

# The Missionary Position: *Proselytizing for Progressives, or a Brief Guide to Polite Progression*

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You've gone and done it. You've converted to the Dark Side of reenacting. You've become a Progressive citizen. You've upgraded all your clothing and belongings. You've debated the merits of different styles of hairpins, and have designed a cooler-free weekend menu for the season. You're thrilled! Finally, the possibility of looking like you stepped out of the 1860's seems attainable!

And then, you look around you. With the dismay and horror common to new converts, you survey your former companions, and see the full weight of their farb. You weep. You wail. You gnash teeth on occasion.

With the zeal common to conversion, you set about plotting to baptize your fellow civilians in the Waters of Progression. After all, it all makes such *sense*, when you get right down to it: doing it *right* is the only way to go!

You gleefully pass out factoids like a missionary hands out gospel tracts. Your companions stare at you. You offer your copy of *Who Wore What* to be lent to interested parties. Your companions change the subject. You begin to rail against the use of snoods. Your companions drop their jaws in horror, and clasp the scraps of rayon to their uncorseted chests.

You've hit The Wall.

Adopting a Progressive mindset is an individual process, and as much as we zealots would love to convert the world, it really must be an individual effort. You can lead Farbette to water, and even light her snood on fire, and still you cannot force her into the Waters of Progression.

That said, you can still be a missionary for the movement—without becoming a candidate for crucifixion at your next event.

Be Selfish,  
Be Subtle

Your own impression and attitude will speak the loudest about the desirability of “upgrading.”

If you are nasty and accusatory, even the interested women will reject accuracy.

If, on the other hand, you focus on yourself for a season or two, improving your wardrobe and accessories, improving your knowledge base of the era, improving your ability to construct a rounded first person impression, you'll set a polite and pleasant example of what “progression” looks like.

Do your best to make contact with any prospective members of the group, and catch them before they purchase ill-considered items. Suggest alternatives when asked, and don't be offended if your overtures are rebuffed. It's not personal.

Gather a  
Core

Over the course of a season or two, you'll start getting questions from potential converts. Answer them. Answer politely, pleasantly, with an invitation to ask other questions, or go shopping for period appropriate fabrics, or take a look at the reprint of Peterson's you just bought. Speak often about what you're finding out through your research, which reenactorisms you've cast off, and why.

You don't have to pester them to make the same changes; that comes later. You'll find that some companions gravitate toward you, and will start asking questions about what they can do to look more like the pictures, and less like the other reenactors.

As the core solidifies, you can expect some hostility from the “Old Guard.” Be polite. Don't take it personally. Much discord can be deflected with a simple, “Oh, thank you for noticing my improvements! I've been working pretty hard this season.”

Stopping short of any criticism on your part is very important. Each person must make their own decisions; you can only change yourself.

A Plate of  
Progressive  
Brownies

As the season ends, consider hosting a social activity for all interested parties. Relaxed, non-event time is a great opportunity to share information and help others get inspired.

Some ideas to get you going:

- **Ladies Tea**, hosted at your home, or a local historic house. Schedule a short slide show or over-head projector show of period images, fashion illustrations, and original photographs.
- **Sewing Afternoon**, with a purpose of constructing undergarments (something most “progression-challenged” people will not have in any quantity or quality, but which can be done very cheaply.)
- **“New Member” orientation**, to share resources for research, patterns, clothing suggestions, first person suggestions, and the like
- **Regular “work parties”** for the core group and any interested people, at which period books are discussed, sewing done, fittings assisted, and first person scenarios worked out.
- A clothing **workshop** by an outside lecturer, with “upgrade” fashion show and goodies after.



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It is important to issue regular, non-threatening invitations to the less progressive elements of the group. Try a card or a phone call, with a simple, “I’m hosting a sewing day at my house, and I’d love it if you can come. We’ll be helping one another fit a bodice, and we’ll have a potluck salad lunch.” It’s just a simple, courteous request for the pleasure of their company. After all, exposure is the surest way to catch a disease! The “symptoms” may be slow in arriving, but the camaraderie formed will be helpful in later stages of evangelism.

### Be Supportive

Be supportive and complimentary of *any* move toward progression. Accept that not everyone wants to be progressive and accurate. Accept that not everyone will wear a corset (even though it’s the most comfortable way to go!). Accept that it is a hobby, and you cannot, and should not, force people to do your bidding. Even if you are right.

What you *can* do is notice when people get things right, and give them opportunities to upgrade painlessly.

Are far too many women sporting modern hairstyles? Host a “*hair-do*” *parlor* each morning at camping events, where ladies help one another pin up their hair. Period styles may be intimidating with just two hands; but when someone else offers to help put hair up, a simple bun with a center part is much easier to accomplish. Hairstyle changes will go a long way toward improving the presence of a group.

Do you see the need for some basic upgrade pieces for new members? Organize a *loaner trunk* of accurate gear and accessories for those who want to improve, or recognize need for improvement while at an event. Aprons, shawls, and slat bonnets cover a vast multitude of sins, and are quite cheap to make, if you are feeling philanthropic (be sure to put your nametag in each somewhere!).

**Build a better fashion show.** Offer to do a fashion review, selecting the most accurate ensembles to highlight in vignette form, discussing the accurate parts of the ensemble and why they work. You’ll educate the public and membership in a non-confrontational way.

Are too many women shopping and chatting? You can alleviate the boredom by organizing and participating in *valid citizen/soldier scenarios*, and “*home front*” *activities* for citizens that are not dependent on soldier participation. Having accurate and appropriate activities will go a long way to reduce “camping in funny clothes.”

Use the “Spousal Holding Tank Tea” as an opportunity to **educate in an enjoyable way**: read from a period book, or host a discussion on women’s rights, education, emancipation, child labor. Rounding out the knowledge base of the Civil War era can spark an interest in accuracy for someone who doesn’t particularly like clothing.

You can also **use your own experience** as an example. When you are unafraid to drag out pictures of yourself wearing inaccurate things, and compare them to original images of the

time, you may be less intimidating to someone eager to upgrade, but fearful of ridicule. For instance, I can speak honestly about how much more comfortable I am since adding a corset to my wardrobe, how much nicer 100% cotton chemises and drawers feel, how well-protected my skin is in a slat bonnet. I don’t need to be critical of others—I can encourage by my experience.

### Write the Gospels

After a year or two of subtle proselytizing, the core will have further solidified, and you may find that some of the “fringe” people are drawn into a more progressive mindset quite against their intention! It may be time to suggest drafting “*common sense guidelines*” to use in the organization.

The guidelines for dressing should act as a written mentor, giving a standard and base, with supportive details, that any person can use to upgrade, or start, their wardrobe. In the guide might also be included favorite resources, a basic persona worksheet, and any guidelines the group has regarding what personas are *non grata* (for instance, prostitutes).

### Continue Your Own Education

With the ever-increasing body of public information, there is no reason to ever assume a static position. Progression requires that we continue to learn and implement changes as needed. We each pursue our Progression for our own personal aims. Set that aim high, and share the excitement with others in a polite, friendly manner, and you will find many opportunities to encourage others along a similar path.

