

Be Careful What You Ask for

Does Your Town Honestly Welcome Newcomers?

BY TERRY WOODBURY



Terry Woodbury

For nearly a decade, I've heard the same plea in every one of the 50 plus towns I've visited: "We need young people to move in."

But what if that happened? Are you ready for young people to move into your town? I'm going to risk stepping on a few toes by suggesting that your town, your church and your civic club are likely not as ready as you think you are.

I met with a community development group this month who was excited to introduce me to their newest member. In recent months, they had added two folks in their 30s and were already among the most aggressive solicitors of young voices that I'd witnessed.

So, as we opened this Public Square gathering, I felt free to ask this resident of four months to share her opinions of her new hometown. I emphasized that the extraordinary gift new people bring us is their ability to see us with new eyes. I urged her to be honest.

She took me at my word. I asked for it, and I got it.

"Fortunately, my opinion has changed," she began, "or I probably wouldn't be sitting here. My first impressions weren't good." She recounted how, in her first phone call to realtors about available housing, each asked where she was from. After hearing she was from out of state, all three realtors said no houses were available.

Later, when she and her husband made their first visit to town and the realtors learned her husband's occupation, they revealed there were, in truth, several houses for sale. (By the way, she is a service-sector professional, so apparently the realtors hadn't queried about more than her prior residence.)

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I glean a few lessons from this real-time story:

- ▶ We need to seek honest feedback from newcomers about their early experiences in our community. If we truly listen, newcomers' perceptions will point us to the practices and behaviors we need to change in order to be hospitable. They will also affirm what we're doing right.
- ▶ The entire community needs to openly discuss—we at Public Square call this a Community Conversation—what it means to recruit and welcome newcomers, including those with no family or friends here. Both citizens and institutions must gear up for welcoming new residents or we'll find ourselves saying one thing and doing another.
- ▶ Those coming from a larger city to look us over are used to shopping around, checking out the competition and seeing who provides the best customer service. By contrast, our towns have adjusted to 40 years of losing population, grieving businesses as they close and growing weary of seeing our hopes dashed. No wonder, then, that few of us are primed to greet the potential resident who is checking us out for the first time.

So, it's a tough switch of emotions, attitudes and skills to realize there are actually young people wanting to move from large cities to rural communities. We'll have to help each other "practice" the new skills we'll need if we want to be competitive with the next town up the road.

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