

PROTAGONIST CORNER

Recruitment or Seduction?

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Mother, father, and two kids join the church; they become active, contribute time, money, and energy; they seem to enjoy their participation in the church. It's a success story in recruitment and assimilation. They move away, however, and at their leaving you let them know of churches in their new neighborhood, and you let the Presbyterian churches near their new home know of their arrival. Then weeks go by, and months, and you hear nothing from them. Chasing them down by phone, you find out that they shopped around the churches for awhile, were not quite smitten with any of them, and have just gotten out of the habit of going to church.

Something close to that has happened often enough to members of churches I have served, that it has led me to ask around to find out if it ever happens to folk in other churches. Apparently I am not alone. Why does it happen? Such change of habit leads me to wonder about what type of commitment these contented, contributing members really had within our congregation. What is it about that commitment that makes it non-transferable?

No doubt an extensive survey, testing for factors like burn-out syndrome and trauma in moving, would be required to describe this puzzling behaviour fully. Nevertheless I fear I have spotted one likely, important, and depressing cause for this commitment which gets lost in the moving van.

It may be that the commitment was not to the service of the Lord in the first place. That is no condemnation of the family under discussion. If blame is to be assigned, it likely falls on folk like me who had a part in their deciding to become active in our congregation.

How were they "recruited?" What was the motive we appealed to in asking them to join? Was it God's love for us and his call to service? Or was it something else? What was the shape of the choice they made when they joined? Was it a clear look at the call to follow Christ and to discover what gifts God has given them for the pilgrimage? Or was it something else?

The answers to those questions are not flattering, at least as I reflect on my own practice of recruitment in visiting with potential members. I offer my reflections not just as personal confession, but in the suspicion that I may not be entirely alone in my guilt. The process for recruiting new members bears precious little resemblance to a call to serve out of gratitude. It looks more often like a fraternity or sorority rush. The process might well be called seduction.

As we go out to visit we feel it would be bad form to brag on our church in crass fashion. Proper form requires that we present ourselves as attractive sensible people with whom a prospective member would like to be associated. By our behaviour we are asking people to say yes, not to being disciples of our Lord, but to our particular collection of people, our style, our good taste, our way of doing things. That at least is my fearful suspicion.

If that is true, we have no cause for surprise when a family we have wooed into

the church moves to another town and chooses not to join another congregation. Their commitment has not changed, they remain faithful. Their allegiance is to the same group of people it has been. That commitment is not easily transferable.

If the prot-agonist is on one side of a battle, and the ant-agonist is on the other, what should we call a person who has both sides of the battle inside him? Prot-ant-agonist is awkward. Maybe the best is simply an agonist. That's me--in the agonist's corner. On one side of the battle inside me is the wish not to seem the manipulative, arrogant, high-pressure church pusher. I would like to be courteous and sensitive to personal subtleties--all of those nice things. On the other side within me is the determination to break out of that mode of recruitment which points, however subtly, to what nice, first-class folks we are. Moreover it includes a determination to find a way to point to the good news and then get out of the way so that a commitment can be generated which is to the Lord of the Church.

No doubt, we owe any potential member the courtesy of a description of our congregation, a description characterized by candor and affirmation. Beyond that, however, we owe them and our Lord a clear declaration about the one we serve and a challenge to serve along with us. I wish I could report that I have won the battle and now know how to present such a declaration with eagerness and ease, without anger or force. All I can report is that the times I have found the nerve and the opening to speak about the heart of the faith with a potential member, it has been a lively and liberating experience.