

Why mainline pastors should read Rachel Held Evans

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I put it off for a while. I don't like to read people who are so popular, so trendy. Furthermore, I'm a United Methodist minister teaching at a PC(USA) seminary—why would I want to read a story of a young evangelical who has a few doubts and then joins the Episcopal Church?

What have you to do with me, Rachel Held Evans?

But this sense that I should read someone who a lot of people are talking about—this curiosity—got the better of me. So when I saw a good deal on her newest book, *Searching for Sunday*, I bought it and read it. I'm glad I did.

There are few places where her story and mine would connect. Many of the doubts she is having in her early 30s I had as a freshman in college, the year I made my way back to Methodism after a two-year sojourn among evangelical Baptists (a return occasioned by my evangelical Baptist girlfriend breaking up with me). While Evans grew up evangelical, I wasn't evangelical long enough for the culture to seep into my bones. Unlike her, I still have to Google snatches of scripture stuck in my mind to locate them in the Bible—the tragedy of being raised in the mainline.

But for five years, I was a pastor of an urban UM congregation in a progressive town in the heart of the Bible belt. I suspect a Rachel Held Evans walked through our doors every week. She didn't have the blog audience or the book contracts or the speaking engagements. But she had the wounds, the questions, and the hope of someone who loved Jesus and the scriptures and the church but who, for one reason or another, couldn't be evangelical anymore.

Maybe she had become too interested in reversing climate change, and was now out of step with her denomination. Maybe she felt called to be a pastor, but her church denied ordination to women. Maybe she told her pastor she was a lesbian, and he asked her to leave.

But she didn't want to leave Jesus.

And so she visits my church. Her antennae are up, easily detecting the wounding language of judgment—but also detecting indifference to deep faith and to the way of Jesus. Is this a place she can land, feel safe, and flourish in her discipleship?

I wanted to be the pastor of a church where the Rachel Held Evanses of the world could love and be loved, could meet Jesus and study the Bible, could serve and be shaped by God's kingdom—and yet not have to hide the questions and doubts they'd been wrestling with for so long.

I wish I'd had this book ten years ago. It would have helped me put into a wider context the many conversations over coffee I had with these church visitors. I could have understood more deeply their particular questions—questions I likely had never asked. And I might have had more empathic answers.

As it was, we did pretty well. Our church was a refuge in the Bible belt for those who had to leave Bible-belt Christianity but still loved Jesus. I don't know if that was one of the graces of our particular congregation or one of the gifts of Methodism's never being entirely at home in either evangelical or mainline Christianity. Likely both.

A pastor once told Evans that her relationship with evangelicalism is like “the boyfriend you broke up with two years ago but whose Facebook page you still check compulsively.” That's not my story; it's not the story of many mainline pastors.

But it is the story of many of the people who walk through the doors of our churches looking for a place to call home. Reading the oh-so-trendy Evans has helped me appreciate that story a little more.