

Pastoral sabotage

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [July 20, 2016](#) issue



Not until reading Wesley Granberg-Michaelson's article ("[Stealing Jesus](#)") had I contemplated connecting the phrases "stealing Jesus" and "ecclesiastical disobedience" with eucharistic fellowship. Granberg-Michaelson stirred up a memory of an ecclesiastical transgression in my own past.

In the early 1980s, while serving as student pastor of a congregation, I was suddenly in charge one weekend. The pastor had to be out of town, leaving me responsible for all Sunday duties. The congregation had a long-standing practice of collecting registration cards as people stepped forward for the Eucharist. Using a small, unsharpened pew pencil, each worshiper filled out a card noting that they were participating in communion and handed it to the usher before proceeding to the bread and wine.

This ritual always reminded me of an amusement park attendant collecting admission tickets for the Skycoaster ride, though the Lord's Supper has never been known for attracting thrill seekers. I failed to see any benefit to this way of registering for the sacrament, except that it justified the employment of the woman who recorded all the names in a book. God would not have invented the word *communicant* if we weren't supposed to take attendance, right?

The few of us who had been seeking to change this peculiar practice had so far met with indifference, so I decided to take matters into my own hands. I sneaked into the sanctuary late Saturday night and methodically emptied every pew rack of these Holy Communion attendance cards. Then I raided the supply of cards in the ushers'

station, hauling them off to a corner cabinet in the boiler room. I prepared to present a totally innocent facial expression the next morning.

When the first usher arrived and proceeded to ask about the missing pew cards, I knew I was deep in the jungle of ecclesiastical criminality. But my innocent expression held. An apoplectic attack soon afflicted the entire usher corps. Great spiritual distress, not seen since the Israelites thirsted in the wilderness, overwhelmed a gathering of anxious Lutherans that morning.

I have no idea what I preached about or how effectively I led the service. I do recall that the pastor summoned me to his office on Tuesday morning. He shared words of admonition that, I clearly recall, had nothing to do with my sermon.

My goal that weekend had been to help our little church discover the opposite of legalism. Gentler ways exist to move the needle of congregational thinking on such matters, I know. But, as Granberg-Michaelson notes in his comments on Pope Francis's leadership style, loosening up actual practice, in the right context, can prove more efficient than changing official doctrine. Sometimes change comes through "acting our way into a new way of being."

Many of us find it easier to act our way into feelings than to feel our way into actions. It could be that some of the most beautiful Christian practices, like receiving communion, serving the hungry, or speaking forgiveness, precede belief rather than grow from it. If we acquire virtues by putting them into action first, maybe it's possible to learn a better theology by trying out surprising new practices.