Biblical, evangelical—and progressive

In the United Church of Canada, a liberal congregation is growing. Here's how.

by Jason Byassee in the November 8, 2016 issue

Hillhurst United Church, Calgary. Photo by Sydney Fream.

Can a church be both open and inclusive on social questions and at the same time evangelical in outreach and committed to scripture and doctrine? Wouldn't you want to be part of a church like that?

It is not hard to find theologically open churches that aren't engaged with scripture and doctrine. And it is easy to find churches committed to scripture and doctrine that make the lines of belonging impossibly narrow. Could a church offer the best of both worlds?

John Pentland, minister at Hillhurst United Church in Calgary, Alberta, thinks so, and his church seems poised to reach a generation of Canadians who are skeptical of religion in general and Christianity in particular. He admits that this is surprising—those looking for innovative congregations and dramatic church growth are not likely to look at the United Church of Canada.

The United Church started as almost a state church in 1925. It was a merger between Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists that was ratified by an act of Parliament. The United Church has just over half a million followers. Atheists in Canada number 4.5 million. Recent media attention to the United Church has

focused on the “atheist” United Church minister Gretta Vosper in Toronto, whose denunciations of the deity would seem to make her like a scientist who doesn’t believe in the periodic table. The United Church has not yet managed to nudge her to other employment.

Pentland arrived at Hillhurst a decade ago when the church consisted of about 50 older people and a handful of children. The board that hired him warned him that they weren’t sure they could employ him for more than two years.

Today 450 people worship at two services, and the church is starting a third service and contemplating a building program. HUC has 250 children on its rolls, and between 60 and 100 of them are in church each Sunday. The budget, once south of six figures, is now north of $950,000.

Pentland says it’s better to serve a church that’s nearly closed instead of one that still has some strength left. “They’re less likely to oppose everything,” he says.

The turnaround at Hillhurst may not be miraculous, and by the standards of more evangelical churches in Canada’s larger cities, HUC’s growth is only modest. Giant Christian and Missionary Alliance congregations ring Calgary in what’s often called Canada’s Bible Belt. (With its oil and cattle industries and megachurches, Alberta resembles Texas.) Some colleagues of Pentland’s suggest that anyone can grow a church in Calgary, given its province’s greater friendliness to Christianity than is found in, say, British Columbia or Quebec.

Pentland’s associate Danielle Ayana James says UC pastors react with jealousy to church growth stories attributed to ministerial talent: “We play whack-a-mole. When someone raises their head, it gets smashed down.” The Hillhurst-Sunnyside neighborhood in Calgary hardly seems inherently friendly to Christianity. It’s a hip part of a gentrifying downtown with pubs and pot shops. I saw more Buddhist places of worship than churches.

Pentland describes an early Sunday at HUC when he was robed up, waiting to process into the sanctuary with the choir, and noticed a line forming for brunch at the restaurant across the street. He wondered what it would take for a similar line to form at HUC. He laughed, and then shared his thought with the sparse congregation. They laughed too.

What sparked the change? Pentland ascribes HUC's growth to three factors: its open and affirming ministry to LGBTQ people, its approach to worship, and its children's ministry. Pentland's book *Fishing Tips: How Curiosity Transformed a Community of Faith* (Edge) names several more factors, including HUC's approach to media. Pentland's own quirky genius is surely also a factor.

The United Church of Canada was an early pioneer in the ordination of women, and it moved to ordain gay and lesbian people in 1988—a shift so momentous it is referred to in denominational shorthand simply as "88." Not every congregation was happy with the move, and HUC was a center of opposition.

Pentland describes an early day on the job at HUC when he furtively slapped a rainbow flag sticker on the front door. He expected it to be taken down, but it wasn't. A board member at the time remembers a giant rainbow flag going up beside the choir loft. Those moves were made without consultation. But when the board wanted to make the church an official "affirming congregation" in favor of gay inclusion, Pentland slowed things down. Discussion over whether and how to make that move took more than a year. Pentland had an intuitive feel for how fast to move on the issue.

Mainline and evangelical churches in both the United States and in Canada seem to agree on one thing: gay-inclusive churches don't grow. Mainliners assume that doing the right thing for LGBTQ people means folks will leave and churches and denominations will split. HUC shows otherwise. It now has an associate pastor, Pam Rocker, whose title is "Affirming and Creative Coordinator."

Rocker grew up as an evangelical at one of the area's megachurches but found herself on the outs because of her sexual orientation. She summarizes HUC's goal in its affirming ministry with the acronym PIE: "public, intentional, and explicit." The church has brochures describing its ministries to and with LGBTQ people. Pentland speaks proudly of the dozen or so trans people who are part of the community (and tells me he's sorry I didn't get to hear a testimony from one of them on the day I was there). The church advertises events offered by other inclusive organizations in the city as well.

Terry Rock, a lay leader at HUC, describes this as a "wedge" issue: it determines whether a church has integrity when it claims that God loves everyone. LGBTQ inclusion isn't just a matter of checking a box and moving on. It has to be "ongoing,

ongoing, ongoing," said Pam Rocker.

And the stance has borne fruit. Rocker spoke of a couple who recently attended the church for the first time. "How did you find us?" she asked. "We saw you in the pride parade six years ago," they said. That kind of fruit is not the fast-growing kind.

Rocker told of a UC church in Toronto where a lesbian woman attended for 12 years but didn't come out until the church officially became an affirming congregation. Only then did she know it was safe. "Conservative churches don't realize they already have gay people in their midst," she said.

On the Sunday I attended, a dozen or more people told me they've only been coming to HUC for a few months. A young woman named Anne said she grew up Anglican but found that HUC matched her progressive values better. The Anglican Church in Canada has actually been out front on gay inclusion, but Anne's presence demonstrated what Rocker means about HUC being out front in a PIE way: the symbols, programming, and staffing at the church make that commitment unmistakable. Then someone like Anne turns up and calls the place hers.

The second engine for HUC's growth, according to Pentland, is its manner of worship. He doesn't just mean the music, though it's a fine mix of liberal praise choruses (scrubbed of any masculine language and nearly of any singable tunes) and traditional hymns played on the organ. (Pentland calls the music "pretty white bread.") Rather, Pentland is interested in the way that worship can be narrated. In the service, there is no insider language or code or obscure acronyms or naming of people "everyone knows" that newcomers of course don't know.

HUC's worship is what might be called a "teaching liturgy," or what the ancient church called "mystagogy." Everything that is done is explained, opened up for the uninitiated, and marveled at. Pentland's language is always aimed not at the "committed" or the "contented" but at the "curious"—those just outside the church's current reach.

His first words on Sunday echo the mantra on the banner out front: "Whoever you are, wherever you're at, you're welcome on the journey." He repeats that slogan four more times in the first 15 minutes. When folks stand to join the church, he reflects on what's going on: "This is amazing, that in 2016 people join a church." He laments that at a recent ordination service no one said anything similar: "There were

nine hymns, Jamaican music, a 52-page bulletin, it took two and a half hours, and no one said, ‘Isn’t it amazing that in 2016 people would get ordained?’”

Pentland names the challenges the church faces and the surprising ways they are often met. And, as his associate Danielle James puts it, Pentland does all this in a manner best described as playful. When a new member gave a testimony about how good it was to hear from Pentland that it’s OK for one’s mind to wander in church, the congregation laughed and Pentland deadpanned, with perfect timing, “Sorry, I wasn’t listening.”

Moments in the liturgy that are often lifeless elsewhere—even in highly liturgical churches—are filled with energy. When Pentland promises the people that they are “healed, forgiven, and set free” by Jesus (another oft-repeated mantra), he tells them to turn and offer peace to one another. “This is our most important work this morning,” he said—to greet one another with the peace we’ve just received from God. During the community’s prayers, folks speak up about what they need—an unusual practice for such a large gathering.

One prayer request during worship turned into a ministry—a support group for mothers of kids addicted to video games. “I never would have thought of it,” Pentland said, but one prayer request made it happen.

At the conclusion of the service, people joined to sing the theme song to *Cheers*. I winced a little, but the congregation loved it. It showed another of HUC’s commitments—it insists there is no wall between secular and sacred, that churches have nothing to fear from the world, that God is already at work “out there” and in everyone. Pentland leads worship as constant catechesis.

A major engine of the church, Pentland says, is children’s ministry, called Kidspace at HUC. The children are in worship for the first 20 minutes and then head to their own classes (a common pattern in Canadian churches). Pastor Sheena Trotter-Dennis leads this ministry and has discovered a number of gifted teachers in the church’s midst. Kids who attend often ask their parents if they can come back. Terry Rock, the lay leader and a local politician and business owner, says his daughter demanded that her parents take her to church. “There was a time when we aggressively avoided church,” Rock said. Kidspace and his daughter changed that.

In the land of Christendom, people often assume that young adults will come back to church when they have kids, almost by instinct. Observers of post-Christendom

know that this no longer happens automatically. HUC makes a significant investment in children's ministry. "We wince when Kidspace is about to deliver its budget," longtime board chair Bryce Paton said—but the church meets the need.

Pentland is convinced most churches come at budgeting the wrong way. "We tend to pay for what we have, instead of what we want," he said. So HUC funds the areas it wants to see flourish. "It's a human resources and a programming basic," Paton said. "But the church often has yet to figure it out."

Pentland recently baptized a four-year-old who had insisted, "I want the water," in a way that indicated she expected to meet God there and be changed. Before the baptism, her mother testified that she'd grown up in the United Church and had missed the stories and songs. The girl's father got up and said: "I'm an atheist, so I feel like a fake here. But what you're doing makes sense." The congregation erupted in applause.

"It was our most important baptism in a generation," Pentland said. He was pointing to the way it combined childlike faith, adult churchmanship, and honest doubt. The sequence of testimonies summoned a favorite word at HUC: authenticity.

Another engine of growth less prominent in Pentland's talking points but clear in his book is communication. It is rare to find a mainline church whose website and social media presence are not dated in some way. Early on, HUC hired a communications director (it was Rocker, who is now the affirming minister). Its print media is also sharp.

Pentland told of how the church used its sidewalk sign effectively in its pedestrian-friendly neighborhood. An early effort said "Happy Hour 11 AM Sunday." Rock said that while walking and texting in front of the church, he literally stumbled over a sign that said, "We don't do guilt." He went home and told his wife about it.

Pentland is a frequent contributor to the letters section in the local *Calgary Herald* and to Toronto's *Globe and Mail*—including the morning after the Orlando massacre. A regular preaching feature is a Reel Theology, on the year's Academy Awards nominees. "People forward those sermons to friends," he says. "They don't do that if I preach on, say, forgiveness."

Pentland contrasts HUC's media strategy with churches that have their Christmas Eve worship times posted in February or have a sign like the one he saw in Calgary,

“Tea and dainties 2 pm”: “Why don’t you just put up that you’re old and boring?” he asks.

This gift for communication isn’t just external marketing. Every Sunday Pentland asks a question and has congregants engage with a neighbor. “What’s a group you belong to?” was the topic when I visited. The woman beside me was a Ph.D. student in philosophy who belongs to a screenwriters’ group working on a film set in Calgary. “I missed the Catholic Church, came for the building here, and stayed for the community,” she said.

A common theme at Hillhurst is that of coming back to the church of one’s grandparents. HUC is housed in a gorgeous old building of the sort that often ends up empty or transformed into a nightclub. But HUC’s building is beautifully refinished, with handsome wood and stained-glass windows. “We look traditional—and that’s a strength,” Pentland said.

Canada’s boomers represent some of the most religion-averse people in North America. But their Gen X and millennial kids have nothing religious to rebel against—except the rebellion itself. A testimony I heard at the church was by a woman named Melissa who told of the Dalai Lama turning away a woman who asked to study with him and urging her to try the faith of her ancestors. Melissa took that advice and started reading the Bible that her Catholic grandparents had read. Then she found the United Church (“which I had never heard of”) so accepting that she jumped in.

“The first sermon I heard was about money. I thought you couldn’t talk about that!” said Patty, a woman who said she’d been attending since January. She said she had practiced Buddhist meditation. “But I’m white, right?” She found her way to HUC and has started to mix Christian teaching with her practice of Qigong.

A writer named Robin Galey grew up “new age” and insists she still is “not a Christian, no way.” When she started attending Hillhurst, her mother blanched. “Your grandfather went there,” she said. But Robin loves sitting in the pews where her grandfather once sat. “I’m less of an imposter now,” she said of her weakening irreligion.

For all of HUC’s openness, the sermons are explicitly Christian. Pentland’s sermon on the day I was there was based on the lectionary’s Gospel lesson about the sinful

woman who anoints Jesus' feet.

"This is a story about the body," he says, drawing out the text's sensuousness. "To be sensuous is deeper than being sexual," he said, and called the text a "sabbath of skin." A God who becomes flesh adores flesh and "takes on our shame about our bodies head-on." The woman is the prophet in the story more than Jesus is. "Your faith, your faith, *your faith* has made you well," he quoted Jesus. Faith isn't a matter of groveling or doing the right things. It's a matter of seeing that you are beloved by Jesus. Again he used the mantra, "Healed, forgiven, and set free." This is robustly christological and biblical, even evangelical, preaching. As Pentland said: "This is good news for everybody."

Pentland has a wiry energy, an edge-of-the-seat seriousness about his preaching, yet he somehow comes off as casual. He loses his reading glasses during worship so often that parishioners deposit new pairs in the offering plate. He doesn't even take his gum out before church starts. He's so relaxed that lay people often remark that he speaks off the cuff, saying whatever comes to mind. He actually went back to preaching from a manuscript to make it clear that he does prepare.

Pentland recalls studying preaching with James Forbes at Union Seminary, who threw a volleyball at his head during his first sermon presented in class. "He made me catch and pass that ball for the rest of the sermon," as a way of teaching him to engage with his congregation.

Pentland is a fan of Richard Rohr and quotes the Franciscan mystic in nearly every sermon. Pentland's criticism of the 52-page ordination bulletin brings to his mind Rohr's comment that we often "hide ourselves in religion." Pentland attends Rohr's workshops in New Mexico as often as he can.

And Pentland has experienced Rohr's "second half of life" category himself. Early in his career his marriage came undone, and he left ministry for three years, working for the United Way. He came back chastened about the impact Christianity has on culture.

"I realized cities are doing just fine without churches," he said, adding that secular organizations raise far more money and do far more civic good. He also came back with a fresh ear for how churchy stuff alienates outsiders. And he is frank about his failures.

Growing churches often have lean administration; shrinking ones are overheavy. Pentland sees his role as finding the right people and then letting them grow into their work. An example is Susan Cooper, whom the church hired as secretary early in his tenure. With Pentland's encouragement, she became a spiritual director, which is the role she occupies on staff now.

When folks who were angry about some of the new things the church was doing would storm into the office, Cooper would respond as any good administrator should: nonanxiously. But then she would go further: "I was determined to find what had hurt this person," she said. She would pray with the individual and move the conversation from the level of church politics to the more promising ground of spiritual growth.

Cooper remembers one man who huffed that he would "not take direction from a secretary." Pentland had just preached on leaving one's gift at the altar and making amends before praying, so Cooper determined to do that. That led to a breakthrough with the man, who confessed in detail all the hurt in his life. Cooper calls this approach "spiritual hospitality."

For all the talk of how unchurchy Pentland is, he and the church are deeply part of the United Church. The Sunday I attended, Pentland announced a midweek program on climate change: "And isn't this great?" he commented. "The city called and asked if they could come." The founders of the United Church imagined that the church would have a prominent place in public life. At Hillhurst, it does.

Some liberal pastors joke that theirs is the church people would go to if they went to church. They are culturally well positioned to reach those people, but the people aren't interested. Hillhurst United is showing that those folks can be found, invited, and tapped to lead—and that a church for them can grow.

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