

What if no one shows up?

Asking the question gives people space to discern the answer.

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Five years ago, right before St. Francis House, the Episcopal campus ministry I serve at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, sent a few people to our very first student organization fair, a long-time campus missionary friend gave me a call. I asked him if

he had any advice for engaging the event. "Yes," he said. "Be sure to communicate to your folks that advertising doesn't work. I'm not saying it won't, but it doesn't. And I'm not saying you shouldn't. I *am* saying, ask your crew whether they think it's worth doing, even if nobody becomes a member of your community as a result of the effort. If they say yes, ask them why."

I did as my friend suggested, and I was relieved when the students did not appear to be as discouraged as I was at the unsurprising news that church advertising seldom yields fruit directly. I asked them if we should go ahead with our presence at the student organization fair anyway. "Yes," they said. "Okay, great. Why?" Silence. Then one said, "It will make us think about and give voice to what this community means to us." YES. "I'm in," I said.

Because of this prior conversation, when the unexpected opportunity came up for one of our students to fill a 30-second spot on university radio during the fair, the student jumped at the chance. Only, he didn't answer the question he was given, exactly. Instead, he started with "St. Francis House saved my life..." and told his story. Standing nearby, watching this student, listening to his voice roll through speakers and echo into the halls of the Kohl Center and across campus, I welled up with tears.

Because we had asked the questions, "Is this worth doing, even if no one shows up as a result?" and "Why?" the student was willing to tell his story in an unexpected moment on an unexpected platform and bless a lot of people. After asking the questions, we made space, in community, for the students to discern and answer them.

In the larger church's ongoing conversations about numbers, attendance, and the rest, it is sometimes helpful to ask ourselves, "If no one shows up as a result, is this worth doing anyway? Why?" And I also think the logic holds if we run it in the other direction, "If *a ton* of people show up as a result of this thing, is it worth doing anyway? Why?"

Numbers are not bad, but they aren't self-justifying, either. Numbers are helpful partners to lift up what we are about, but they can only do so when, in a given project or moment, we know what we are about. Do we give ourselves permission to be patient and take the time it takes to ask why the thing matters and then create space for the answers?

Two helpful leadership questions I picked up from Pope John Paul II are, "What light do the scriptures shed on this issue/opportunity/challenge?" and "Who can we ask for help?" When we are in touch with the reason that fills our hearts we become capable of even failures that sustain us. Equally, we detect the emptiness of successes that do not satisfy. We notice the difference between relying on grace and controlling the outcome. Most of all, I suspect we become in those moments people whose lives are put in touch in new ways with the story of God, of which God is patiently making us a part.

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