

Retail evangelist: What I learned selling shoes

by [Norman B. Bendroth](#) in the [October 2, 2013](#) issue



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One year when I was between interim gigs I became a sales associate at Macy's. I'd be a natural, I thought, and so I took a job selling women's shoes.

When I alerted Facebook friends to my new vocation, one of them sent me a cartoon of a medieval painting of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. A disciple asked the kneeling Jesus, "Do you have these in a 10EE?" and Jesus replied, "Let me check in back."

Despite my initial confidence, the job had a steep learning curve. After all, my last retail job had been during college, and things had changed. Every morning, the management and staff started the day with a rally in the handbag section. We applauded sales associates who had opened the most new accounts, cheered if we had reached our sales goal the day before, and heard pep talks about new sales goals. We left with an injection of "atta-boy" adrenalin.

This retail evangelism or "Macy's magic" wasn't unlike church outreach training. Make contact, our Macy's supervisors told us. Ask open-ended questions. Give suggestions. Inspire the sale. Finally, celebrate the sale. We never understood what that last directive meant—dance around a cash register?

It's the same at church. Make contact—What brings you to church today? Ask open-ended questions—What are you looking for in a church? Give suggestions—We have an amazing youth group that may interest your teenagers. Inspire the sale—We need questioning, searching people like you in our congregation. Finally, celebrate the sale—I'm sure you'll enjoy it here. It seems like a good fit for you and for us.

Yet the real business of selling shoes was about a lot more than a smile and an encouraging comment—it was rigorous and challenging. I lost ten pounds running back and forth to the stock room, where I'd search frantically for one particular shoe in shelves of shoeboxes that ran ten feet high and 300 feet long. Incredibly, we learned where things were. One day I asked a fellow sales associate where the Nine West medium-heeled pumps in gray alligator skin were located, and without missing a beat he said, "Aisle 9 on the right about a third of the way up."

The customer base was as diverse as the shoe selections. Families from Colombia, Haiti and Greece would buy 15 to 20 pairs of shoes during markdowns using one coupon at a time to get maximum savings. I asked one Colombian gentleman why he wanted so many shoes. "I'm sending them home," he said. Aging women would find the one shoe that fit just right and buy three pairs in different colors.

Doses of hard-won common courtesy went a long way. I was ringing up the purchase of a woman who was trying to squeeze every dime she could out of available discounts. She asked how much 15 percent off would be. I did a rough estimate in my head, but that wasn't enough; she wanted a sales slip on each item to prove it. When I told her that this was not possible, she raised her voice. I responded as calmly as I could while mentally sticking pins into her.

The most satisfying part of the experience was working with sales associates from all over the world. Asar from Egypt told me about Coptic Christianity. Daryl from the Dominican Republic showed up late for mass because he forgot that we were on daylight savings time. A young Indian woman was a nominal Hindu who had been educated in Episcopalian schools.

I became kind of a surreptitious chaplain for them all. Indira cried on my shoulder after being chewed out by her first rude American customer. Maitea told me about her weekly trips to take her dad for dialysis. One colleague had a sluggard boyfriend who wouldn't get a job, another couldn't make ends meet, and still another showed me pictures of his daughter's graduation. My Ugandan colleague asked for help in

picking out a good used car.

The old divines speak of common grace and special grace, the later being the grace that comes to those who trust Christ; common grace is the glue that holds families, neighborhoods, cities and the world together in the midst of all of our fussing and fuming. For those few months in the world of retail I saw how common grace holds a disparate group of people together.

Every pastor should work at Macy's. He or she will learn how to punch a clock, take only a half hour lunch, meet a sales goal, work under a boss, deal with irritating customers and toil alongside people who have no choice but to come in the next day and do it all over again. I could not hide behind a divinity degree or brag about things I've accomplished; I had to prove that I could sell shoes. I've said a lot in sermons about how we're all equal, but in the shoe department this was real. It was an odd place to learn how to be a better pastor, a better husband and father and a better human being.