



EXPERIMENTAL CHURCH

TALKING CHURCH, CHOCOLATE, COMMUNITY AND COFFEE IN SOUTH LAKE UNION WITH REV. JAMES B. NOTKIN

BY AARON WILLETT

» On my way to Union Church, I noticed the Tesla dealership next door. As I marveled at the all-electric sports cars, the South Lake Union Streetcar rolled past. This neighborhood is full of both new ideas and fresh takes on things tried and true. Like the sports cars opposite its front door, Union Church has something a little different under the hood—there is no grimy combustion engine to be found here. Union is shiny and new, but not without strong roots. Like the streetcar, Union is looking backward for inspi-

ration to move forward. It is an experiment in authenticity, probing for a vision of what church can be in the 21st Century.

I recently had the pleasure of joining Rev. James B. Notkin for a cup of coffee and a bite of fine, dark chocolate at Union’s newly opened café, kakáo. We discussed the impetus behind Union, how they are responding in new ways to their Kingdom calling, and how an entrepreneurial spirit informs this “Caleb” congregation.



Top: James B. @ kakáo. Bottom: South Lake Union Streetcar ©seadevi

AN URBAN LABORATORY

Union, an extended congregation of UPC, was designed from the ground up to be different. James B. recalls, “We thought, OK, we’re going to have to put money into a building one way or another to make it a worship space. So, if we really believe that we are to be externally focused [and] be a part of the community that we are in, are we going to build it in such a way that screams church, or are we going to build it in such a way that

says, ‘Hey, we want to be an asset to the community?’”

For Union’s organizers, the building is an extension of their mission—an aspect of their response to the needs of the community. They asked themselves, what does this place need? As James B. observes, “There are no amenities here... no libraries, no community center. [The community is] now growing at a rate where it is underserved.” Here was their answer, to “provide a meeting space.” In addition to partnering with agencies to serve the marginalized, they serve the community with a very real presence. “[We provide] a third space, that

place after work and [outside] home that people can come and meet with friends. That was the purpose of both the venue and the café.” By operating their venue—called just 415—on a slid-

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ing scale, they are able to host a wide variety of events, including recent fundraisers for recovery work in Haiti



KAKÁO BARISTAS HAYDEN WARTES AND ELISA CASEY.

and an equipping event for International Justice Mission.

From the outside, Union looks like a pleasant café and nothing like a church. For James B. and his wife and pastoral co-lead, Renée, this is part of the task of taking the church to the world. James B. recalled passing a mosque in his neighborhood. “I drove by it and thought I know something about Islam, and I know I would be welcomed, but I am never going to walk into that Mosque. I feel it is not for me. And, I thought how many people drive by our church buildings the same way? Thinking, ‘Oh, that’s a church, I’m never going to go in there.’ They may know something nominal about Christ, about Christianity, but they’re never going to go in. I was thinking how foreign that is to me. I think people see a church and say, ‘Oh, there’s a place for me.’ I realized that’s not where our culture is. So the expectation of people naturally coming to us grows less likely as the church loses credibility in the culture as it increasingly is perceived as like a club. . It’s [telling] that Christ never called the world to go to church. He called the church to go to the world. And so we asked, ‘what does that look like?’”

UNION = 415 = kakáo?

The purpose of having so many faces is to create a welcoming space that is of service to the community. “The idea,” according to James B. is a bit of a tongue twister, “to have a place where you can belong and believe before you believe you can belong. It’s a true missional sense that we exist for the world, not for ourselves. If that’s the

case, how are we going to use every asset that we have with an external focus?” Based on George Hunter’s book *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, the leadership at Union is modeling their outreach efforts after the ministry of St. Patrick. As James B. paraphrases, “He said... let us breathe our life together and work together and create a context for questions to be asked and trust to be established.” He sees that our own culture is largely in this same circumstance—with little notion of who Christ is. With Union’s welcoming attitude, James B. celebrates that, “People don’t feel like I have to be a card-carrying member of a church to show up and be a part of it here.”

A CALEB PEOPLE

James B. recounted how he had been lamenting the challenges of being sandwiched between the Moses’ who led us out of Christendom and the Joshuas who will bring us into the new land. He said Renée had reminded him that, “There is another player in that story—Caleb... spying out the land. We get to look ahead, we get to experiment.”

On the first, third and fifth Sundays of the month, worship services at Union look a lot like other worship services. Following Robert Webber’s ancient-future model, they blend traditional and contemporary elements. It’s on the second and fourth Sundays that they change gears and the experimentation begins in earnest.

The second Sunday features conversational small groups gathered around tables. There is a brief message that sets up the text and topic at hand. No one sits any-

mously in a pew—everyone is engaged. This re-think has delivered four fruits: authenticity (“People see that they’re not the only one carrying around warts or brokenness.”), faith vocabulary (“Instead of being a one-way communication... they can talk about it.”), more accessible small groups, and an empowered leadership team. They hear things like, “This is what church is supposed to be” and “I wanted to bolt for the door, but I know more people now... in a real way than after three years when I used to go to church.” It is a risk, but so far it is paying rich dividends.

James B. describes the fourth Sunday as, “the hardest

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thing we do.” It is a day when the congregation worships not by gathering, but by serving out in the community. “The beauty of the fourth Sunday is that it underscores that our faith really is outward focused.” It provides a side-by-side format for relationship building, and it hopefully develops credibility in the community. He talked of the surprise encountered in the neighborhood, “You would do that on a Sunday?” Of course, there is a downside too:

the interruptions to the preaching schedule and the inevitable financial cost of not gathering. But, James B. says that when they do get together “for worship in a more celebratory form... there is a focus and an intensity. We don’t take our community time for granted.”

Union is spying out the new territory. “Everything we do is important, because it’s either going to help come up with some forms of discipleship for the future, where the church is headed, or we can cross something off. It’s an exciting time, and we know that we’re in here for an experiment—an adventure with the Spirit.”

