

Building for Faith in Action: Church as Incubator

May 14, 2023

Incubator

The first time I remember encountering an incubator was at my cousin's house in Ashwaubenon. I must have been about 6 or 7. The moment we entered the house, I was drawn like a magnet to the aquarium-type set up with a heat lamp clamped to the side. They had this wire contraption that my cousin would rotate slightly periodically which was supposed to mimic the movement of a hen. I pulled up a kitchen chair and felt like I stared for hours...as nothing seemed to happen. Knowing what I know now about 6-year-olds, I probably sat there for 5 minutes, but still, it felt like an eternity of waiting and watching nothing.

After what seemed like months (but again, knowing what I know now about the life cycle of chicken eggs as well as how long my mother and aunt would visit, my guess is it couldn't have been more than a weekend), we started to notice tiny cracks in the eggs and they seemed to be moving ever so slightly on their own. Oh, how I wanted to help, to crack the shell for them, to wash them off when they finally did shed their shells, to cuddle them. But my cousin, the 10-year-old authority on such matters, was adamant that I couldn't touch, that my instincts were wrong, and that what the chicks needed was a safe, warm place to hatch, some food and water, but mostly to be protected from well-intentioned 6-year-olds.

All of this comes to mind as we plumb the idea of church as incubator today. In our seven-week celebration of the best of Union, as we undertake our Building for Faith in Action campaign, each week we're lifting up a different image of some of the remarkable things this church does. Today, as we celebrate Union, I'm conscious that our church serves as an incubator both collectively and personally.

As we began today, Mary shared so powerfully about the Blessing Box ministry, how this seed of an idea I had in 2017 for a little free library for stuff has grown, blossomed, and borne fruit beyond my wildest dreams. And there are so many other examples: the Executive Director of the Ecumenical Partnership for Housing will speak with us shortly about the life-changing work that organization does. That ministry was hatched and incubated right here. Mel Polarek, Chuck Zanzig, and a few others incubated and hatched the plans to start a Green Bay chapter of Habitat for Humanity under this very roof.

Some of you have been part of Union long enough to remember the Green House, an after-school program this congregation brought to life in, of all things, the green house just off of our property. JOSHUA, the ecumenical advocacy organization in Brown County, was birthed in this very room. The earliest days of the Brain Center of Green Bay were nurtured here by the remarkable Dr. Rolf Lulloff.

Of course, On the Mark Dyslexia Clinic is thriving here, having been conceived in Pat Shafer's heart, fertilized by the waters of Moon Beach, and tended by countless volunteers. Again, this is life-altering ministry. And these are just examples from the last 30 years!

Scriptures

As we celebrate Union as an incubator today, two things from our scripture readings resonate. First, in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles that Ed proclaimed for us today, we hear of an experience Paul had in Athens. He says that he noticed an altar in Athens that was dedicated “to an unknown God.” Being okay with the unknown and stepping out in faith is part of incubating something. When I initiated discussions about the Blessing Box with our Outreach and Stewardship Ministries, all I knew was that there are needs in our community and our church is generous. Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined the depth of that generosity - in terms of items given nor in terms of energy and commitment. In some ways, it feels like parenting. We birth something, we nurture it, but it is still its own being with the potential to become so much beyond our wildest dreams.

This spirit of possibility weaves its way through our reading from the First Letter of Peter, too. There, we are admonished to be eager to do what is good, and to do so with gentleness and reverence. Gentleness is key to incubation. It is why my cousin made sure I kept my 6-year-old paws off of his chicks as they were hatching.

It is also part of incubating mission-aligned non-profits. Union has consistently used our building, one of our biggest assets, to provide a gentle, nurturing, nourishing space for fledgling organizations to come into their own. Some eventually fly the coop. Others put down roots. Each story is unique, because we foster their potential.

Conclusion

I could go on all day, but we have a lot yet to do and some of you have brunch reservations, so let me close by looping back to the idea that Union serves as an incubator not only for mission aligned non-profits, but also more personally, for our souls. The role of an incubator is to provide a warm, nurturing environment. In the case of eggs, it’s so they can hatch. In the case of babies, it’s usually because they were born prematurely. In the case of non-profits, it’s so they can get a head start.

If we extrapolate this into our spiritual lives, then, our church serves as an incubator when it provides a warm, nurturing environment for our souls to thrive. An incubator doesn’t try to make you what you’re not. Rather, it provides a space for you to thrive. And so, my prayers this week are in thanksgiving for the incubatory work that the Holy Spirit is doing through this church. May Jesus’ spirit of mutual care and growth thrive in us and all we do.

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Acts 17:22-29, 1 Peter 3:13-16
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