

Thinking about what it means to be open.

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Democracy Dies in Darkness

A small-town Georgia preacher fills pews by leaving no one out
By Alison Miller | July 9, 2023 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

HARTWELL, Ga. — At night, the worn sign looks like a beacon in the darkness out front of the modest, red-brick Mt. Hebron Baptist Church.



The tired, it reads. The poor. And huddled masses. Welcome home.

In this small town in the rural northeast corner of Georgia, it's the kind of message that assures Teri Massey she is loved for being who she is — a message 180 degrees from the one she heard in the Baptist church where she spent her teens into her 40s, where her grandfather, father and brother all held leadership positions.

When Massey came out in 2004, shortly after meeting the woman she later would marry, the congregation in that other small Georgia town responded by campaigning to send her to conversion therapy and holding prayer vigils outside her home.

She found Mt. Hebron a few years ago through a friend. Pastor Grant Myerholtz, whose usual preaching attire is T-shirt and jeans, met her and her wife at the door. They listened carefully as he stood in the pulpit and proclaimed: All are welcome.

"It was like this load was off of me," Massey, 63, recalled last week.

At a time when many houses of worship are struggling to sustain themselves — with church membership and attendance both at all-time lows in this country — Myerholtz seems to be pulling off a miracle of sorts: Tiny Mt. Hebron is flourishing. Barely a dozen people showed up for his first sermons in fall 2020; these days, sometimes 100 faces are looking up at him.

Church members say his empathy and engagement are what draw them. His interpretation of scripture is not what is traditionally heard in a conservative community.

In April, for instance, Myerholtz gave the opening prayer at the Hartwell Pride festival — which already had weathered a backlash from area churches over a proposed spring drag show. "There's a community of people that guard their religion and say, 'It's not for you. You're a sinner. You can't love God like that,'" said the organization's president, Collin Graham, who is trans. "So I think it was important to have [Grant] out there to show people that you can be a Christian and you can be gay or trans."

And on two Saturdays this month, Myerholtz will host a lakeside baptism for anyone who has been denied that rite for any reason. "If it were up to me, a representative of every ministry in this town would be there with arms wide open," he says. "We have the easiest job on the planet as Christians if we want to accept it. That is simply to love everybody."

Hartwell is the seat of Hart County, where chicken farming is the major industry and massive broiler sheds house millions of birds. Downtown businesses include a store for ax throwing as well as an art gallery. American flags abound.

Church is, and has always been, the community's backbeat. Every week, the local newspaper devotes a page to the worship service times of the area's 100 houses of worship, nearly half of them Baptist. Hart, not surprisingly, does not allow the sale of liquor.

The 47-year-old Myerholtz is a native son, with a family history several generations deep. His path to the pulpit started in a different local Baptist church, where he briefly served as associate pastor before heading to Fruitland Baptist Bible College in North Carolina for studies in Christian ministries. Then came stops at small churches in South Carolina and Georgia, but he said he became weary of denominational doctrines, which he felt got in the way of Jesus's teachings. He stepped away.

By 2011, he was in the National Guard. A fall during a training exercise left him with brain and spine injuries, and while recovering, he picked up a book called "The Ragamuffin Gospel" by a former Franciscan priest named Brennan Manning. Myerholtz decided to build the rest of his life around its simple premise for the Gospel: unconditional grace.

He was back in Hartwell with his wife when a chance encounter with one of the deacons at Mt. Hebron led to an invitation to lead the church. Myerholtz arrived with new energy and double sleeves of tattoos. He says he was embraced immediately.

His inclusive approach is the reason Jake Duvall said he was in the front row last Sunday — as he is almost every Sunday. A combat veteran who twice deployed to Iraq and still grapples with PTSD, he wore jeans, a black T-shirt and heavy black boots. He carried a diaper-filled bag for his year-old son, Rowan.

He remembers what Myerholtz said when inviting him to Mt. Hebron: Come as you are, not as you should be. "I don't do well with crowds," explained Duvall, who is 38. "But I really feel that my symptoms are tolerable when I go to that church."

Well into its second century, Mt. Hebron remains linked to the Baptists, according to its name and the newspaper directory. But Myerholtz shies away from denominational categories and considers his an independent congregation.

He has not won over other Baptist leaders in the area. On the day that Myerholtz prayed at the pride festival, the Rev. Andy Buchanan of Liberty Baptist Church opened its doors and invited the community to pray for "those who are engaged in this evil."

A week ago, Buchanan started his Sunday morning sermon at Liberty Baptist with a plea for God's intervention against forces that threaten the country. "We find sexual perversion being promoted on a scale that we could not have imagined," he said, targeting issues including

abortion and “the mutilation of children that is taking place in the name of progressive thinking.”

“God help us,” Buchanan said.

By contrast, Myerholtz showed a movie clip from Disney’s “The Lion King” and then quoted 1 Peter 5:8. The verse warns that the devil prowls about like a “roaring lion” looking for someone to devour. The exhortation that follows is to stand firm in faith, knowing that others in the world are dealing with similar suffering.

Myerholtz often uses pop culture references and details from his own life — such as doctors’ recent assessment that he is at increasing risk of paralysis from the injuries sustained during his National Guard training — to make the Bible more relatable.

“Anybody ever have a week that just sucks?” he began, sitting in a folding chair by the front pews. Hands flew into the air. He leaned in. “Ever been hit so hard that you’re questioning God?” he asked, before offering reassurance. “That doesn’t make you a bad person.”

As the sun illuminated the church’s simple stained glass windows, Myerholtz closed by asking everyone to reach across a pew or aisle and hold hands.

“In God’s kingdom, it doesn’t matter what color we are. It doesn’t matter what party we are,” he said. “What does matter in God’s economy is how we treat one another. How we roar for one another.”

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

How do you respond to this story of the ministry of Pastor Grant Myerholtz?

How does this article and story of the ministry of Pastor Grant Myerholtz speak to the notion, value and aspiration of being OPEN?

How might we be called to be more, or differently OPEN as CAPC Oakland?