

When Rebranding Requires Hiding Your Real Constituents



["Hide the Face,"](#) Fan D.

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"You've gone too far this time, Sir."

That's the title of an [outrageous cycling memoir](#), and also a warning the leader of a certain Minnesota church desperately needs to hear.

Reverend Dan Wetterstrom of The Grove United Methodist Church in Cottage Grove, Minnesota, and Jeremy Peters, who specializes in starting new churches, have come up with a plan to revive their church's pitiful attendance numbers: They're asking the old folks to go away.

Specifically, Wetterstrom and Peters have asked their current parishioners, most of whom are over 60, to stay away for 15–18 months while they "relaunch" the church. After that, if they wish to return, and "if they are on board" with the church's new youthful identity, they may consult with leadership about coming back. (Why on earth would they?)

"It's a new thing with a new mission for a new target," said Peters, "and a new culture."

Cottage Grove wants to attract younger members, ideally families with young children. Peters seems to think these hypothetical parishioners are being kept away by the prospect of worshipping amongst their elders. (He may want to consider how his plan fits in with the dictate to "Love your neighbor," and a study showing that 32 percent of young people who [left church](#) did so because they're disgusted by hypocrisy.)

Cottage Grove's church is currently down to about 25 weekly worshippers. They merged with a nearby church in 2008, and Peters suggests that current Cottage Grove members may worship at this other campus in Woodbury for those 15–18 months. In 2013, when Methodist officials said they couldn't pay for a minister at the church

anymore, Cottage Grove switched to lay ministry, meaning that people from the congregation took turns giving the weekly sermon. One wonders who will give the sermons to the new attendees after the reverend makes all the experienced parishioners go away.

The campaign to attract younger church members has already begun: most of the programming advertised on [Grove United's website](#) is aimed at this target demographic, including "Tween and Teen Parent Gatherings" and "Scout Sunday." Ironically, the website also claims that the church "honor[s] the sacred worth and dignity of persons of every age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation," etc.

The current parishioners are not feeling so honored.

"This whole plan makes me sick. I believe it's evil," said parishioner William Gackstetter. He explained to the *Pioneer Press* that current members were being asked to help maintain the church they were no longer allowed to worship in. "They want us to mow the lawn and shovel the snow," he said. "As if anyone would do that."

Peters and Wetterstrom may want to consider instead the route taken by [Jubilee Baptist Church](#) in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Jubilee was down to just 12 members in 2018. Like in Cottage Grove and nearly every church across the US, most of those members were elderly. But rather than kick them out, Jubilee's pastors reorganized their church, orienting toward inclusion, support, and revolution. They used their funds to pay off members' debts, to ease their burden, and assigned Karl Marx in Bible study.

"Jubilee believes," wrote Anne Helen Petersen at *BuzzFeed*, "that truly following Jesus's teachings, especially in the contemporary, capitalist world, requires a radical reconsideration of wealth and work and power." And it worked.

Jubilee Pastor John Thornton said he simply reframed the question of attendance. "[Churches] ask the question 'Why don't people go to church?'" he said, "But very few of them are asking 'Why would someone come to church?'" Probably not as an act of solidarity against elderly neighbors, that's for sure.

Cottage Grove's approach is not, sadly, unknown to nonprofits. Many, especially arts organizations like symphonies or operas, decry their graying audiences and worry what it means for their future. Fundraising wisdom these days often focuses on [how to attract and retain millennial donors](#). It's a reasonable consideration, in terms of organizational survival. But it doesn't require dismissing those who are currently keeping the place running. Instead, reorienting positively around the current needs of a community, being willing to radically reconsider what mission alignment means, may bring people in from all demographics. After all, community organizations serve an important role for their members, one they won't easily give up on.

Take William Gackstetter: "I pray for this church, getting through this age-discrimination thing."

In this rapidly aging society, the fact that many equate age with a lack of currency is a bit of irony. Perhaps this church's problems lie in its own narrow understanding of how communities develop and sustain themselves over generations.—Erin Rubin

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Erin Rubin is an assistant editor at the Nonprofit Quarterly, where she is in charge of online editorial coordination and community building. Before joining NPQ, in 2016, Erin worked as an administrator at Harvard Business School and as an editorial project manager at Pearson Education, where she helped develop a digital resource library for remedial learners. Erin has also worked with David R. Godine, Publishers, and the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers. As a creative lead with the TEDxBeaconStreet organizing team, she worked to help innovators and changemakers share their groundbreaking ideas and turn them into action.
