

Enhancing New Attender Experiences

Friend Arnon Reichers of Ohio recently completed a study for the [School of the Spirit](#) on newcomer socialization, retention and turnover among unprogrammed Friends. Arnon uses the phrase newcomer socialization to refer to the things that newcomers go through that affect their intention to remain with the organization.

In her study, Arnon notes that formal newcomer socialization literature conceives of the organizational entry process in terms of a three stage model. While models vary somewhat, they usually include

1. a pre-entry stage that occurs before the newcomer actually arrives
2. an encounter stage, during which newcomers first come in contact with the organization
3. a subsequent settling-in stage where the newcomers become accepted members of the organization.

During **pre-arrival** newcomers develop expectations about what the organization and its members will be like. They envision their own role and how they will be treated. Research in business organizations shows that newcomers almost always have unrealistic expectations that are based on a lack of valid, concrete information.

During **the encounter stage**, newcomers come face to face with organizational realities that disconfirm some expectations and confirm others (for better and for worse). Most newcomers experience some unpleasant surprises during this stage. At this point, newcomers who cannot adjust to organizational realities frequently try to leave the organization for greener pastures.

During the **settling in stage**, newcomers find that their newcomer status disappears and they are considered established members of the organization. They sort out the various roles they must play, and learn informal “insider” norms about how the organization actually functions.

Arnon adapted these ideas to make them more appropriate regarding new attenders and Quaker meetings. What follows focuses primarily on the encounter stage, because that’s usually the stage when newcomers decide to stay or leave. There is also some information on the settling-in stage.

The data comes from twenty Friends representing twenty-four different monthly meetings in Michigan, Ohio, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, New York, New Hampshire, Virginia and Tennessee. The survey consisted of open-ended questions that asked these Friends to list things that happened to them when they attended their first few meetings and things that helped them

decide to keep returning to their meetings. They also reported their opinions on things that should happen in order to influence newcomers to return.

ENCOUNTER STAGE

Warm welcome: This was the most important thing in helping newcomers decide to return. A warm welcome included a greeter at the door, a person or persons whose responsibility it was to greet and introduce newcomers to others, members of the meeting introducing themselves and saying “welcome”, and/or a welcome table. Designated people should continue to sit with and chat with newcomers after the initial meeting. It is important to avoid “cliquishness” that might make a new attender feel shut out. Being asked if the newcomer wanted to be put on a mailing list, and follow up phone calls or emails were also important in the overall perception of being welcome.

However, respondents also indicated that not feeling overwhelmed or pressured to return was also important in their comfort level with Friends’ meeting. Specifically, not being asked questions about their beliefs or their previous religious affiliations was a relief, as was being told not to sign up for a committee right away out of a sense of duty or obligation.

Access to information: Many respondents mentioned that receiving a pamphlet(s) about basic Quaker beliefs and practices helped put them at ease. Some members made a point of giving newcomers some history about the meeting and inviting questions. It is important that members of the meeting be willing and able to talk about what Quakerism means to them. Respondents also mentioned access to the library and recommendations about particular books to read were helpful in giving them information they needed to feel part of the meeting. New attenders could also benefit from reminders about when a potluck is coming up and other scheduled events.

Opportunities for children: It was very important to the parents of children that there was a First Day School and other events for children. Respondents felt comfortable when people were nice to their children and accepting of nursing during meeting for worship.

Other positive encounter events included:

- a website that is interesting and informative
- a common, simple meal offered every week
- explanations of acronyms during conversations
- a meeting house that is fully accessible to people with physical challenges
- being sent a card after surgery and receiving a visit at home
- being offered a key to the meeting house

- the presence of male elders

SETTLING IN STAGE

Opportunities to serve: People felt like they had become more established in meeting when they were asked to serve on a committee. It is important, however, that this not happen too early in the newcomer's attendance. It was also important not to pressure people with children to start doing child care too early in the process.

Opportunities to socialize: People felt accepted when they received invitations from others to attend meeting events. Friendly Eights received multiple mentions as good vehicles for feeling accepted and connected with others in meeting. It is also important to work out any on-going conflicts or rifts in the meeting, otherwise the tension is palpable and off-putting to newcomers.

Opportunities to learn more: Several respondents indicated that after they had been attending meeting for some time (six months to a year), they had the opportunity to join a spiritual formation group and/or enroll in Quakerism 101. These opportunities allowed them to learn more about Quakerism, but also to become more connected as members of a smaller, more intimate group.

Settling in was also facilitated:

- when there were no behavioral distinctions made between members and attenders
- when there was support for an individual's personal ministry
- when there was encouragement to attend FGC and an annual retreat.

CONCLUSIONS

It is tempting to conclude that most of these results are just common sense and that the vast majority of meetings are doing well at integrating newcomers. However, during the process of doing this research, Arnon had many conversations with Friends who told horror stories of their first encounters in meetings. That's why it is important for meetings not to be complacent and to examine their policies and practices where newcomers are concerned to be sure they are not alienating potential new members.

It is also important to realize that newcomer socialization is an extended process that goes far beyond being nice at the first meeting or two. Newcomers must be actively cared for, engaged and socialized over a period time before they feel fully integrated into the life of a meeting.