THE MEMBERSHIP

A practical ethos for the people who stay

Paul Tan · Good Protocols, SPC · October 2026

Two people stand in the same food bank on a Tuesday morning.

One is in the line. She has used the pantry through a hard winter, and she knows things the staff do not: which landlord on her block will take partial rent, which mechanic will not cheat a woman alone, which neighbor has not been seen at the window in a week. Nobody asks her. She came in through the door marked for people who need things, and from that moment the building has one question for her: what do you need?

The other is behind the table. He retired last spring, his wife died in the fall, and this is the only place in the week where anyone expects him. He has never said so, and nobody has asked. He came in through the door marked for people who help, and from that moment the building has one question for him: when can you work?

Both of them are giving, and both of them are receiving. The doors have taught each of them not to know it.

The wrong direction

Most of what we build for neighborhoods in trouble runs one way. A person who lacks something comes in one door and is named needy. A person who has something comes in another and is named helper. Food, money, knowledge, and navigation then flow downhill from the second group to the first, and the record makes the slope permanent. A case is opened. A case is closed. The person who was helped is never asked to teach the next family, and the person who helps is never allowed to say what the place is giving back.

I have spent thirty years in this work, in youth homelessness, foster care, refugee services, and multicultural family support, and I have watched good people do it well inside this shape. I have also watched what the shape does over time. Frontline staff at a large food bank told me this fall that they felt stuck: they could process requests all day, and they wanted to change lives. The direction of the help was the trouble, and no amount of skill inside it could change that.

The people who stay

Every neighborhood already has people who stay. Wendell Berry, borrowing from Wallace Stegner, called them stickers, as against the boomers who come to a place to take what it offers and move on. The volunteer of twelve years. The librarian who knows which patron sleeps in a car. The deacon who delivers the casserole. The barber. The shop owner who has watched the same corner for twenty years. The woman who used the food bank through a hard winter and now runs the sorting crew.

These people already carry neighbors from one place to another, by name, without a form. When the food bank volunteer phones the librarian about a family, when the night host at a church shelter introduces a guest to the deacon, when the barber tells a young man which coach to go see, help moves across a neighborhood in a way no referral system has ever matched. The stickers are the real hub of any place. Almost no

institution is built to see them, and when they tire or die, what they carried dies with them, because nobody was apprenticed to it.

One door

The first practical change is small. Each house in a neighborhood (the food bank, the shelter, the congregation, the library, the community center) changes what happens in the first five minutes, so that everyone arrives as a neighbor before anyone knows which way the help will run.

The food bank asks a new shopper what they know before it hands them anything, and writes the answer down in their words. The shelter lets a guest who has been coming all season help welcome the next guest on their first night. The library gives its meeting room to the patron who learned the benefits system the hard way and can teach it. The congregation opens its kitchen before its pews. The community center lets the teenagers run something real.

None of this costs much. All of it changes the direction of the flow. The test for any house is simple: in the last month, how many people who first came here to receive something have also given something here, and did anyone notice?

The membership

The second change is something new: a plain association of the people who stay. It owns no building and has no staff to speak of. It delivers no services. It is the stickers of a neighborhood, gathered on a rhythm, carrying a small purse, apprenticing one another to the work of the place, and lending themselves to every house on the street.

People join by showing up and saying, at the table, that they intend to stay. Receiving help never disqualifies anyone; a person in a season of pure need is a full member while giving nothing. A large gift does not buy a seat. The only condition is presence over time.

The membership meets for a meal every week that moves among the houses, so that people learn every door by eating behind it. Once a month its people gather to say who they are worried about and what nobody is doing, and one person carries that short list to the houses. Once a year it reads aloud the names of everyone who stayed another year, and remembers by name those who died.

What makes it more than a volunteer pool is an arch of ages built in from the beginning. Newcomers are introduced to one member by name, which is the whole of the orientation. Apprentices learn a real craft of the place beside someone who knows it: cooking for many, the garden, repair and building, how the housing and benefits systems actually work, how to welcome a stranger, how to coach a child. A core of people carry the weekly work, and each of them carries an apprentice, so that the work outlives any one of them. Elders hold the memory of the place and sit with the core when something hard happens. A person moves among those standings by their own word and the recognition of the people they work beside, never by a score. And the person who was helped through a hard year becomes the one who teaches the next family how to get through it, and the membership says so out loud.

The work is the renewal

Our sector's habit is to raise the money, build the building, hire the staff, and then open the door to the people the building was for. By the time the neighbors arrive, everything that could have formed them has been done by contractors and professionals.

The membership runs the other way. It begins with rooms already standing and slightly tired: a church basement with a kitchen, a storefront a landlord would rather see lit, a fellowship hall used twice a week. It borrows them, then fixes them, and only much later, if ever, owns anything. The fixing is the point. Cleaning, repairing, painting, planting, and remodeling a place together is the same work as forming apprentices and growing leaders. A retired electrician working beside a nineteen-year-old on a Saturday is doing workforce development, mentoring, and community repair at once, and nobody needs a grant to call it that. The person who shows up three Saturdays running and knows where the screws are is becoming a leader whether anyone names it or not.

The honest costs are small and real: insurance, permits, a licensed tradesperson for anything structural or electrical, tools, food, and modest stipends for the people who carry the weekly work. Those stipends matter. Shared work is still labor, and the person who leads a crew every Saturday should not be asked to do it for nothing.

What it refuses

It refuses tiers of worth. A standing in a craft is a fact about the work, never about a person's value.

It refuses conditions. No meal, bed, or welcome depends on behavior, belief, sobriety, gratitude, or progress in a plan, and nobody earns a place by giving back. Relationships run in every direction as an invitation and never as a debt.

It refuses records on persons. It keeps names and stories told with consent, and nothing else, and it shares nothing with any agency. It will walk a neighbor to the outreach worker or the clinic when the neighbor wants to go, and it will never build a list.

It refuses to become a program. The day it is asked to deliver outcomes for a funder or count as someone's required service, it says no or it stops being itself.

And it refuses to replace what must be fast and professional. Crisis response, the law, medical care, and the deepest kinds of distress belong to the people trained for them. The membership comes alongside. It does not appoint itself savior.

A few questions worth sitting with

For boards and funders: what would change if we measured whether the people who came to receive have become people who give, and stopped measuring how many cases we closed?

For cities: every plan this year names agencies, business associations, and service providers as partners. Where are the people who stay, and who in city hall knows their names?

For congregations: your kitchens, halls, and the habit of showing up when someone dies are the oldest infrastructure in the neighborhood. What would it take to lend them to a membership that includes people who will never join your church?

For all of us: who in your neighborhood is carrying something nobody else knows about, and who is learning it from them?

Where this comes from

None of this is new. Settlement houses ran on an arch of young residents, older donors, and the neighbors who held them both, and a century ago a Boston organizer named Mary Parker Follett argued that the neighborhood group was where democracy actually happened. Our grandparents' fraternal lodges, mutual aid societies, and rotating savings circles did much of what is described here without calling it anything. What is new is how badly we need it again, and how cheaply it can be rebuilt from what is already standing.

Berry gave the idea its name. In one of his stories a Kentucky barber says that we are all members of each other, and the difference is only in who knows it and who does not. The membership is a way for a neighborhood to know it, on purpose, every week.

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