

In 2013, Andrew Forsthoefel was 23 years old when he decided to try walking across the Continental United States from his home in Philadelphia to the Pacific Coast. He carried a backpack with camping equipment, a camera, food, and a sign that said, "Walking to listen." He also carried a voice recorder to collect the stories of those he met along the way, asking them the question, "If you could go back, what would you tell yourself at 23?"

Andrew admits that he traveled with both a spirit of adventure and a strong sense of vulnerability. He said that at times he was "fear-walking." In response to his question, no one said that they would tell their 23-year-old self to be more cautious or more fearful. Their messages were full of boldness and daring. At the same time, however, people were constantly warning Andrew to watch out for the others down the road. "Don't trust them," they would say, "They aren't like us."

"What I wish," Andrew said, "is that these people could have seen that those "others" down the road befriended me and told me *their* stories." Of course most people never had the chance to learn that, from behind the doors of their own homes or churches or preconceived ideas. We have all been in situations when our courage and faith clash with our suspicion and caution. (Rev. Sherouse)

But this day of Pentecost reminds us that sometimes the things we end up closing ourselves off from are the things that can renew us and redeem us, the things that flow from the very Spirit of God, the Spirit that comes to comfort, empower, and enliven us as we seek to follow Jesus' teachings.

In the gospel of John, when Jesus came to his grieving disciples hidden behind locked doors, he gently breathed the Holy Spirit upon them. But in Acts, the disciples are waiting in a spirit of hope and expectation for the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to send them as Advocate and Counselor. They are outdoors in the center of Jerusalem, along with crowds of people from diverse backgrounds who are enjoying the Jewish Feast of Weeks, also known as the Festival of the First Fruits, Shavuot or Pentecost.

And suddenly the Spirit arrives like a forceful wind rushing through the city streets. The Spirit whirls with fiery fervor through the crowd filling hearts with holy power and passion. *What does this mean, they ask, and how is it that we can all understand and communicate with one another, as if there were one universal language, as if we shared something in common?*

Good questions! Luke, the author of Acts, tells this story with that 23-year-old idealism--the kind of youthful abandon that would set out with a backpack and follow Jesus' vision of God's realm. Over time, we learn caution and fear, don't we, as more is established and more is at stake in our lives. But the vision of Pentecost proclaims again and again that the young shall prophesy and see visions, and the old shall dream dreams. And we are a church that proclaims wholeheartedly that *God is still speaking, (comma)*, in new, unexpected and even disruptive ways, right? **O, that fervent (and pesky) Holy Spirit!**

Most of you know that I participated with three church members in a recent Workshop entitled: “Reaching Out to New People,” where ten church teams explored ways in which to “reintroduce our church to the community.” The leader Paul Nickerson began with a presentation of the *church then* and the *church now*, the *church then* being in the 1950’s and 60’s. Gone are the days when church members could wait on the front steps to greet the flock of new people coming to Worship on Sunday mornings!

Jesus commissioned his disciples of all ages with these words: *Go out and proclaim the good news to all creation!* What does that mean for our church in today’s world? Pretty daunting, isn’t it? “*Make disciples of all nations,*” Jesus also said. You and I may start thinking of televangelists or Jehovah’s Witness or Christians in the media who strike us as overly dogmatic aggressive.

You see, we all become cautious and suspicious, and that includes the people out there who don’t go to church. What do you think their images and ideas are of the Christian church?

The media is full of church scandals, cult leaders, a pastor burning the Koran, church people violently protesting same-gender marriage, the proclamation of rigid and exclusive doctrines, even some hell, fire and damnation rhetoric... It’s truly a wonder that any visitors dare to enter our church! In addition to all the people today who were not brought up in the Church, there are of course those who were raised Christian, but who have become disillusioned or angry, who have been rejected or wounded.

So, what we learned at the workshop is that the first basic step in reaching new people in our community is to become more visible, so that they understand we are normal, friendly, sane people—not wacko (at least not usually), not arrogant or rigid in our faith, not pushing our beliefs on others, not stuck in the past or unwilling to do new things as a church. Just good people of faith who enjoy the movies, eat out at restaurants and take walks like everyone else—AND who are eager for our church to become known as an integral part of Sanbornton and the wider community? We ARE a part of this community—but who knows it? Do the people who live in the houses in this neighborhood know it? Do the people who live near you know it, wherever you live?

You will be hearing more about this, but here is an example of one way to become more visible as a church. Boards and committees are asked to hold some of their meetings in a public place, such as a restaurant or park. People would then see us out in the open, doing our business like others in the community, meeting at Starbucks or Uno’s, laughing, sharing... Two Boards might go out to dinner together to discuss ways in which they can collaborate---or simply to celebrate the good job their members are doing!

Now we don’t all have to wear Sanbornton church tee-shirts, but it wouldn’t hurt to have at least one T-shirt visible or perhaps a UCCZ hat, which might provoke a few questions! It was so much fun when 17 of us, youth, children and adults, went out to see Zootopia at Smitty’s movie theater during school vacation. People definitely saw us and heard us!

After attending this workshop a year ago, the Center Harbor church decided to get together for ice-cream on the first Tuesday of each month. One Tuesday, a woman in the next booth who had overheard them talking about church, came over and said: *You're a church and you're going out together for ice-cream? That's awesome!* Maybe the conversation continued, and the church people listened to her story, even her experience with "church." "Walking to listen," surely that's a part of the good news of God's love.

Did that woman come to church on Sunday? I have no idea, and that's not the point. Something new was in the air; something new was shared and learned with smiles all around! And maybe the next day that woman said to her neighbor: *You'll never believe what I saw last night!*

O, that fervent and pesky Holy Spirit!

Such congregational visibility would of course be combined with the pastor reaching out to all kinds of people, beginning in Sanbornton with the school principal, town social worker, clerks at the post office and local store, the police and fire chiefs, as well as setting up office hours at Starbucks in Tilton or Dunkin Donuts in Belmont. I'd better do some prayer walks too, or I'll soon be 20 lbs. heavier!

Now, you may wonder how a part-time pastor with a full schedule can do this. Well, at the Workshop, the church teams discussed possible ways of freeing up a few hours each week for the pastor to reach out into the community. Stay tuned for more details!

Right about now, your courage and faith may be clashing with your caution and suspicion, am I right? Feeling a little wary or cynical? Not to worry! We simply start by doing a little differently what we're already doing. Wherever the Spirit leads us, I am with you, stepping in and out of my comfort zone too.

Just picture the awesome Spirit of Pentecost urging you from behind like a strong wind that doesn't blow you over but actually lightens your steps. Oh that fervent (and pesky) Holy Spirit, rushing through streets and rounding corners to bring people together across the boundaries of background and religion and language!

I don't know if it was the Spirit of God or the spirit of youth that sent 23-year-old Andrew Forsthoefel out his door that day. It was probably both. But whatever it was, that spirit carried him from coast to coast. Some 4,000 miles. 11 months. 85 hours of recorded conversations. 5 pairs of shoes. And feeling vulnerable, with plenty of fear-walking along the way.

You and I, well, we may only travel a short distance to a local restaurant or park, but we may be crossing years of caution and suspicion that has accumulated not only between religions but also between churches and their communities. Trust in the Spirit of Pentecost. At the same time, keep an eye on your pastor who may become so caffeinated at Starbucks that she starts acting wacko!
O, that wondrous, amazing, gentle, powerful, fervent (and pesky) Spirit of Pentecost!

NOTES

Merrill, Timothy ed. *www.homileticonline.com*. Sermons on Acts 2

Sherouse, Rev. Alan. "Open Wide the Doors," May 15, 2016. *www.day1.org*. Thank you for the story and information about Andrew Forsthoefel, as well as your ideas about Pentecost, especially courage/faith clashing with fear/suspicion/caution.