

Theological Banquet, week two: an Evangelical response to God  
Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church – 5March2023

In her book, *Undivided Love*, Janet Gear describes five faithful, active ways of responding to God's call commonly experienced in a United Church setting. Using the extended metaphor of a Theological Banquet, each of these five modes is like a place setting at Christ's banquet. As mentioned at the start of today's service, our focus today is on the Evangelical stream.

In presenting these five streams of response, one at a time, my hope is to lift and celebrate the unique flavour it brings to the banquet. If it's a mode of response that is close to your heart, I hope you find resonance and encouragement; if it's quite a bit further from you, I hope there might be a point of greater respect or understanding of that stream, or maybe even something that makes you think, "you know, that's an area where I could grow a bit."

Perhaps none of the streams presented by Rev. Dr. Gear is more misunderstood than the Evangelical stream, partly because of the US Media tendency in recent years to equate "Evangelical Christian" with the "Make America Great Again" sentiment that led to such an unfortunate result in the 2016 US election. As such, it may be a term that seems justifiably foreign to our setting of the United Church of Canada.

But hear this quote from our United Church Manual "[in 1899] the Presbyterian General Assembly, on the request of its Board of Home Missions, appointed a committee 'to confer with representatives from other evangelical Churches... so that the overlapping now complained of may be prevented.' The General Board of Missions of The Methodist Church appointed a similar committee [and] an effective plan of co-operation was adopted". To be "Evangelical" in outlook and practice, then and now, is to assume that in Jesus we are given the gift of "evangel"—that is, "glad tidings" or "Good News" - and as those who follow Jesus, Christians are responsible to not keep that some in-house, guarded secret. This is good news for the world, not just for us. So this term Evangelical – those who share the good news of Jesus – is deep in our DNA as a Church.

In the present-day United Church of Canada, Janet Gear writes this (p.43): "The table of evangelical lived faith is the most diversely populated table at the banquet – generationally, racially, internationally, politically, and theologically. They become a community in our schema by virtue of their lived faith: they share the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ."

"The evangelical lived faith", Janet continues (p.45) "is the faith of the messenger of glad tidings, the one who eagerly shares the gospel with

others. The language of these evangelicals is passionate and direct, unapologetic and personal". Cambie Village United Church in Vancouver happily embrace their evangelical identity with these words: "Jesus' life, death and resurrection is of first importance, and has the power to transform us, our communities, and the world. We strive to be a living mode of Christianity – a multigenerational, neighbourhood community, gripped by the gospel of grace, seeking to reach and serve our multicultural society for his [Christ's] glory." (Gear, pp. 43-44)

Each of the five streams of lived faith identified by Janet Gear has a desire to reach into the community beyond the Church for *some reason*, and for the Evangelical stream, *the reason is the reconciling, saving grace of Jesus*, which brings transformation and hope and new life into even the most hopeless of situations. In worship, things tend to be informal, offerings tend to be generous, music tends to be contemporary with some old favourite gospel hymns peppered in, sermons tend to be long and Biblical, the God language may be pretty masculine, and responsive prayers and formal liturgies are uncommon. And somewhat curiously, in the three years I worshipped most Sundays in Evangelical Churches, from 2009 to 2012, I heard the Lord's Prayer shared in meetings and in personal prayers, but almost never in a Sunday Service. But as both Cambie Street United and Janet Gear suggest, there's no one snapshot that could define this group: some folks identifying as Evangelical within the United Church have been part of a conservative stream of evangelical faith for generations, while others have brought their zeal for Jesus from other lands or from other denominations, and some of our congregations identified with a single ethnicity are also some of our most Evangelical. The differences are substantial, but what's held in common, with passionate intensity, is Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, alive forevermore, changing hearts and lives.