Raven Kindred's Guide to Starting a Kindred

by Lewis Stead

Getting Started

Most persons will want to join or found a kindred in their area, This guide has been put together to hopefully offer some bits of advice that I've come across in the last five years of organizing in the Asatru community, and the 5 years before that wandering through the generic Pagan community.

First, before one runs out and begins to solicit people, you should think about what you are doing. You'll need to think hard about what you want to get out of a kindred. Do you want a large group? Are you interested in outreach or do you just want a few close friends? The very name of our groupings, "kindred," implies a great deal more than does membership in a church. Today we are accustomed to religious institutions that are more or less anonymous and sterile. A kindred should not be this way. While we must be open to all, we need not act as if we were a public facility with no more intimacy than a department store.

The Core

The real key in getting a kindred started is to find a few "core" people who are dedicated to getting something together, and with whom you are comfortable. It's really important to get this core that you can count on before you try to expand further. Get folks together and have a couple of blots and perhaps a few discussions about what people want to get out of the group and where their beliefs are. It's very important that everybody have a very similar idea of what they want the group to do and what they want out of it. If people have very different ideas, the group will not work, most particularly because people will at first delude themselves as to how much they have in common, and later become divided over what appeared to be small differences in the beginning. Folks with differing beliefs can be integrated into an existing group, but unless you have a set of core beliefs and people who are agreed upon them, factions will quickly form and the kindred will split or die. This "core" group doesn't have to be large. In our case, our "core" was my girlfriend (now wife), myself, and one friend with very similar ideas.

While this "core" is very very important, I can't really give you much advice on where to find these sorts of people. We lucked out and found someone with ideas very similar to our own right away. (I've seen other kindreds where I'm not sure if any of the folks have the same ideas with about as much success as you'd figure.) The real keys are that the core people need to be willing to do work and you need to get along with them on a very easygoing basis. Core people usually get along in a very organic way and are generally friends outside of the context of Asatru.

P.O. Boxes

The first thing you will need when you first get started is a contact address that you are comfortable giving out to the public. I strongly advise that you get a PO Box. Many people recommend a box because of fear that someone will find out they are Pagan, but the most important reason not to use your home address is that its likely that sometime along the way you'll move or want someone else to deal with the mail. It's important that your kindred's contact address doesn't move. With a Post Office Box, even if you move some distance away, you can take a ride out to the box on Saturday afternoon or more importantly, you can hand the key to someone else and have them take over. You'd be surprised at how long after publication people will continue to use an address. I ran a small magazine from 1989 to 1992. Now, 4 years after ceasing publication, I still see that magazine advertised. After, being published in magazines and networking guides, no matter how much you publicize the new address, not everyone will get the information. If people write to an address and get their letter back, they're more likely to conclude that the group has disbanded than it has moved.

The other reason for a PO Box is that there are some weird people out there in the Asatru community and you may not want them to know how you live or more importantly you may not want them to get your phone number through your address. Harrassement, however, is not really very much of a problem.

If possible, get a box at a regular US Post Office. You may need to get on a waiting list, but the boxes are much cheaper ($25-$50/year compared to $100-200/year) and come with fewer restrictions than those at private post offices such as Mail Boxes Etc. Private post office places also can go out of business, which defeats the purpose of getting a box for long term consistency.

Finding People

Once you have this "core" and a place where you can be contacted, you are ready to expand. There are three main venues to find people: the Asatru community, the generic Pagan community (i.e., the Wiccan community), and the general populace.

The Asatru community is very aware that we are currently a small group, and there are many efforts to connect people interested in forming kindreds. It is entirely possible that there are other people in your general area who are already Asatru and looking for someplace to go to rituals. Many magazines have kindred listings and will gladly list your group (many groups will cross-list, so if you get on one list chances are you will be picked up by a number of them). There are also several groups such as The Ring of Troth, Raven Kindred Association, etc that offer sponsorship to local kindreds. What real resources they can offer you are generally minimal, but its sometimes useful to have their name in attracting people. Of course, you need to be careful what groups you get involved with because bad reputations can become attached to your group as well. We found that because of our semi-official association with one group, people were convinced we were a racist organization. Several organizations provide listings for member kindreds in their organizational newsletter or magazine. A few publish membership directories or are small enough that they will simply refer you to a few folks in your area through a letter. They can also be a source of pamphlets and other materials to get folks interested.

Another somewhat less useful resource is the general/Wiccan-oriented Pagan community. We have found some of our best converts from this field, but we have also found most of our nuts and kooks there. The Wiccan community has a very different view of the world than Asatruar do, and this is very important to

remember. We share a common vocabulary, but we often mean very different things by those terms so it's important to make sure that you aren't talking at cross-purposes. In fact, often a Asatru kindred will have its best success among people who are turned off by the rest of the Wiccan-oriented community. Having given the warnings, I *do* encourage you to seek out resources there. Most areas have some type of networking organization that you can take part in. These groups usually sponsor open rituals, coffee houses, and perhaps a weekend festival. Most areas also have something which is acknowledged as the local magazine, and it's important to get listed in this.

Finding people in non-Pagan areas is also a good possibility. Advertising in the general population will not necessarily yield a great response, but you can target certain communities. Bookstores, even mainstream ones, are a good resource. Scandinavian organizations, such as the Sons of Norway, can sometimes be useful, but people with strong Scandinavian cultural roots are usually also tied to the Lutheran Church, which occupies a very central place in Scandinavian cultural life. Other places to search are historical recreationist groups--not just medievalist groups, but also Civil War and such. The best way to attract people in the general populace is simply to be who you are and generally you will come across people who are interested. Wear a Thor's Hammer or Valknot, read a book or magazine on Asatru in public, and don't hide yourself and you'll come across people. Arguing with people or trying to get uninterested people to come to things is a useless gesture. Discussion of our faith and open invitations are excellent ways to find people, but if someone isn't interested, don't waste your time trying to convert them. They'll only resent it.

Another way to find people is to create a public event. The easiest thing to do is to teach a class somewhere about Asatru or runes. If your area would be more accepting of a non-religious event, you might try lecturing on "Norse Paganism: Ancient and Modern" and simply concentrate on the modern. Of course, these rely on the idea that you are somewhat knowledgable and comfortable talking. If this isn't the case, you might try to get someone from elsewhere who is known in the Asatru community to lecture or teach for you. There are many knowledgable people and virtually all would be willing to help you out.

Once you get people interested, you'll need to devote a reasonable amount of time to explaining not only the group and its goals, but also the general information about the religion. Even among people who claim to be Asatru, many will not know even the basics of the religion and it's a general tendency for public groups to attract inexperienced people. While it may be shocking to you as someone new to organizing, the very action of putting together a kindred means you are the expert. Don't worry about this. As long as you are sincere and honest, most people are quite willing to bear with you.

When new people come to their first ritual, it's a good idea to take people aside and make sure they know what's going on and answer any questions they have. Many people are shy and may be embarrassed to admit, to use an actual example from our kindred, that they don't know that Aegir is the God of brewing. This was a weak point in our own kindred's activities and we now handle it in two ways. Before our ritual, we have a discussion about the myths and lore relevant to the Gods we are honoring at that blot. Then immediately before we perform it, we go over the ritual step by step. This will usually elicit questions from newcomers, and it serves a dual purpose in making sure the people performing it know their parts and when they come. We also have a series of handouts on the blot and on Asatru in general and will recommend or loan books out to people.

Having people interested or attending rituals doesn't mean they will necessarily become members of your kindred. In Raven Kindred we have three basic "communities" within our rituals. Some people are full members of Raven; others are Asatru, but not part of our kindred; and still others are friends or members of other Pagan faiths and just attend rituals as guests.

A kindred is something which should form organically. It's not a good idea to push ones friends into joining unless they are sincerely interested. In the Raven Kindreds, we usually wait until people ask to formally join, unless we perceive they are waiting to be asked. On the other hand, Ásatrú is not a secret religion or one open only to "initiates" as many Neo-Pagan faiths are. We must be open to outsiders who are truly interested.

A bit of warning is in order about over-enthusiasm. It is often one of the hardest things in kindred leadership to *not* go out and recruit a whole-bunch-a-people as fast as possible. It is actually quite easy to get a fairly large size group together very quickly--if you expand the goals of the group to an absurd point. I've seen groups go out and apply friendly pressure on people who really aren't appropriate, trying to get them to come to kindred events. Most of these folks figure out quickly that Asatru isn't for them and drop out. The result is an endless revolving door. In such a case, not only are you unlikely to retain people who aren't in sync with your ideas, but the revolving door is likely to place an emphasis on newcomers and often means that regular members do not get enough out of the group and drop out as well. This most often happens when folks try to recruit people who are interested in other types of Paganism (usually Wicca) or non-religious medievalist groups such as the SCA. You are far better off offering a friendly invitation and then referring these people to more appropriate groups, rather than trying to get them interested in Asatru when they really aren't.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't give people a prod. We've had folks who kept coming to our events at public festivals and who we talked with in local stores, and we've encouraged them to come to our regular meetings. But, the key is that people should show some interest--don't just grab them because they don't run away too fast.

Another area where you have to be realistic is in what geographical area you try to recruit from. First, it's generally counterproductive to try to recruit from areas that already have kindreds. We're not big enough as a religion that this is acceptable. One kindred of a dozen people is much better than 3 kindreds with 4 members. (The exception to this, of course, is if people honestly can't get along or have very different ideas about what they want from a group. Also, if you find out the local "kindred" only exists on paper, I wouldn't worry about stepping on their toes.) You also need to be realistic in how far people can live from the kindred and still be active participants. I've found anything over an hour drive tends to significantly decrease activity, although we had at least one member who rarely missed a meeting despite a long bus ride. The simple rule here is that if you never see them at rituals, it doesn't matter what's on paper, they're not really members of your kindred in any way that counts.

Regular Meetings

As you gather members and expand, there are certain things you should think about. The most important single thing is consistancy. Meetings should happen on a regular schedule and should be similar in focus.

Nothing is more important to making a kindred grow than consistancy. Religion is a regularizing influence on peoples' lives and they must know what to expect from the kindred.

The most important element of consistancy is holding meetings on a regular and reliable basis. People must be able to know where and when meetings are happening and have assurance that they will happen. I cannot emphasize this enough. I have watched successful kindreds fall apart when they violated this one simple principle.

Our kindred has a ritual on every first Saturday of every month beginning at 2:00pm. Our members don't need a schedule (although we provide them with one) to know when to show up. If attendance is minimal, still hold a ritual. Don't cancel things at the last minute or change the time or place simply because someone can't attend. (Obviously if nobody able to lead the meeting can make it, then you need to reschedule, but if one or two folks are going to be out of town, it's better to miss them than to inconvenience everyone else.) If you find people can't make it at the scheduled time, get together with the whole group and establish a new schedule, *but make it regular*. New folks will quickly become frustrated if you continually change the time for rituals. If you keep to an established and regular time and place, members will usually adjust their schedule so they can attend. If meetings aren't regular, they won't be able to plan far enough ahead to make sure they can make it. I advise, for the same reason, that meetings happen at the same location. If you hold more than one meeting a month, this can be fudged by linking a particular time with a particular place such as holding Friday night meetings at Joe's house and Saturday afternoon meetings at Bill's.

Another item of regularity is a real commitment on behalf of the organizers to making sure that meetings happen. For example, we have had opportunities to leave town on our regular blot day for a vacation or other leisure events, but we don't because we have made the commitment to run meetings for the kindred. If you can't make this commitment, find someone who can. This doesn't mean that you're tied down with chains, but if you're going to have a successful kindred, you need to treat kindred meetings with the same seriousness as you do other parts of your life. For organizers, the kindred cannot take a backseat to other parts of life.

You also need to be aware of time and not be late. In the Wiccan community there is a joke that people operate on "Pagan Standard Time" which means that everything occurs late, often by several hours. This is rude, and you can't expect people to come to a gathering if they will end up waiting for hours for others to show up. You needn't become oppressive, but you can't be too forgiving. Being a half an hour late may be acceptable, showing up at 6:00pm for a noon ritual is something else. In our kindred we have a discussion group before the ritual. This builds in a one hour period in which folks can be "late" and still make it to the ritual. On the other hand, they do miss out on the discussion.

In setting a schedule, I suggest that people follow a secular calendar rather than a lunar or religious one. It's a nice idea to get people together exactly on the solstice, but it's hard for most people to make it to a ritual that's held on Tuesday morning at 10:37am. The best method seems to be to schedule meetings on a particular day and a particular week (e.g. every first friday of the month at 7:00pm). Again, this also helps people to adjust their own schedules so they can make it to meetings. If someone needs a day off from work, it's much easier to tell a supervisor at a job that you need every first saturday off rather than providing a long list of dates that appear to be random.

How often to meet is another important question. If you meet too often, dedication to the kindred will begin to interfere with people's mainstream life and folks will begin to miss meetings. Christians meet weekly, but can do so partially because most church services are only an hour or two long and occur at a time when people have nothing else to do (Sunday morning, Saturday afternoon). Raven Kindred's rituals involve an "Edda study" session and a feast after the ritual, so people are making a commitment to a day of festivities lasting between 4 and 8 hours--although they are welcome to attend for only part of the day. We have one of these meetings a month. The key is to find a schedule that makes people feel like meetings are happening on a regular basis (probably at least once a month), but don't consume their life. Take into account how long people are driving and what other priorities they may have in their lives. I live in an area where most people work Monday through Friday, 9:00-5:00. Work schedules combined with a long commute and rush hour traffic, make weekday meetings very difficult for people to make. If everyone lives close together and has a similar schedule, weeknights might be easier and more convenient than weekends, but I'm very dubious. While everyone currently in your kindred may be able to make the evening meetings, can someone in the next town, or someone who lives an hour away? We aren't that many in number, it would be tragic for a kindred to exist that nearby people can't attend. Weekends are definitely preferable if not essential.

A printed schedule is also very important. While we have our rituals on a very regular timetable, we always try to put something in people's hands. This same schedule/newsletter can also be used as a tool to find new people by leaving it at appropriate places. In our case this is a combined newsletter offering writeups of past events and schedule of future events. It doesn't need to be elaborate, it could be something as simple as a photocopy of a neatly hand-written schedule.

In addition to being regular on paper, meetings must also be reliable in practice. I know of a kindred that has a scheduled meeting every two weeks. However, out of all that I made plans to attend, only one actually was held. The rest were cancelled at the last minute. I do not know of anything more frustrating than rearranging your schedule, only to have a meeting cancelled out from under you. This will not only lose you members, it will leave you with a very negative reputation.

The content of meetings must also have some consistency. Keep to your core people and your core vision of what the kindred is supposed to be. If your interest is in more or less standard Asatru religion, don't change the focus of the group simply because a few new people come in who are interested in esoterica, magic, or seidhr. You don't have to be a slave to your original ideas, and evolution is necessary, but you can't move from one thing to the other without keeping some core consistancy. The key here is that people want something that is reliable. Each of our blots is different, but at each meeting we generally follow the format of holding a discussion, a blot, and a feast. If we were to suddenly have a meeting where we did nothing but rune magic, with no discussion or feast, it would be very offputting. People would not be getting what they were coming for. I would suggest that if your focus is very broad, to try to link certain activities to certain times such as having blots and feasts on Saturday meetings and magic on friday evening meetings or to schedule single-time events separately. For example, we meet regularly on the first Saturday, so we might schedule a special meeting for rune magic on the third Saturday of a particular month.

If there was any single thing to avoid in running a kindred, it's sentimentality. You can't be too nice a guy. Many groups die because people are *too* nice. They don't want a member to miss a ritual, so they change

plans at the last minute (and inconvenience other people). They don't want to say "no" to someone, so the focus of the group shifts and nobody is getting what they really want. You can't be everything to everybody and sometimes the most important act of leadership is to suggest that your group isn't what someone is looking for. This doesn't mean that a position of leadership gives you a right to be a jerk or a petty tyrant, but you need to consider the long term needs of the group as well as the short term needs of individuals.

Membership, Probationary Periods, and Commitment

While I have used the term "you" in running a kindred, I strongly suggest an open and democratic structure in running things (with the warning that I don't believe that offices and formal voting according to *Roberts Rules of Order* is necessary because the process rather than the result often becomes the focus). In our kindred, most decisions are made as a result of simple conversations. We talk about some idea, usually over dinner, and if it seems like a good idea we do it and if it doesn't hold up to people's analysis, we don't. If everything is running well, there shouldn't be any politics or problems. We seldom have any decision that isn't unanimous and simply decided. If there ever is anything that we can't agree on, we take a simple majority vote. We have a written set of by-laws that lay out our official structure, but our success has been because we usually don't need them. Generally, someone is going to end up being the leader (perhaps coordinator is a better word), whether officially or unofficially. This is usually the founder or the person who holds the key to the PO Box or at who's home meetings are held.

A kindred is not someone's personal feifdom. There is a tendency among alternative religious groups for people to assume the role of guru. This is something to be very careful of, both in oneself and also in watching new members. As an organizer, you should try to make people feel as if they can take an active role in the group and have a voice in decisionmaking. Not only will this keep ones own ego in check, but in my experience loyalty is earned by a leader, not demanded.

Making the differentiation between people who are merely coming to rituals and people who are members is extremely difficult. Virtually every legitimate group I know of discourages people from officially joining until they are convinced of the persons understanding and commitment to the religion and their ability to fit into the current group. Some groups have specific probationary periods before someone can join, others make the decision depending on the circumstances. Usually the only problem you run into is someone who is flushed with the zeal of a new convert and wishes to join the kindred the first time they meet you. Most people will listen if you explain that it is a large commitment and you want them to experience more before they join. This is where having a specific probationary period is a big help. If you put off someone from joining based on a personal or group decision, there is the potential for the person to be offended or believe he is being disrespected or that he is disliked. If the period is based on a rule, your kindred can use the rule to avoid this becoming a point of personal judgement. If everyone has to follow it, individuals won't feel they are being judged.

How open your group is has a lot to do with your own personal desires and should be something that you and your "core" discuss when the kindred is first starting out. I believe firmly that being a religion, Asatru rituals should be open to anyone who is interested and sincere. A kindred is not a magical or esoteric group, it's a religious unit. (There's nothing wrong with a magical group, but it's a different animal and operates under very different assumptions and rules.) Thus, I do not believe that there should be regular

rituals which are open to members only. People should not become second class citizens simply because they aren't yet ready to commit to the group. I've found this only encourages people to make commitments before they are ready, and leads to problems down the road. Likewise, I don't believe that membership should be offered only to the few, but should be available for anyone who wants it and is not otherwise a trouble maker. If there's no legitimate reason they shouldn't join, then they should be welcomed.

Now we come to what kind of commitment is required from members. In general, people who formally join the kindred should be regular attendees and should have some sense of friendship and devotion to other members of the kindred. Membership in a kindred is like membership in a church, it is not training for the clergy. While I would expect people joining an Asatru group to know the Gods and myths, there is no reason why everyone should be a Gothi, a rune-mage, or an esotericist. There is a place in our religion for lay persons who simply want to worship the Gods.

It has become a custom in Asatru for some people to "oath" people to their kindred or to the leader of the kindred. This has led to a number of fights as people need to be released from such oaths because they discover the group is not for them. In our kindred, people are welcomed as kinsmen and must make an oath of Profession to the Gods, but there is no formal oath to our kindred or anyone in it. Our loyalties are based on friendship and mutual respect, not on a legalism.

Kindred Business, by-laws, etc.

I tend to think that politics and decisionmaking take up much to much time in most Pagan groups. Our kindred does not have "business meetings" and what few decisions we make about day to day operations are generally discussed over dinner at a regular meeting. People do jobs as needed and we don't have any real problems with this.

We have a set of by-laws, which act as a sort of compact between our various members as to what the groundrules are. We haven't looked at them in a few years. They are, nonetheless, a good idea. People can get funny ideas and it's good to have things written down. You don't need to include much in your by-laws. They should lay out how someone becomes a member, what officers you have and what they are supposed to do, and how decisions are made in the group. You don't need to write them in legal language or incorporate and register them with the state. They can be as simple as "Members are admitted by a majority vote. We elect a President each January who hosts meetings and checks the PO box. We decide things by majority vote." That's perfectly acceptable. In fact, it's probably better for a small group than more complicated by-laws.

It is a good idea to have occasional discussions about where the kindred is going and how happy people are with what is going on. Here, you can go over the goals of the group, how you're reaching them, and whether people feel like changes need to be made.

Problem People

Once you have a group of more than two people, you will begin to deal with interpersonal relations and politics. It's inevitable. It would be wonderful if everyone could get along, but this usually just doesn't happen. I'll try to cover some of the problems I've had in groups and my suggestions for them. Everyone

is different tho, and it's hard to give you solid advice. Perhaps the best thing I can say is to hold onto your original ideas and perservere. Most of the big problems come when you are still quite small. Problem people's influence will begin to diminish when the group reaches 10 or so people.

My most simple piece of advice in dealing with people is that quality is far better than quantity. This doesn't mean I endorse some type of elitism where only the priviledged are allowed access to the kindred. I simply warn against trying to include people who really don't fit in. You are better off finding more appropriate groups for marginal people, rather than trying to alter your group's goals to accomidate them. As I said above, you can be too nice and need to realize that you can't be everything to everybody.

The most common problem is people who I call feuders. These folks generally come in pairs and are people who have bad blood with each other from outside the kindred and bring it in with them--commonly it's a couple who splits up after joining the kindred. This can be extremely difficult, especially if both are likable people. Factions can quickly develop as people take sides with one person or the other. It's especially nasty when a couple who are members of your kindred break up or are having problems. Having experienced it, I can assure you that nobody wants to look across the ritual and see two people glaring at each other. This can reach a point where other people leave the group because of it.

Another problem is the geek. Now some people are probably already angry that I would use such a pejorative term, but it's the best I can come up with. Alternative religions and activities generally get more than their share of the socially inept and part of religion is being able to get along with people who are different from you. I *do not* encourage anyone to think of people as being a problem simply because they are different or a bit socially inept. Every group is going to eventually attract someone who says really stupid or inappropriate things, talks constantly, or just isn't used to being in polite company. This is part of life. What *is* a problem are people whose social presence is *so* repugnant that their attendance causes other people to drop out or skip meetings rather than endure the person. In general, if people agree that meetings have become agony because of someone's presence, you have a problem.

As with feuders, the geek creates a real moral dilemma because one needs to choose between the right of the individual(s) to practice the religion and the health of the group. You have to judge for yourself. Some folks will respond to simple social pressure, and will pick up on what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Generally, the best way to deal with people who's presence is causing problems is to not allow them to steal the agenda. If they continue to talk about inappropriate things, simply ignore them and return the conversation to the topic at hand. Eventually, the group will either grow to the point where individuals can be more easily ignored or the problem people will figure out that they don't fit in and will adjust their actions or leave. If it does reach a point where people are about to quit, you may need to have a meeting and discuss this with the person who is a problem. There is no point in being tolerant to the point where your group no longer exists.

Most everyone is familiar with the critic. This is the person who can find fault with something no matter how good it goes and more importantly has little or nothing in the way of solutions. These people are actually easy to deal with: tell them to put up or shut up. If they don't think rituals are run well, suggest that they run one instead. If they don't have solutions, tell them to come up with some. On the other hand, you have to be careful. Some critics have important things to say and may have solutions in mind. Don't

write someone off as a problem, when they might actually be an important resource for improving the group. *Constructive* criticism is very important. Pointless griping isn't.

Another problem are what I call gurus: people who are interested in propping up their own self-esteem by becoming petty dictators. Some gurus simply start their own group, but it's not at all uncommon for someone to join an already existing group and attempt to take it over. This is usually done with a snow-job of how experienced, knowledgable, or powerful they are. When you are trying to get something organized and not all that experienced, it's very tempting to let such people take charge, but you do need to be careful. Most people who are sincere and experienced will help support the already existing structure and won't try to take it over and turn it into something they want. I don't want to discourage you from availing yourself of experienced people, but be wary--not everyone is a nice guy. If they're so knowledgable and powerful, why don't they have their own group? The easiest way to judge these people is by their actions. Do they come through with what they say? Trust your instincts. Does their knowledge and wisdom seem like BS? Do they talk about their abilities more than they exercise them? Keep in contact with other Asatru groups and ask about them. Finally, have them put their cards on the table. Have them run a ritual. If you (and your other members) think they are incompetant and you can do a better job, then ease them out of this sort of thing. On the other hand, if they blow you away with how good a Gothi or Gythia they are, you've found a valuable new resource.

Closely related to the guru is the person with an agenda. By this, I mean someone who is coming to the group not because of what it offers, but because he wants it to offer something else. This person is most typified by the statement "here is what I want you to do for me." This could be someone interested in Wicca or a secular medievalist looking for a re-creation group or even a sincere Asatruar interested in different things than the rest of your group. This type of person is usually sincere, but does not or will not recognize that the group is not for them. The simplest way to deal with these people is to keep solidly to your original notion of what the group is about, and eventually these people will fall away or at the least understand what the group will and will not give them. This is one of the places where the core people are very important. The core can reinfoce their understanding of what the group is about and keep it on an even keel--which is one of the reasons I suggest it is so important that the core people agree on what they want the group to do.

Finally we come to the deadbeat. A deadbeat is someone who simply won't pull their own weight. They are generally the ones who are too "poor" to pay their share of the food (or if you are doing pot-luck they bring something very cheap like cool-aid or nothing at all). In essence, they can be sincere or insincere, Asatru or not, but they are people who are a drain on your group because their financial situation is insufficient for the basics of survival. Now, if someone has a family and is obviously working hard, but just not making it, that's something else entirely and you probably want to help these people out. However, I've found the people who are working hard and have responsibilities like kids or a high mortgage are generally *not* the ones who whine about their finances. It's the people that never seem to be able to hold jobs and who are always pleading victimhood that you want to look out for. They're not hard to spot, but a lot of people don't like to think of Asatruar as being like that. I don't like to think of us like that either, but they are unfortunately out there and we need to be realisitic. Don't facilitate their ineptitude by subsidizing them. The same goes for people who come and never help to clean up, do cooking, or gather firewood. If they aren't going to contribute, you don't need them. They will only sap your resources and create bad feelings among those who are carrying their own weight.

Now that I've talked about some of the problem people, let me tell you that they are actually quite rare. Most of the people are pretty easy to deal with. You will have to be aware of peoples needs and understand that there will be occasional stresses, but in general things take care of themselves.

National Networking Groups

While most of the successful Asatru kindreds are independent, there are several groups such as the Ring of Troth that you can affiliate with as a kindred. I wish I could give you better news about the national networking groups, but there is really only so much they can offer to the organizer of a new kindred. These groups are sincere and dedicated (usually), but don't have the resources to support new groups in the manner they would like to. Some have enough people in their database that they can refer people to you. However, there are so few Asatru that its possible that they don't know of anyone in your area. They will do what they can for you, but you can't expect them to do much more than lend a minor helping hand. Many of the advantages of affiliation with larger groups are long term ones such as tax exempt status or recognition of clergy and these should not be discounted, but when you are just starting out they may be the last thing from your mind. Whether you affiliate with a national group or remain independent, the vast majority of the work will be your own.

Nonetheless, if you feel like you want more support, I encourage you to check out the various groups that charter local kindreds and consider joining one or more of them. If they do have members or come across them, you'll be that much further ahead. Most have some type of newsletter and/or journal and will list your group. This is important because many of their members may know of other people. As a member kindred, you will also be able to take advantage at least partially of the groups good name (or bad name--it can work both ways).

There are a number of regional networking groups. Here the news is even less positive. About half of these are legitimate and hardworking. The Indiana Asatru Council is larger than some supposedly national groups. On the other hand, the other half exist largely on paper. A couple are little more than ego trips for someone who wants a new title and aren't even on good terms with the existing legitimate groups in the area.

Politics

As I said above, if you get more than two people together some sort of politics will develop. In our faith, this may be somewhat magnified because as a new religion we are dealing with very important issues and secondly we are generally strong willed and opinionated people.

Some politics are merely misunderstandings or petty fights between egotists, but the vast majority of fights in our community are over very real and important issues.

The most divisive issue in Asatru is that of racism. There are various groups who wish to limit membership in our faith to people of a particular skin color or ethnicity. This is a pretty clear issue. Racism is morally repugnant and moronic. It not only splits us as Asatruar, but it gives us a terrible reputation in the mainstream. Nonetheless, there are still racists and those who wish to accomidate the racists. My advice on them is simple: shun them. Don't let them into your kindred, don't let them attend,

don't go to their events or events they will be at, don't offer them anything. If given an inch, they will take a mile, and they will gladly drag our religion into the gutter if given a chance to.

Another divisive issue is what sort of organizational structure our religion will adopt in the long term. This tends to be a contest for the hearts and minds of Asatruar between those who think Asatru needs to be coordinated by a central authority and those who believe in a decentralized structure of independent kindreds. This is, of course, complicated by a wide variety of egotists who want to be the central coordinator of either model.

There is a tension within Asatru between those who are focussed on the religion in a modern context and those who believe that some version of traditional Norse society must be recreated in order for our religion to be a success. The latter often term this "retro-heathenry" and include things such as altering the national government to a monarchy as outright goals.

Finally, we have the simple argument found in any faith whether new or old about where the boundaries of our faith begin and end. For example, are Wiccans using Norse deities a form of Asatru, a related Heathen religion, or a totally unrelated faith?

I don't know how well I have been able to deal with politics, but I must have been somewhat successful as you're reading this (perhaps you're monitoring it for dangerous influences?). For the record, I'm known as a hothead and a pain in the ass. On the other hand, our kindred recently celebrated it's 60th monthly meeting, something that few others can boast of. I can offer my bits of advice, which may very well be worth less than the paper they are printed on. First, always be true to yourself. Don't compromise your values in order to achieve peace. If you are right on an unpopular issue, you may take a good deal of grief, but you will eventually find people who agree with you. Don't fight for the sake of fighting, but don't be afraid to argue for something you believe in. Don't get complicated--political scheming works much better in Tom Clancy novels than it does in real life. Realize that people who disagree with you are usually not evil (although I have come across at least one outright liar and thief in Asatru.) Most importantly, be aware that no organization or person speaks for Asatru or controls it. The vast majority of Asatruar in America belong to no national organization and don't care much about them. If you can't get along with the "important figures" in Asatru, realize that to a great extent they are legends in their own minds.

Kindred Meetings

The basic function of a kindred is to hold meetings and worship the Gods. So, what do you need to do to set up a meeting and have it run smoothly? This depends a lot of your goals and outlook. Asatru is a religion based in the family and the community, so gathering people together is very important. Because of this, I would advise strongly that time be set aside for non-ritual events. In my opinion, a kindred should not be something where people gather together solely for a ritual and then part their ways.

If you are hosting a ritual or meeting, the things you will need to think about are primarily mundane in nature. Asatru rituals are fairly simple, and you can put one together in about ten minutes. I wouldn't necessarily advise this, but before you get elaborate, you need to deal with the basic needs. You will need the physical items for a blot, a place to meet, and some plans for the food.

As far as a place to meet, I encourage very strongly that you find a place where you can meet indoors. Most people prefer to do their rituals outdoors, but you can always move outdoors from an indoor site, but if you don't have an indoor place you will be forced to deal with inclement weather, etc.

Food depends a lot on your personal preferences, but I suggest that you have some type of feast after your ritual. In addition to being a simple celebration, sharing food is a very powerful thing in building community. There are three basic choices for food: ordering out, pot-luck, and cooking it at the meeting.

I do not think that ordering out food is the best option. It is impersonal and I do not believe it produces the same atmosphere as eating something that is produced by hand. It does have the advantages of being very easy and also of being something that can be planned by the people at the meeting. A disadvantage is that you need to collect money from people. Pot luck has the advantage that it shares the burden in a more or less even way and it doesn't (necessarily) require that your location have cooking facilities. It does have disadvantages. Unless it is coordinated, you can end up with all deserts or salads. It also isn't very cohesive, and has less of a feast-like quality. My personal preference is for purchasing and cooking a feast at the meeting and splitting the cost among members. This allows you to plan the food at the meeting according to circumstances (heavy food in colder weather, etc) and produces a cohesive menu (pot-luck can result in szechuan chicken next to lasagna which don't quite fit together). It also brings a community feeling because everyone is involved with the production of the food. It has disadvantages of needing to do some planning ahead, taking a much larger amount of time, requiring a site with cooking facilities, and most of all making it necessary to collect money from people who attend. Another popular option is coordinating pot-luck and assigning the main dish (a roast or something similar) on a revolving basis among members.

Alcohol is an important issue in Asatru. I had always considered myself a perfectly happy drinker without any emotional problems with alcohol either pro-drinking or anti-drinking. I felt that a liberal amount of alcohol was a pretty much essential part of any Asatru gathering. That was until I attended my first largescale Asatru event and saw some real problems. Drinking should be an afterthought, not the main event. We use alcohol in the blot, and we drink during dinner often quite heavily, but we always are aware that the reason we are at the ritual is to honor the Gods, not to get blotto. I have seen (and heard even more tales) of people who didn't seem to get this. People should not be drunk before the blot starts. People should not be getting out of control. The atmosphere should be one of a stable "family gathering" type event (at which people can and do drink, occasionally somewhat heavily), and *not* the atmosphere of a frat party. People drinking should also not be driving home. As a host, you need to be willing to put up with people until they have sobered up, even if that means them sleeping on your floor. There are also certain legalities in serving alcohol. You may be considered a "host" and subject to legal penalties if someone hurts or kills someone while drunk driving. You also need to be aware of the ages of your attendees. Many people first come across Asatru while in their college years, and 18-20 year olds cannot legally drink. Local law *may* provide an exemption to this for the actual ritual and only for the actual ritual. Certainly an exemption for the ritual itself is part of our American heritage of religious freedom and covered by the first amendment right to freedom of religion, but as my attorney friend says "that and $100,000 will get you the Supreme Court decision to uphold that right." I doubt if you would have any problem with 18-20 year olds and a blot, but a sumbel might be another matter. I would not want to try to explain to a police officer or a judge that our ritual consists of endless rounds of passing around a horn of

mead. Yes, that *is* what the ritual is about, and I can't imagine a sumbel without an intoxicating liquid, but you have to admit it sounds a bit far fetched to the outsider.

Another matter of legality has to do with illegal drug use. No illegal drug use should be condoned at kindred meetings. First, it is illegal. Any arrest or conviction on drug charges would draw an enormous amount of negative attention to our faith. Second, there are many Asatruar who are against drugs and do not want to be associated with drug use. Finally, there are many people in Asatru who may not have any ethical problem with drug use, but who have sensitive jobs (police officers, schoolteachers, people with security clearances, etc.) that could be affected by being in a situation where drugs are being used. Asatru events are public events and should not be treated as being some type of "subversive" or "underground" events at which illegal activities are openly tolerated.

Reputation

A great deal of what has been discussed thus far has to do with the overall impression your kindred makes on people. Quite simply, the most successful kindreds create an impression of real people running something that they take seriously.

As an example, while there are good solid mundane reasons to make sure that meetings happen on time and on a regular basis, a just as important reason is that by doing this people will take you seriously.

Other Pagan groups revel in not taking themselves seriously, and frankly it shows in the type of people they attract. If you want people with good jobs, who own their own homes, who are willing to put forth their energy and resources, then you need to have a group that such people will want to get involved with.

Conclusion

There are a lot of ways to run a kindred. I have my ideas, you might find that they don't work for you. (Let me know.) If I could boil down everything I know about running a kindred to a few lines, it would be to make meetings regular and consistent, be honest, and keep things in perspective.

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