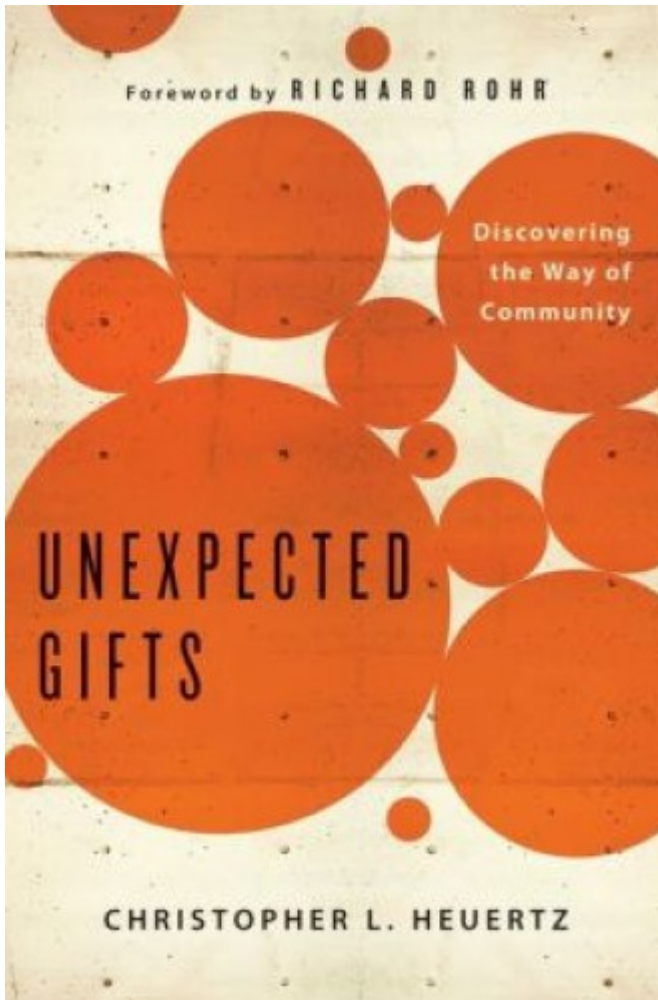


Unexpected Gifts, by Christopher L. Heuertz

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [May 29, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Unexpected Gifts

By Christopher L. Heuertz

Howard Books

What does it mean to be mainline Protestant? For some it means being Christian, but *not* evangelical, or *not* Catholic, or *not* a member of some other group perceived to be inadequate. Others imagine the tall steeple on Main Street, or the majority of the

electorate, or some other icon of Christendom's passing power.

What I *want* the mainline to be like is Word Made Flesh, a 22-year-old mission organization headquartered in Omaha and led by Christopher L. Heuertz, author of *Unexpected Gifts*. The people at WMF have the zeal for Jesus and the passion to change the world that are hallmarks of their Wesleyan heritage. They add the contemplative spirituality of Franciscan friar Richard Rohr and friendship with the most vulnerable of the world's poor, which Heuertz learned personally at the feet of Mother Teresa.

The folks at WMF also engage in the critical inquiry and pursue the life of reading and learning that are still sometimes the hallmarks of us magisterial Protestants. Phyllis Tickle has deemed Heuertz and his cohorts ("Fleshies," as they call themselves) exemplars of the new friars movement. In contrast to new monastics, who can tend to pursue community for community's sake, new friars are Protestants in radical engagement with the world's need. The result is great fruit for the whole church. WMF doesn't just talk about need; it comes near to it. It doesn't just assert that God doesn't want children to be sexually exploited; it helps them escape exploitation.

This is Heuertz's third book. *Friendship at the Margins*, coauthored with ethicist Christine Pohl, and *Simple Spirituality* were less ambitious. This one is produced by a major New York house (Howard Books is an imprint of Simon & Schuster) and is aimed at least partly at debunking the media stereotype of Christians as primarily partisan, self-serving creatures who spout bile at their enemies. Some of the best observations anywhere of the spiritual gifts and ills of Gen-X and younger people are in these pages.

Each chapter names a threat—doubt, betrayal, restlessness—to the life of Christian community that WMF seeks to build in dozens of places around the world. Heuertz calls these "tensions." He illustrates each tension with a portrait of WMF's life together among the vulnerable (an intentional word choice as opposed to Mother Teresa's *poor*): civil war survivors in Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone, ostracized Roma in Bulgaria, prostituted girls and women in India, Bolivia and Thailand. A resolution to the tension in each chapter is portrayed as an "eruption of grace" (what a glorious phrase) flowing from the community's life together. These stories are the highlights of the book.

For example, the story of Sari Bari illustrates support as a resolution to the tension of failure. Sari Bari is WMF's entrepreneurial initiative in India that gives trafficked girls an economic alternative to participation in the sex trade. They take discarded saris that Indian women have worn and sew them into quilts, scarves, purses and other goods. Bari means "home" or "haven," suggesting the safety that Sari Bari offers women in contrast to the abuse of their old lives. Instead of meeting failure with blame or stigmatization, a community can weave its individual failures into a beautiful whole, as Sari Bari does with torn or discarded fabric.

In another example, WMF's community in Bolivia teaches women to make bags out of *aguayos*—traditional Bolivian blankets. That enterprise is called Suti Sana, which means "healed name" in a mix of Aymara and Spanish. These and other missional initiatives do more than proclaim the gospel. They *show* it, with each stitch.

Heuertz's book reflects his community's painstaking effort to put its remarkable work into words. He writes that he works with "heroes of hope—men and women who have sacrificed almost everything to fight for justice on behalf of children whose childhood has been plundered." WMF's sees itself as having "a fight to break up—the fight between the integrity of God's character and the powers that try to discredit that integrity." In the process of breaking up this fight, Fleishies attest, they learn and receive far more from their friends among the desperately poor than their friends ever receive from them. WMF doesn't count successes the way mission organizations normally do. Rather than numbering souls, it counts friendships.

The book has some weaknesses. Heuertz is among the most intuitive geniuses I've ever known of, but I often wish he'd picked up a seminary degree along the way. At one point he writes: "It might be bad theology to suggest that the creation of humanity was predicated as much by God's love as by God's loneliness." That's not bad theology. The church assumes that creation reflects not loneliness but the inner-triune love of the divine Persons.

Elsewhere he wishes the church would talk more of "original righteousness" than of "original sin." Reinhold Niebuhr wished the same, Heuertz knows. But as a different sort of Augustinian, I have a hard time imagining original righteousness in the persons who enslave the people with whom WMF works. The church's theology is also a running argument over how to speak well of what we've found in Christ. Heuertz has found more than anyone I know. I just wish he were more knowledgeable about the multicentury conversation to which he is now contributing.

I also wish he were as good at articulating his and his organization's prodigious gifts as they are at describing the way they strive to "fail forward."

Those criticisms aside, Heuertz is braver than most of us. He is pushing his own evangelical community on kindness to gays and lesbians in ways that have been costly for his organization and a model for the rest of us.

I have long thought that WMF's only deficit is that it needs a good enough publicist to share its story more broadly. The publication of *Unexpected Gifts* suggests that Heuertz is taking on that role too—not only for the sake of his institution, but because both the church and the world are desperate to see a Christianity that is as wise and gentle in its relations with the vulnerable as it is zealous and creative in its evangelism. We in the mainline should take note of this singular institution of grace.