

On the Importance of Making Space for Newcomers

Building Up Steam

I'm going to start with a story:

My wife loves model steam engines. So, a few years ago, wanting the chance to hang out with other people who shared her interests, she sought out the local live steam model trains club. The club consisted of 8-10 guys in the mid-seventies, and a common topic of concern was the lack of "young blood" in the club. My wife was game to be that young blood, however – I'm sure you can see where this is going – the other members, as much as they said they wanted new members, were unwilling to change anything about how, when, or where they conducted their meetings. On top of this, my wife got the strong impression that all the other club members wanted her young blood for was to ensure there was someone available to do the heavy lifting and maintenance work on the tracks at their club house. They scoffed at her love of miniature models and resented her suggestion that they change some of their meeting times and locations to "accessible by public transit" and "not during school/business hours".

Consequently, my wife – who doesn't own a car, and does have to work during the day – wasn't able to participate in the club's activities and, after about a year of this, she left.

This is... not an uncommon problem.

There was a twitter thread not long ago talking about this situation when it comes to mainline Christian churches: Aging congregations say they want new community members, but are inflexible when it comes to changing up their status quo.

The result is that interested people come to a new church looking for shared values, fellowship, and faith, only to find out that, while the church is more than ready to pass them the offering plate, they won't do anything to help them become part of the community. They arrive thinking they've found a place to belong, and they leave shortly thereafter, feeling let down, rejected, and resentful.

This is why it's important, and necessary, to make activities, events, and also team, committee, and group meetings, available outside of regular business hours. Because the **"new blood" of parents with young kids, new adults away from home for the first time, and established folks looking for a spiritual Something More, aren't likely to be available between 9am and 5pm.** If you want them to come, to feel like they're part of a community and not just a cash cow or someone who can carry furniture during Fall Fair set-up, **you need to make space for them to take part in the social and spiritual life of the church, every day, not just on Sundays.**

This doesn't mean you have to change everything

The people who are already here, who made FirstU a community worth taking an interest in, are valuable too. We don't want to trade them in, like a late model sedan, for something new.

What we want to do is make space so that the Already Heres and the Potential News can meet each other – over zoom if necessary – mingle, get to know each other, and find out just how many values and interests they have in common.

What that can look like – some potential scenarios:

Poetry Group 1 and Poetry Group 2 start co-hosting an Open Mic Night that we present (via facebook and community event boards) to our potential new friends. Over the course of 8 months to a year, a number of potentials become regulars – because X number of slots on the open mic list are reserved for people who aren't already part of either poetry group – at which point there may be enough New People to suggest *to the new people* “Hey, would you come to a regular writer's group here? We've got two poetry groups, but we're starting another one in the evening. Can I put you on the email list for when we're sorting out which night works best?”

The Men's Breakfast Group, in addition to their regular breakfast meetup, start hosting a Seasonal Men's Dinner where non-group members – men and nonbinary people whose genders overlap enough with “man” that they'd feel at home in a “men's group” – from FirstU, as well as just local guys looking for some low-key socializing, could hang out over a meal and get to know each other in a low-stakes way. As Breakfast Group members rotate out of the core group, and new members are invited in, those invitations could(?) be extended to the whole Men's Dinner group, whether they're FirstU congregants or not. Or, alternatively, a Men's Group 2.0 might start, with meetings that are scheduled around the needs of the New People who've arrived and taken an interest in going deeper.

The Knitting Group partners with UU Pride (for example) to do an open-to-the-public coffee and knitting event where people spend an evening making items to fundraise for the church / donate (slippers) to YSB, OR working on their own projects while geeking out about fibre arts, having show-and-tell, and getting way too caffeinated for 8pm on a Wednesday night.

We start advertising Mindfulness Meditation and Trivia Night (already evening events) on Facebook and schedule events like the Messiah/Complex Showing and Discussion, or the Riverfront Clean Up for days when multiple demographics are likely to be available.

When we're doing in-person events again: Art Night, the Painters' Circle (a daytime group, but a lot of professional artists and art students are looking for opportunities to work in a group setting, so it might be fine) get added to the facebook events roster.

Basically, **we make it very, very easy for outsiders to find, and attend, the social events** that are already scheduled to accommodate day-jobs and school hours

AND

We schedule NEW events and new groups' meetings (like the Eighth Principle Task Force) with an eye to making them accessible to BOTH people who retired ten years ago AND new (or familiar!) people who are trying to accommodate taking their kids to Hockey and piano practice, and/or a 9-5 as well.

***We don't have to upend everything for the convenience of a still-hypothetical new member.
We DO have to make space for that hypothetical new person to arrive and belong as they are.***

-submitted by Allison Armstrong, January 27, 2022