other. She knits people together all the time. One Sunday while I was preaching I could see people's eyes looking behind me. Two aboriginal folk who come during the week for lunches had entered through the side door. They were obviously dirty and were taking a long time to get to the front row and sit down. Without missing a beat Marsha moved from the back to the coffee urn, picked up two mugs full of coffee and brought them to these two sitting down. I have never seen it better than that. Nothing was said. No production. Just naturally done.

My father-in-law who goes to a Presbyterian church in the city was up in the balcony one day. When that same thing happened at his church, the service stopped and the ushers escorted them out.

John's D.Min. thesis dealt with "Speaking Faith in Public Space." He is very conscious of the need

to avoid churchy language when you are reaching out to new people. And there are new people. "A woman who came here sat at the back holding her Starbucks coffee. She waved me over and said, 'I've never been to a church before. I've never been to a baptism or a wedding, a funeral or Sunday. What do I need to know?' We think about what would make her feel comfortable."

The second value is spirituality. Monday is education night. There have been courses on parenting, the wider family, social justice, yoga, and theology. The many small groups provide a time for people to get to know each other to the point where they can share their deep spiritual questions.

The third value is social justice. A sign in the front hall indicates the church uses Bull Frog Energy - that's wind power. The congregation is active around homelessness and host "Inn From the Cold."

At the beginning of each Board meeting someone is designated to take notes. At the end of the meeting they report back what was discussed and how it fits with the congregation's three values.

Worship

Worship is very intentional, but very modern. The mood is casual, open and comfortable.

The people who are associated with a church fall into one of three types: the committed, the comfortable and the curious. Churches that are in decline tend to have the bulk of their people in the committed circle. Churches holding their own add a layer of "comfortable pew" folk. Hillhurst is growing, and there is a reason. "At Hillhurst we pay the most attention to those who are curious. If you are going to expand, you have to attract the curious."

Prayer time at worship takes a good ten minutes. "I don't write the prayers. We ask people what is on their mind. It is a time of sharing. Sometime there are lots, sometimes not too many." People give testimonials at least once a month. "People are anxious to share what they really believe."

The development of a theme over a series of services has been well received. They did "God's Top Ten", which as you can guess were the Ten Commandments. The "Seven Deadly Sins" series was based on a book by that name. It is a matter of engaging the culture head on. It is John's belief that "the culture is really starved for good spirituality in worship."

One thing John is clear about. "You have to have a preacher. I don't know a church that can do without someone who can say something of value."

Time Management

How does John spend his time? The answer is very intentionally. He spends a lot more time with his Blackberry communicating with people than he does in his office. Even the computer is turned on only once or twice a week. The Blackberry handles e-mail and phone calls while on the move. "I use my Blackberry in worship occasionally so the congregation get the point. I'll say, 'Greg e-mailed me this week and this is what he said.' It's a great tool. It is really essential in my mind."

Lots of time is spent with individuals, church staff and doing education events. Baptism is a big deal. Every family is invited for lunch. John does his own pre-marriage work with couples. "I want to know the couples I am marrying. As well, they meet other couples. They show up three times. It's small group ministry."

John discovered there are courses when you get married and when you get divorced. The course he does once a month called "Building Healthy Relationships" fills the gap for people who are living together or already married. There are same sex couples and people who have been married for years. At the end they all go down the street for a beer or a coffee.

In the middle of all this, self care and family are important. The work week has a maximum of 40 hours. Friday and Saturday are days off.

Reaching Out

The congregation has just finished a fundraising project for building renovations. The campaign in May raised \$1.3 million and the plan is to bring that up to \$2.5 million. The church part of their complex is a heritage space. They will redo that and lop off the 50 year old hall to create new church space and 15 units of affordable housing. They hope to connect into government funding and private donors for the housing part.

Co-chairs of the financial campaign were 24-year-old Hillary, and Tim who is retired engineer. They organized a wine and cheese launch for 250 people and were able to announce that \$900,000 had already been raised. It is another example of getting the right people to do the job.

The story is not over. For the latest, check out the church web site at

<http://www.hillhurstunited.com>

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