

PLACING THE GROUNDWORK

Suggestions for Improving Communication Practices at the *First Presbyterian Church of El Paso*

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Description of the Problem

Rev. Locke expressed the following concerns about the communication practices at the First Presbyterian Church of El Paso (FPC):

1. Communication differences between younger and older members of the congregation:
 - How to improve the usage of digital media?
 - How to reduce paper usage?
2. Decreased attendance:
 - How to motivate parents from preschool to become church members?
 - How to motivate current members to attend worship service?
3. Unclear practices of welcoming newcomers:
 - How to improve the use of FPC's entrances and lobby?
 - How to improve the greeters' service?

Summary of the Observations and Interviews

- FPC has currently 355 members, but approximately 150 members regularly attend the church's activities and Sunday worship services. The church previously conducted two surveys in order to better understand the members' wishes and visions for FPC, but the response was low (approximately 50 responses).
- The church publishes a monthly newsletter, which is printed and distributed on paper, as well as posted on FPC's website. Also, a weekly service newsletter is distributed to service attendees in A4 format or in a larger A3 format. In addition, the church has a Facebook page, where Rev. Locke regularly posts news and announcements.
- The church offers Youth Classes, but they are currently not active. However, a new youth coordinator is scheduled to resume youth activities with April 1st, 2013. Past youth activities included mission work to other communities, small group mentoring, and connecting with other churches.
- The church also has its own library that is open 30 minutes before and after worship service. The library offers a variety of books, magazines, VHS tapes, and audio cassettes with biblical topics. In the past, the library also provided computers, but these were not used by members, so they were removed. Rev. Locke expressed a preference to introduce e-readers and tablets instead of computers.
- Other activities offered by FPC include: children and adult Bible study classes, participation at El Paso community events, movie nights, and common meals.
- A section of the church's premises is used by the *First Presbyterian Christian Preschool*; however, only a small number of families whose children attend the Preschool are also members of the church.

A Look into the Future

After careful observation of FPC's practices and of Rev. Locke's concerns, I propose additional work in the following areas:

1. Welcoming Newcomers

This area appeared to be particularly weak from the point of view of a newcomer during the Sunday worship service that I attended. Although everyone was very kind and welcoming, a variety of things was confusing and unclear (ranging from the calendar of activities to where to go after the worship service).

2. Website

Today's digital era relies on online visibility and accessibility. Visibility is especially relevant for potential newcomers and for new El Paso residents --for example, although the church already has a website, it does not portray how FPC of El Paso is different from other churches. Likewise, better accessibility could motivate existing members to become more involved in the church.

3. Bridging Generations

In order to overcome the disconnect between younger and older members, additional activities could be offered to bridge the gap. These activities could ultimately result in older generations feeling more comfortable with today's technology, thus reducing paper usage and increasing involvement in the church activities.

4. Youth Involvement

Although the current number of youth members is low, this area could be the most important for future expansion of the congregation. Today's teenagers are quite different from previous generations when it comes to spiritual needs, expectations, and activities. Considering that the church is introducing a new youth coordinator in April, given the right direction, this could increase the youth attendance significantly.

Welcoming Newcomers

Welcoming potential new members has a direct impact on the goal of increasing the congregation. This area appeared to be particularly weak from the point of view of a newcomer during the Sunday worship service that I attended. Although everyone was very kind and welcoming, a variety of things was confusing and unclear (ranging from the calendar of activities to where to go after the worship service).

Church Entrances and Greeters

The First Presbyterian Church is a beautiful and impressive building with two big parking lots, thus making the church attractive to the eye and very accessible to visitors. In an interview with Rev. Locke, he showed me the entrances that the church uses or would like to use during the Sunday worship service. I attended a Sunday worship service in order to observe how these entrances are used.

Since the parking lots are built on the side of the church, the main entrance to the church is hidden from the view. The side entrance that Rev. Locke would prefer to use as the main entrance (because it features a lobby with a notification board) appeared to be closed, and nobody was there (either outside or inside of the lobby). The only door that was open was the side door to the sanctuary on the building's east side. Since this appeared to be a *side door*, in the shoes of a newcomer, I was not sure if I should use that entrance; however, since that was the only *open* door, I proceeded that way. As I entered the sanctuary, two greeters welcomed me by saying "Hello" and "Welcome", they handed me the service handout, and I proceeded to the pews. One of the regular members, who was sitting next to me, was very interested in learning about me as a newcomer, and both Rev. Meyer and Rev. Locke came to greet me. I felt welcomed and excited about being a part of a kind and spiritual community even if just for that short time. The worship service was interesting and engaging, and it included parts that involved both children and adults. After the service, however, I felt left to my own perceptions of where I should or could go. For a while, I simply stood there deciding which way to go, and then I decided to follow those who seemed to be going *inside* the church and not *outside*. My decision, however, was based mainly on the fact that I was there to observe the church's activities. Had I been a regular newcomer, I would have probably followed those who were leaving the church.

Based on the above observations, I suggest that the greeters focus on the following:

- Train one or two greeters who are willing to focus on identifying newcomers on a regular basis.
- These greeters would approach newcomers with the purpose of getting to know their interests, so that then they could introduce them to other members with similar interests. Newcomers typically feel like strangers in a foreign land when visiting a church for the first time, so meeting someone with similar interests could make them feel more at ease.

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- Another option could be to take five minutes during the service and invite visitors to introduce themselves. This option usually results in various members of the congregation approaching the newcomers after the service and making a personal connection.
- After the service, the trained greeters should approach the newcomers again and offer/explain/lead them to the activities after the service. Otherwise, a number of newcomers could simply leave and not come back.
- The first few minutes after the service would also be a good time for the greeters to introduce newcomers to members with similar interests, as well as to answer any questions that the newcomers might have. This is especially important for newcomers who tend to hold back and not approach strangers first.
- Greeters could also ask newcomers to fill out a visitor's card. Other willing greeters could be designated to follow up on visitors' cards by emailing or calling the visitors and inviting them to the next Sunday service as well as to other FPC activities.

Newsletters and Sunday Service Handouts

FPC issues a monthly newsletter and a Sunday service handout. The Sunday service handout includes a calendar of events for the coming week; however, some events are not explained and would therefore be confusing for a newcomer. Although some newcomers may be familiar with certain events based on their experience with other churches, some newcomers may have never attended a church before and may not be familiar with any of those events/activities. For example, a brand new church searcher may not know:

- what a "Board of Deacons" is
- if the "Pastors' Lectionary" is only for FPC's pastors
- what "Naomi Circle" is
- what the Tuesday 6 p.m. "Session" includes, or
- what happens during "Wild about Wednesday".

These questions could be answered by a designated greeter, but brief descriptions should also be included in the Sunday service handout and/or in the monthly newsletter, as well as to the website. The monthly newsletter should also be given to a newcomer during the first visit.

Library

The church also has its own library that is open 30 minutes before and after the worship service. The library offers a variety of books, magazines, VHS tapes, and audio cassettes with biblical topics. In the past, the library also provided computers, but these were not used by members, so they were removed. It appears that the library is rarely used by members, and it was rather reminiscent of a museum than of a library.

Issues that could be addressed regarding the library:

- The library is mentioned in the Sunday service handout in the section of "Thanks to members", while it is not mentioned at all in the monthly newsletter. Newcomers may not

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spot the library if they are not interested in reading the “Thanks” section, so it should be mentioned more prominently—maybe in the section of “Spiritual Formation”.

- As a newcomer, I would not have found the library had I not seen it during my interview with Rev. Locke. In addition, I stayed in and around the library for about 10 minutes, but nobody was there to help me with any questions that I had. After the service, the voluntary librarian could show where the library is and invite everyone to visit it.
- To enhance the above invitation, the library could offer special topic reading sessions or short workshops after the service. For example, the library could offer brief workshops on how to use an e-reader.
- Finally, VHS tapes and audio cassettes are excellent artifacts of the past, and they could be introduced to younger generations through fun activities that would show what kind of multimedia were used before the digital era. However, the library should update the offer with movies on DVDs and audio books on CDs. In addition, the library could acquire a few e-readers and tablets that could be used for workshops and that the members could check-out for a limited period of time.

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Improving the Online Presence

Today's digital era relies on online visibility and accessibility. Visibility is especially relevant for potential newcomers and for new El Paso residents—for example, although the church already has a website, it does not portray how FPC of El Paso is different from other churches. Likewise, better accessibility could motivate existing members to become more involved in the church.

Visibility

The current website was very easy to find through the Google search engine. Whether I searched for the “First Presbyterian El Paso” or for a general term such as “church El Paso”, FPC’s website appeared in the top 10 results. The URL address of the website is also easily presented and remembered since it follows the acronym of the church’s name (fpep.org). Although the future website is not searchable yet, the new URL address still follows the church’s acronym (fpcep.org) and therefore seems very appropriate. With the use of relevant keywords in the text on the future website’s welcome page and in the metadata, the new website should also be well visible through search engines.

The notion of visibility also includes rhetorical approaches that relate to what is visible on the website itself, and equally important, what is *not* visible. The Welcome page of the current website provides a few sentences on what FPC of El Paso would like to represent (e.g., “A church and a family”); it includes basic information on the most important services (Sunday School, Sunday Worship, and Midweek Worship); it shows a summary of current events; and it offers contact information. The Welcome page also has a photo of the church, and a specific link that welcomes and invites military families.

Providing such a quick view of what the church represents gives visitors a good idea of whether this particular church would be the right choice for them or not. With that in mind, it is very important to choose a text that truly represents what the church offers, as well as what the church seeks in its members. For example, the terms “family” and “family tradition” seem to be very prominent throughout the website. Thus, visitors would most likely expect that the church values and supports families, and more specifically, traditional families.

If FPC’s mission and values allow, the church might take into consideration appealing to non-traditional families, as well as to single persons. This consideration does not apply only to the website, but to all FPC’s communication materials (such as newsletters). However, the website is most likely the most important hub for providing information for newcomers and potential visitors. Thus, as mentioned earlier, if FPC’s mission allows, I suggest including information pertaining to:

- Single parents
- Families without children
- Families searching for a pet-friendly church

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- Other non-traditional families
- Single persons

In order to achieve this, I suggest including phrases and images to show that the church offers events and activities that are open to everyone (e.g., currently, most events seem to be related to family and children, such as “parents’ night out”, etc.).

In terms of visibility, FPC might also consider making more visible the information for the disabled ([a]) and the connection to the First Presbyterian Christian Preschool ([b]):

[a] The current website includes information on “Accessibility for the Disabled” under the “Services” tab. As I was looking for information for the disabled, I did not expect to find that information under “Services”, so I either skipped that tab completely or I did not notice the information. Our perceptions are influenced by our expectations, so the future website could include this information in the main navigation pane, either as a separate tab or as a part of a general description on “How to get to FPC El Paso”.

[b] The current website includes a link to the FPC Preschool under the “Helpful Links” tab. Considering that the Preschool shares the religious values as well as the physical premises with FPC, it would be a good idea to make this link more prominent on both FPC’s website and the Preschool’s website. However, making the links more visible would probably be only the first step towards expanding the connection between FPC and the Preschool. While FPC’s monthly newsletter includes a section dedicated to the Preschool, the Preschool’s website only includes a link to FPC without mentioning that the school is related to the church in any way except for sharing the physical location. Clearly, this part depends on the Preschool’s willingness to promote FPC more visibly, but FPC could consider developing joint activities with the Preschool in order to motivate parents to attend FPC’s events and thus, hopefully, become FPC members.

If the information that pertains to the above groups is not made visible, the people that belong to those groups will feel *they are invisible* for the church.

Accessibility and Intertextuality

The content of the current website is predominantly static, while the future website is more dynamic and therefore more engaging. The future website is created through WordPress, which allows the use of Web 2.0 elements, such as leaving comments directly on the website. Consequently, visitors can interact with each other and with FPC, thus perceiving the church as more accessible and open. Other elements that could be made easily accessible through the website include:

- Downloadable podcasts of the Worship Service.
- Worship Service handouts in digital format for mobile devices.
- Monthly newsletter in digital format for computers and mobile devices.
- Calendar of Events.

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The current website offers access to sermons and monthly newsletters in the form of downloadable Word and PDF documents. Although downloading and opening a file takes only a few seconds, today's digital generations tend to see files and folders as obsolete. The future website could provide the sermons and newsletters directly on the website, maybe even with the possibility to comment on the sermons and develop discussions that add to the “spiritual formation”.

As opposed to the current website, the entry page of the future website offers images of people who are involved in FPC's activities. This is an excellent way to immediately establish contact with visitors by showing that the church is not just a building—it is the people who create that building (both literally and figuratively). Consequently, the website is inviting visitors to become a part of that community.

The online space also allows easier access to information through the use of intertextuality. This means that various sections can be nicely organized separately based on their general purpose and content, but they can also be easily connected to other sections that relate to them. For example:

- In the current website's photo gallery, there are photos of the “TRES RIOS PRESBYTERY 89TH Stated Meeting Oct. 15,2010”. New visitors may not know what “Tres Rios” is, so they will have to leave the gallery and figure out where they can find out what Tres Rios is. An easier access can be offered by providing a brief description of Tres Rios within the photo gallery with a link to “Read more” about Tres Rios as well as with a direct link to the Tres Rios website.
- Another example is the photo gallery of the “Columbia Mission Trip”: a curious visitor would want to read more about the trip itself (when, who, what happened, etc.).
- Yet another example to take into consideration is the access to FPC's information by Spanish speakers, especially since FPC of El Paso is geographically positioned in an area with a large number of Spanish speakers. The current website includes a Spanish version of the “About” page that provides basic information and history of the church. Although the church currently does not offer worship services in Spanish, Spanish-speaking visitors who are interested in a Presbyterian church might appreciate a visible and quickly accessible link to the “Presbyterian Border Ministry/Ministerio Interfronterizo Presbiteriano” directly from the page in Spanish.

Although the above information may be well known to regular members, visitors will want to know more, and they might be frustrated by the need to conduct additional searches to find out more. As a matter of fact, newer generations are more and more accustomed to easily accessible information, and the intertextuality approach facilitates this access.

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Bridging the Generation Gap through Youth Involvement

In order to overcome the disconnect between younger and older members, additional activities could be offered to bridge the gap. These activities could ultimately result in older generations feeling more comfortable with today's technology, thus reducing paper usage and increasing involvement in the church activities. On the other hand, the current number of youth members is low, so this area could be the most important for future expansion of the congregation. Today's teenagers are quite different from previous generations when it comes to spiritual needs, expectations, and activities. Considering that the church introduced a new youth coordinator in April, given the right direction, this could increase the youth attendance significantly. By connecting older and younger generations through common projects and activities, both the older members and the youth ministry would have an opportunity to engage more in the church.

Bridging the Generation Gap

The purpose of building a bridge is not to eliminate a river, but to connect its two shores. Likewise, to bridge the gap between generations means to acknowledge that each generation has something to offer to the other one. Creating intergenerational experiences can be done by simply bringing youth and adults together in a physical space for a common dinner. However, to truly exchange what each generation has to offer, a much stronger impact might be achieved by creating common purposes. FPC could consider introducing the following projects in order to foster intergenerational connections:

- **Meetings:** Invite students to visit adult meetings and vice versa. Youth students will very soon become adults, so observing adult meetings may teach them what they can expect in the future as active church members. Visiting each other's meetings could also decrease the perception of two separate sections of the church.
- **Mentorship:** Students could ask older members to become their mentors, thus showing respect and acknowledging that the older members could teach them something valuable (whether spiritual wisdom or cooking recipes). At the same time, students could share the knowledge they have (whether about their own spiritual wisdom or about new technologies). The two-way mentorship would give each generation a chance to recognize that they have much more in common than they thought.
- **Workshops:** Older generations may be interested in learning how to use new technologies, such as e-readers and tablets. Students from the youth ministry could offer workshops on how to use these technologies. These could be brief, half an hour workshops, offered during fellowship time.
- **A Joint Publication:** FPC currently issues a monthly newsletter, which offers a message from Pastor Neal and various updates on past and future events. With the

purpose of engaging the members as writers, as well as readers, FPC could invite students and adults to create a joint publication in which they contribute their own stories and reflections about church events and about their spiritual formation. Such a publication would allow all members to become active participants in a dialogue with the whole congregation.

Other Ideas for Youth Involvement

Despite the general perception of youth as self-centered and self-involved, today's youth seems to be much more inclined towards being active participants in the community. While searching for their spiritual source, they want to be a valuable source as well. Therefore, the youth section of the congregation could be actively involved by:

- serving as greeters for worship services
- sharing their spiritual stories during occasional worship services
- being responsible for updating the website (or even having a youth section that they create and maintain)
- volunteering at the library
- etc.

In addition, Drew Cook, the new Youth Director, already expressed various good ideas that he plans to implement during his youth ministry leadership, such as offering help at the homeless shelters and participating in youth ministry retreats. One concern that he expressed during our interview was the need for a more vast variety of activities that he could use for the weekly hour of serving the community. Some of the community areas that the youth ministry could serve include:

- nursing homes that serve youth with disabilities
- senior communities
- veterans and military families
- non-profit organizations that serve children and immigrants
- animal shelters
- etc.

Apart from serving the community through food and clothing drives, the youth ministry could organize dance hours in senior homes, reading hours in nursing homes, tutoring children and immigrants, or feeding and walking the dogs at the animal shelter. These suggestions could be expanded by identifying what individual youth ministry students are passionate about. Individual students could then be assigned the role of a project leader for a cause that matters to them personally, instead of simply following what others have proposed.

By involving youth in similar activities, they will become more visible to the rest of the congregation, and they will know that their voice matters.

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