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## Setting the Welcome Thermostat

by Sarah B. Drummond

On the cubicle where she works all day, Abby pinned a picture of a church. Where many would keep a photo of family members or beloved pets, Abby has an image of a brownstone building on the Cambridge Common, and she looks at it whenever she feels anxious or unmoored.

At 25, Abby has seen more life than the average young adult. She moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts from the West Coast when her high-school sweetheart husband had an opportunity to pursue a graduate degree there. Not long after they relocated, however, the marriage fell apart and left Abby in a city with no stable job, no friends, and no family. What she did have, though, was First Church in Cambridge (FCC), a church she had first found with her husband and that had later helped her through the transition to singlehood. She now views the church as her anchor, and as she considers options for graduate school herself she is seriously considering staying in Cambridge so she does not have to leave the church behind.

FCC is, in many ways, a typical mainline congregation. The music is usually classical, the liturgy rooted in Christian history and decidedly traditional. Boards and committees make many of the church's decisions through a conventional governance structure. The ministry staff includes a senior pastor, an interim associate pastor, and a lay minister of religious education. The community where the church is located is highly-educated and liberal, and the church's stance on social issues reflects this environment. What makes the church truly different from many of its peers is not just that it is growing—many churches do that—but the demographic category that is growing most quickly: Post-collegiate adults in their 20s and 30s. At one New Member Sunday in early 2008, out of 30 new members, 27 were under the age of 35.

What is their secret?

There is no easy answer to that question. But many religious leaders would like to have at least an inkling as to how this mainline Protestant church has been able to attract a critical mass of new members from such a fluid and complex population.

In 2007-2008, FCC designed and implemented a church-wide program on Christian "faith practices" for all of its members, offering them the opportunity to explore the ways in which

they were living out their faith through Christian practices such as hospitality, keeping Sabbath, and testimony. Building on this study, in 2008-2009 they initiated a second faith practices program focusing specifically on younger adults. They deployed seminarians toward the purpose of reaching out to the younger adults who had found their way, through various means, to the church. The seminarians each designed a program, implemented the plan, and then reported back to each other and church leaders about what they did and what they learned.

Here's a summary of some of the issues that emerged through interviews with the program leaders and several of the participants. These tensions, surfaced by the interviews, give helpful food for thought to congregations that seek to engage younger adults.

### **Tension #1: Flexible, But With High Expectations**

One of the basic questions one must ask when considering the faith lives of younger adults is who, exactly, is in this demographic category? In this case it was younger adults who had finished college but not necessarily put down roots. They saw their lives as transitory, not just because they had moved a lot (although they had), but because they had not yet made long-term commitments to a neighborhood, vocation, or in many cases a life partner. They all described the population into which they fall as one that is in flux and not yet peacefully ensconced in a way of life. They spoke of a sense of yearning for meaning and community that they thought they could find in a church. They described having arrived at what one might call a younger adult plateau, where "you've done all your 'firsts' and you feel a little settled and willing to grow."

They also spoke of a sense of busyness that made conventional church participation difficult for them. The seminarian who created a program on parenting for younger adult parents bemoaned the fact that many potential participants simply could not make the time to participate. "It seemed to me that people were sincere in their desire, and yet the hurdles were also very real." All involved agreed that some form of a "ladder" approach to program planning had been essential, where there were different levels of involvement from which participants could choose. Ultimately, program leaders concurred that they had to, as one put it, "be intentional about offering diverse ways of plugging in."

## **Tension #2: Welcoming, But Not Desperate**

All interview participants and program leaders at some point spoke about the hospitality they found at FCC. They described having needed, in a tumultuous or tenuous time in life, to have a place where they felt they belonged and where the community was glad they were there. Yet the nature of the welcome they received had a particular flavor to it that many found essential to their comfort in the church: The welcome did not feel needy.

Many program participants reported that one of the things that drew them to FCC was the presence of others in their age group. Some pointed out the chicken/egg irony, where a church needs to have younger members to attract younger members. Even so, FCC seems to have set the hospitality thermostat to just the right temperature to help a younger adult feel welcome without feeling pressure. By appearing joyful themselves and also happy to welcome newcomers, FCC members caused younger adults to feel embraced out of a sense of abundance, rather than scarcity.

## **Tension #3: Believing, But Not Dogmatic**

Many participants in this study described a sense of comfort they derived at FCC from knowing where the church was coming from theologically. Though one might conjecture that younger adults, often fresh out of secular colleges, would feel most at home in a setting where the Christian message was watered down, the younger adults interviewed appreciated that the church knows who and whose it is.

This comfort seemed to have many layers to it. First, they appreciated the church's honesty about its Christian worldview and would not have cottoned to a cloaked message. Second, they commented on the integrity of the church's purported vision and how it was reflected in the way church members behaved toward them. Tying back to the example of the welcome they received, several indicated that the church's intentional vision—which was generated out of a great deal of work on the part of the church's leaders and members—is a way of hospitality. The younger adults interviewed understood that the welcome they received was part of the church's effort to live out its stated vision. This

congruence between what the church did and what it said was highly attractive to what one participant called "cynical Gen-X types."

They also, however, appreciated the way in which the church welcomed their doubts and questions. One described her decision to join FCC this way, "I got sucked in by a sermon." She went on to describe a sermon that questioned whether a just God would have crushed Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. She had never heard a minister openly question the Bible, and she found this freeing. Her comments reflected what those who study faith development might consider common knowledge: younger adults redefine the faiths of their childhoods as they formulate their adult belief systems.

Perhaps because of the relatively highly-educated population from which FCC draws, this permission to question seemed particularly important. Participants indicated that they could not have felt comfortable in a church that required them to withhold questions and forego critical thinking.

What does it take for a church to be attractive to a younger adult? By no means an exhaustive answer, the initiative at FCC brings to light that churches should consider how they might be

- 1 flexible while honouring the importance of commitment,
- 2 welcoming but not desperate-sounding, and
- 3 overt about theology while making room for doubt.

Clearly, these tensions present more questions than they do answers. But as many churches are led to believe that following fads is the only way to reach younger adults, these tensions present opportunities for a more nuanced conversation. Younger adults are savvy when someone is trying to sign them up for something, draw them into something, or sell them something. May they also be savvy to how much they have to gain, and how much is at stake for them, as they seek to join with a community to find meaning in their lives.

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