

CONNECT!

CREATING A CULTURE OF RELATIONSHIPS THAT MATTER

PHIL MAYNARD

Connect! Creating a Culture of Relationships That Matter

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Dedication

To my amazing wife Becky who is largely responsible for me finding my way back to the Church and a relationship with Jesus.

She has been the glue that has held life together.

AND

To Carol Wood the wonderful District Superintendent from the West District in the Central Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Carol was the inspiration for the content of this book as she challenged me to help her pastors rediscover how to create a culture where relationships matter.

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Forward

When it comes to the big E word, we all know how to do it wrong, or how to not do it at all. But do we know how to do it right—with the unchurched, the nones, the never churched, the don't-want-to-be-churched, or the please-leave-us-alone-happily-ever-after-un-churched? How do we share our faith with somewhat lonely, little bit overworked, slightly empty everyday human beings? How do we even start the conversation?

Does the conversation just start right out where we hit strangers in the face with our faith, so we can fix them? No, of course not. We know better. Somehow that's neither honest nor respectful of their personal space or their personhood. It doesn't honor who we are as Christians, and it doesn't paint the picture of the loving, grace-filled Jesus Christ that we want to share. So, maybe, we stay inside our circle of friends and fellowship in church. And, maybe, we start to find it's easier and more comfortable to stay put there than to venture out of our comfort zones. But new people and new places await. So, how do we start the conversation?

This is the question Phil Maynard addresses in *Connect!*. If you are ready to participate with him in a journey of finding new ways to help your congregation engage with new people outside your church walls, if you want to help your congregation find genuine and loving ways to share their own personal faith stories with those new people in ways that are life transforming, then this book is for you.

I have not been this excited about a book in a long time. If you have worked with Phil Maynard through some of his previous work, like *Shift*, or *Membership to Discipleship*, you already know that these are more than books, they are rules of engagement with our congregations. Phil introduces us to new processes of self-development, new ways of building relationships, and new ways of being church. He dares us to be bigger than we are.

Now, with *Connect!*, he takes us one step further into the future, and

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challenges us to go the extra mile... all the way out into the far country of never, never land. It's the land where we are so often hesitant to go. But, Jesus is already there, in this land, looking right back at us and speaking so loudly we cannot help but hear Him: "Hey, yoo-hoo, why aren't you over here with me already?"

In *Connect!*, Phil turns everything we have ever learned about how to do faith sharing upside down. It is not top down information sharing. It is not bottom up catechism learning. It is putting ourselves in the right places for person to person building of relationships, for heart to heart making of new friends, and for soul to soul sharing of our faith journeys. *Connect!* does not preach at us; it journeys with us. Phil Maynard provides the scriptures, the questions, the tools for an individual, a church team or a whole congregation to self-discover their own pathway to "connect" with those who do not yet know Christ. And this self-discovery takes place in a way that is filled with respect and integrity for each and every person. It allows each team or church to find the processes that express who they are as Christians and honor their core values.

Connect! has been the answer to my dream. When I first met Phil at Chili's for lunch in the winter of 2015, I was serving a district of 63 churches that were all struggling to turn from being inward to being outward focused. As the appointed "mission strategist," I was thrilled that the laity and pastors alike were recognizing the cultural shift that has taken place in the last few decades, and they were waking up to the postmodern world. They realized it was no longer a given that people would automatically come into the church. So, this brave laity was ready to take responsibility for the future of their church, and the question on their minds was, "How?" How do we go out? How do we reach the world outside our church doors? How do we begin?

Mr. Leatherwood posed the question to me best at a Pastor-Parish meeting in Dublin, Texas. Their church would be receiving a new pastor, and the committee had already given me their list of qualities needed: a Scriptural preacher, a good visitor, a compassionate counselor. Then Mr. Leatherwood, a delightful and very wise older

gentleman, said "You know, we'd really like a pastor who knew how to do evangelism. You know, someone who actually liked to go out and meet new people and let them know about Jesus. Shoot, the pastor doesn't even have to go do that, if they can just teach us how to. It's really our job anyway."

Since then, church after church has asked me, "Could they could just teach us how to do that? . . . How do we start the conversation? . . . We know Jesus calls us to share our faith BUT. . . ." We have all met folks who just naturally befriend and engage people everywhere they go and help bring them into a relationship with Christ and the church, but how about the rest of us? Is it something we can learn? Is it something we can do in a way that is genuine and unique to us and our personality and faith?

Connect! says an unqualified, "Yes!" to all these questions. Beginning at our lunch at Chili's, Phil agreed to partner with 15 of our district churches and spend a year of coaching together to answer all these questions. It was a year of discovery. Each church brought a team of five, and we gathered together every three months for a day of learning together. Then each month Phil provided the coaching for the experiments each church was conducting. Phil brought the leadership and the passion for sharing the Gospel to this project, as evidenced in the Hospitality section of his book *Shift*. Phil also brought the mental and verbal clarity to communicate these ideas, and put it together with interactive visual and technical skills.

This became a vivid learning experience for all of us. First, Phil helped church teams find ways to connect with new people in new places by building relationships. Second, he helped each individual on these church teams become ready and comfortable with sharing their own faith story. He gave us lots of questions to help us think about how we wanted to share our faith, and lots of opportunities to practice and try out those stories with each other. Then, later, whenever we were able to connect with someone in a caring relationship, we would also be ready to connect with our faith. There was wonderful coaching throughout this experience. And many exciting new relationships with Christ came out of our year together. Many

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of those stories are included in the pages of this book.

Connect! taught us that faith sharing is not something we “do unto others” out there. It is something we do with others with Christ. Jesus is already out there in the world, placing the hungering and yearning for a relationship with Him in people’s hearts. We have only to join Him as ourselves, offer genuine and caring relationships to others, and connect our faith journeys when He tells us the time is right.

“Come, follow me,” Jesus says. *Connect!* helps us discover new ways to do just that.

Rev. Carol Wood
District Superintendent, West District
Central Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church

• CHAPTER 1 • **MAKE A FRIEND**

Make a friend, be a friend, bring a friend to Christ.

It seems like such a natural and easy thing to do.

But in a culture that increasingly identifies hundreds of people as friends, even though we have never actually met them face-to-face, this may not be so simple. Take Joe, for example. He is a very likeable guy. Smart. Outgoing. Lots of friends on Facebook and connections on Twitter. Last year, Joe went through a very difficult time at his job. Basically, the position he held was being eliminated in a re-structuring within the company. He could apply for the new position, but he wasn’t sure he even wanted to because he felt so undervalued, unappreciated, and hurt by the situation.

To make matters worse, Joe didn’t even have anyone with whom he could process what was going on. There were options available to him, of course. He could go to a counselor or hire a professional coach or have a conversation with his pastor. But he realized that there was not one person with whom he felt a close enough connection to just honestly share his feelings about what was going on.

Joe needed a friend. We all need friends.

In workshops that I lead exploring the degree to which disciples of Jesus Christ build significant relationships with the people around them, I often invite the participants to take part in an exercise in which they list 20 individuals with whom they would share the news (and all the emotional turmoil involved) if they were diagnosed with a terminal illness. After the names are listed—first names will do—participants are asked to cross out any family members, including

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extended family, and persons they know from church. For many participants, very few names remain on the final list. Some have no friends left at all.

It's a powerful witness to the reality that we all need stronger friendships, and we could all use some help developing those relationships.

Our Christian faith is relationship-based at its core, so it makes sense that people would look to their faith families for guidance in the keys to relationship building, but one of the challenges our local congregational leadership faces is how to help people develop relationships that count—how to help people build authentic connections and learn to be genuine friends—both inside and outside of the church. Research has shown that if we want people who come to our church to remain involved and active in the church, they need to have developed at least six friendships in the first six months. ¹

That's a challenge!

It's also the easiest place to start in equipping our congregations to practice what I call **Incarnational Hospitality**. The incarnational part of this refers to simply being the presence of Christ in someone's life: that is, being a conduit of the love of God to someone else, and allowing them to witness the power of the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Jesus, himself, provided the most perfect example of what this looks like. John describes it in these words:

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.
(John 1:14)*

The hospitality part of this (to use the language of Henri Nouwen) is the act of making room or space for someone in our lives, accepting them as they are, loving them as they are, getting to know them deeply through the sharing of their story and letting them get to know us deeply through the sharing of our story.

Through developing these skills and providing opportunities for Incarnational Hospitality to happen, the church has great potential

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for equipping congregations to “be Christ” in people's lives—both inside the walls of the church and beyond the borders of the church property. This is a very biblical idea by the way. You might recognize some of these scriptures:

- *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. (2 Corinthians 5:20)*
- *...and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)*
- *My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message . . . then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17: 20 & 23)*
- *You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Corinthians 3:3)*



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You might have noticed that there are two significant dimensions, two tracks you might say, to this idea of Incarnational Hospitality. First there is the relationship. This is not a casual, superficial, communicate-through-posts-on-Facebook kind of relationship. It is a relationship in which we are engaged in people's lives in such a way that God's love is witnessed. This can take many forms. It could be gathering for a backyard cookout and enjoying each other's company. It could be moms taking turns getting the neighborhood kids to ball practice or at least making themselves available to pinch-hit during transportation crises. It might be as simple as getting together for coffee and sharing life. We might simply be there to lend a sympathetic ear, or we might take care of the children in a time of family crisis. It could be that our neighbor needs help with lawn care or a home repair or a ride to the doctor. The first rail of Incarnational Hospitality is that of engaging in people's lives in such a way that we naturally communicate God's love.

The second rail is the sharing of the content of the Gospel. In my opinion, we tend to make this harder than it actually needs to be. While I'm in favor of people having a clear understanding of the Gospel message and even foundational theological concepts, I want to make it clear that one does not have to be a trained theologian to share the Good News. In fact, that's not what most people are looking for. Perhaps the most effective sharing of the Gospel message is communicating your own experience, your own story. As expressed by the Apostle Peter:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. (1 Peter 3:15)

My friend Bob Allen, a Congregational Developer for the Rio Texas Conference, shared a story with me that really illustrates the power of unanticipated opportunities to share our faith:

'Be prepared for the unexpected' has become my newest mantra. The following occurred on a two-hour flight home. I was already settled into my seat when an elderly woman sat down in my row. We shared a "hello" and I then sunk into my seat because I was

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dead tired from the day's activity. I must have napped for about 20 minutes. When I awoke, there again was that same smiling face. Once again she said, "Hello. What do you do for a living?" And I replied, "I am a Life Coach." She said, "My life needs coaching – it is totally out of control! I wonder if a coach could give me my hope back? If you were my coach, what would you do with me?" I said, "I would be your guide, helping you to navigate the river of your life and assisting you to examine and explore the great possibilities through a series of questions. I would hope that you would make great discoveries about your life that would lead to new ways to live your life to the fullest. I would help you to reflect on your life and for you to come up with a plan of action."

"When could we start?" she asked. I replied, "How about now? This is your time. What would you like to focus on?" She said, "I am totally addicted to shopping. I never wear any of the clothes that I buy. They hang in my closets with the tags still attached. I am thousands of dollars in debt on many credit cards. All I do is pay the minimum per month, and I am sick about all of this! I need help. I am out of control."

"May I respond with a story out of my own life?" I asked her. She nodded yes, so I continued. "I was a philosophy major in college, and we were told by our professor that he knew that as young adults we were looking for the truth and wanted to get on the right track for living. He told us about Blaise Pascal, a famous French mathematician and philosopher. Pascal put it like this: 'There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ.' If we try to stuff anything but God into that God-shaped hole in our lives, we'll end up dissatisfied, restless, discontent. But fill that God-shaped hole with God and what do we find? In a word: contentment."

My new friend blurted out, "That's me. I have a God-shaped vacuum—a hole right in the center of my being. I attended a private religious school as a young girl, and they taught me that God was out to punish me for my sins. My teachers always told me that I was fat and ugly, and that no one in life would ever love me . . . including God." I asked her, "Have you ever heard about Grace and God's love and forgiveness?" She replied, "I don't even know what you are talking about."

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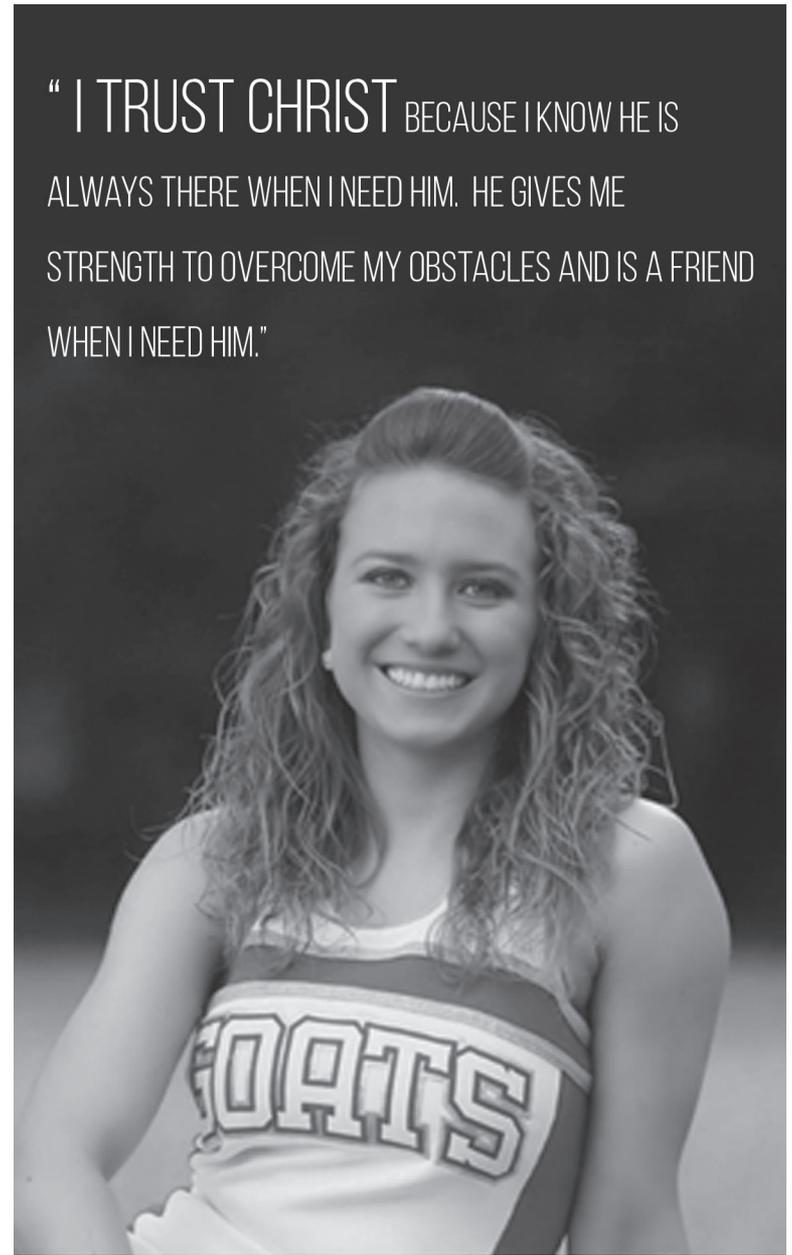
I spent the next few minutes talking about what my understanding of Grace was all about and about God's profound love for all of us. She turned her head away from me and silently wept. In about five minutes she collected herself and said, "Are you telling me the truth? Are you really saying that God loves me even if I have never loved him back? Are you saying that God could forgive me for all of this stupid stuff of buying clothes over and over again? Oh my God, I have been using clothes as a substitute for God. God help me!"

And I said, "He can and He will if you are open to that."

She looked at me and said, "I have been going to a therapist for over 13 months and have made no progress whatsoever. In one hour with a coach, I have made huge discoveries about myself. So, Coach Bob, what must I do to get on track? I have a ton of clothes in my closet, a huge debt, and a great big hole in my heart. I know that within two days my friend is going to say, 'Let's go clothes shopping so we can feel good about ourselves.'"

I said, "It seems to me that you need to make a plan for yourself. What do you think?" I asked my new client, "What is your plan for what you are going to do if and when your friend calls for you to go clothes shopping?" She replied, "I am going to tell her the truth about my God-shaped vacuum. I don't need any more clothes. I have a whole department store in my own apartment. And then I am going to find a church this coming Sunday and apologize for being absent for 45 years. I need to find a pastor who can tell me about this Grace. I need to discover this love that God has for me." She then asked me if God could help her with her credit problems, and I shared with her about Dave Ramsey and how his program repaired the life of my nephew and his wife of their awful indebtedness. I once again pointed her in the direction of a website to explore possible congregations in her local community who participate in a Financial Peace program.

She was in and out of my life just like that. Just a few questions here and there made all the difference in her life. I was given an opportunity to see God in action and the marvelous things that He can do through me and in spite of me. I now look for coaching opportunities wherever I happen to be at any given moment. Be prepared for the unexpected.



" I TRUST CHRIST BECAUSE I KNOW HE IS
ALWAYS THERE WHEN I NEED HIM. HE GIVES ME
STRENGTH TO OVERCOME MY OBSTACLES AND IS A FRIEND
WHEN I NEED HIM."

- KAITLYN, GROESBECK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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What a powerful story Bob shares, a beautiful illustration of those words from 1 Peter 3: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks. . . .” I think it is important to note that we are not being asked in this verse to give a defense of the Gospel (what is known in theological circles as apologetics), but to talk about our own lives and personal experiences and the hope we have through the Gospel message. There are, of course, many different approaches to evangelism. The following chart introduces four major groupings within which there are many variations:

<p style="text-align: center;">Impositional</p> <p>This is the type of evangelism that is demonstrated in street preaching or handing out tracts. The focus is on sharing the message. It is often seen as impersonal and overbearing.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Example: Acts 2:14-21</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Informational</p> <p>This type again focuses on the message but is relayed through a more intellectual approach of Christian apologetics. While taking a more logical and fact-oriented approach, it can be seen as too intellectual and even confrontational.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Example: Acts 17:16-34</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Institutional</p> <p>This type of evangelism is demonstrated in invitations given during altar calls in church or at church conferences. The focus is the invitation to commitment as a disciple. While less threatening than other forms, it tends to lack a personal witness/connection.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Example: John 4:28-30</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Incarnational</p> <p>This type of evangelism is built around personal relationships and engagement in the lives of others. The focus is on seeking opportunities through ongoing friendships to witness to our faith and inviting others to discover God's love for themselves.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Example: John 1</p>

The **Incarnational Hospitality** approach is the one on which we will be focused throughout this book. When I meet with church leadership teams and the conversation turns to this type of hospitality, I often ask the team to step back for a moment and ask the “Why?” question. I think the popular author, Simon Sinek, got it right when he titled his book, *Start with Why*. (By the way, an excellent read for

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leadership teams!) Sinek makes the case that any organization can explain *what* it does; some can explain *how* they do it; but very few can answer the question *why* they are doing what they are doing. WHY does their particular organization exist? WHY does it do the things it does? ²

In this case, the fundamental question of *why* truly is important as we get to the heart of our motivations for wanting to connect with people.

Why should the church practice Incarnational Hospitality?

Too often the answer is some form of the following:

- Our worship attendance is declining so we need new people.
- We need more people to support the budget.
- Our sanctuary feels so empty.
- We miss the sounds of young children filling our hallways.

The problem with these types of responses is that they are self-serving. These answers are all about meeting our institutional needs, while Incarnational Hospitality doesn't have anything to do with meeting our needs and solving our problems as an organization. It is about meeting the most deep-seated need any human being experiences—the need for a relationship with the One who created us and brings meaning and purpose to life, now and for eternity.

There is a quote, referenced in Bob Allen's story earlier and often incorrectly attributed to St. Augustine, but actually authored by Blaise Pascal:

“There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.”

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The goal of Incarnational Hospitality is not to meet the needs or desires of the church/congregation, but to fill the God-shaped vacuum.

It's not about us!

It's important that we keep things in context. Incarnational Hospitality is not an add-on to our faith journey or something in which only 'specially gifted people' are supposed to engage. Incarnational Hospitality is the responsibility of every disciple of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures (as we were reminded a few pages ago from 2 Corinthians 3:3) don't say:

- “Some of you are Christ’s ambassadors” . . .
- or “A chosen few will be my witnesses” . . .
- or “There’s a possibility you might potentially be gifted to be ‘letters from Christ.’”

We are all called, by virtue of our baptism and journey as disciples, to engage others in relationships and share our faith. Therefore, it is the job of the church to help facilitate (make easier) this calling. Take, for example, Paragraph 202 from the The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, which describes the “function of the local church” [boldface emphasis added]:

The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world. It is primarily at the level of the local church that the church encounters the world. The local church is a strategic base from which Christians move out to the structures of society. **The function of the local church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is to help people to accept and confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and to live their daily lives in light of their relationship with God.**

Therefore, the local church is to minister to persons in the community where the church is located, to provide appropriate training and nurture to all, to cooperate in ministry with other local churches, to defend God’s creation and live as an ecologically responsible community, and to participate in the worldwide mission of the church, **as minimal expectations of an authentic church.** ³

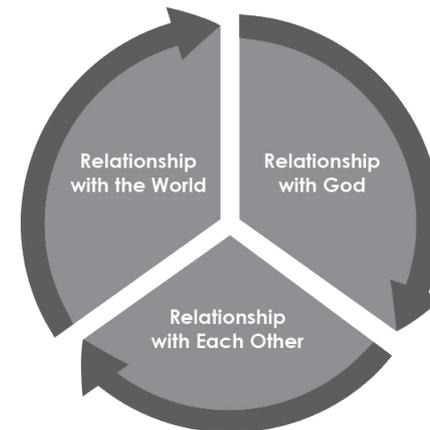
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You may have noticed—I’m not sure how you could miss it—that the church exists to make disciples and that this charge includes two distinct mandates:

1. To help people accept and confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.
2. To help people live their daily lives in light of their relationship with God (that is, to help them grow as disciples).

Read the text below from the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel of John and circle or underline what seem to be key thoughts:

I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.
(John 17:20-23)



What did you identify as key thoughts?

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The image under the scripture passage was created to help highlight these important ideas:

- As we grow in our relationship with God (maturity in discipleship) . . .
- We are led to growth in our relationship with one another (authentic relationships) . . .
- Which lead us to a deepening relationship with the world (engaging the people God loves) . . .
- Which brings us back to an ever deepening relationship with God (as we experience God at work in the world), beginning the cycle all over again.

So, as we grow in our relationship with God (confess Jesus as Lord and Savior) and learn how to live life in light of that relationship, it naturally impacts the way we engage each other and the world around us.

That's the goal.

So how exactly does the church help disciples do this? I want to suggest several ways it should be doing this. You'll think of more, but I'm hoping to prime the pump of your creative imaginations. A good starting point is to get disciples comfortable with sharing their own stories. This does not come naturally for most of the people involved in our churches. Over the course of the next several chapters, many different ways of sharing our story will be presented. My hope is that you will encourage the use of faith-sharing exercises in your congregation. Every meeting of a small group or a committee or administrative council or prayer team is an opportunity to help people learn how to share their individual stories and get comfortable doing so.

A fun and easy way to introduce this idea is a symbol timeline. Here's one that illustrates critical developments in my life as a disciple:

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Allow me to share my (Phil's) unique story.

I was the firstborn child (oldest of three sons), which in and of itself explains some of my life perspectives and choices. During my formative years (elementary school) I lived in Italy for five years, then Turkey for two years—the son of an Air Force Senior Master Sergeant. We were then assigned to a base in Florida, and my Junior High and High School time was spent there where the mascot was a scorpion.

My family were founding members of a local church which started in the living room of a house, then the garage, then moving to a temporary building and eventually to a multipurpose building. My mother was the church musician and choir director for many years, and my dad served in every capacity except preacher—not to say he didn't do a lot of preaching at home. Every time the church doors were open, we were there. A highlight of this time in my life was participating in a youth choir of 150 members.

After a year of college, I got married to a wonderful lady—Becky, who is still the love of my life today—joined the Army, and trained as an X-ray Technologist and Medic. Following three years in the Army, I left and took a position at a local hospital back in Florida. I also did a Bachelor's Degree in Radiologic Science. After graduation, I took a position as director of a hospital-based x-ray school in Kansas City. While there I completed a Master's in Education at the University of Kansas.

This was a difficult time for me. I became convinced that I didn't

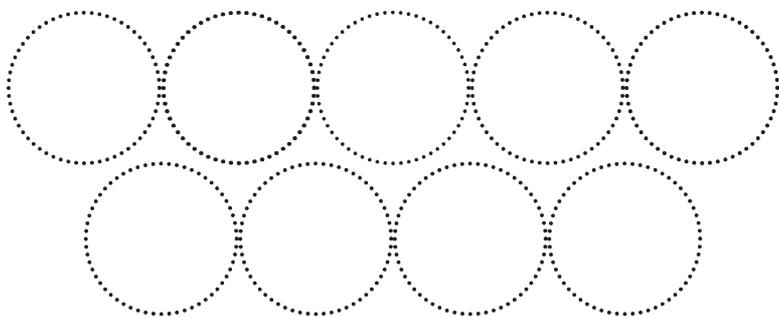
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really need the ‘crutch’ of church. For two years I played racquetball on Sunday mornings while my wife took the kids to church.

At the end of those two years, I was offered an instructor position at the University of Central Florida, in the program from which I had graduated. Becky got involved in a local church, and she and the pastor eventually convinced me to try church again. I grew deeply in my commitment over the next five years and ended up with a call to ministry. My seminary experience was at Duke University, and then I spent 20 years serving in local congregations throughout Florida.

In 2007 I was invited to join the Florida Conference staff serving as the Director of Congregational Excellence. For the next six years, I supported congregations in the Florida Conference in developing effective ministry. Finally, in 2013 I took an early retirement and now serve through my company Excellence in Ministry Coaching, where I get to work with congregations representing different denominations all over the United States. God has certainly enlarged my territory!

In the circles below, take a few minutes and build a symbol timeline for your own life. Add more circles if needed. Include both the good and the challenging events. It’s OK to use stick figures! Or feel free to fully employ your artistic talents.



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Share your timeline with a friend. Or complete this exercise within the context of a group, inviting each person to share their timeline with the other group members. It will be amazing what you can learn in just a few minutes about people you have known for years.

Sharing our stories is a great way to get to know one another more deeply, and getting to know one another is the starting point for building authentic relationships. Our stories are also natural ways of conveying how we have experienced the presence and power of God at work in our lives. Of course, once we are comfortable with sharing our stories, the challenge becomes creating spaces where there are natural opportunities for such sharing—and the key word here is natural; this sets us apart from classic “doorbell ringing” evangelists, in that our starting place is that it is natural to share our faith experience with people whom we have honestly encountered in settings that lead to relationships.

An easy and natural way to help people begin building relationships is to get those people connected around a short-term activity of interest to them. For example: In my first appointment as an associate pastor, the parsonage was directly adjacent to the church property (you could even enter into the back gate from the church). It was an ideal place for informal gatherings.

My wife, Becky, was asked to host an eight-week series on Mexican cooking. I have to admit, it was about the best eight weeks of my life. I love Mexican food. To be clear, she was not the one doing the teaching—we just hosted the group. Each week I would come home and the house would be filled with the aroma of great Mexican dishes.

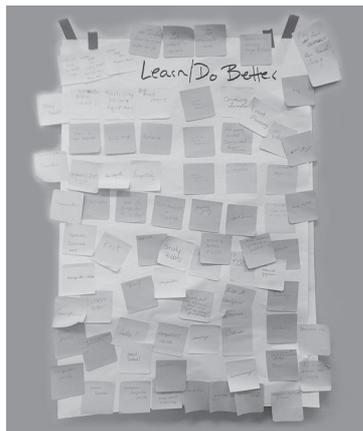
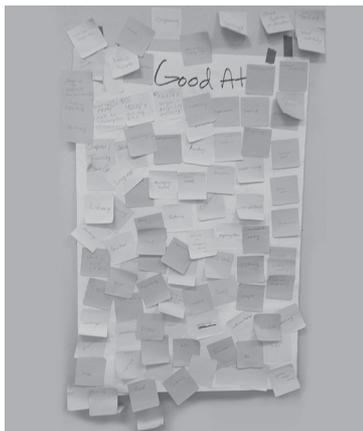
Yet, I was astounded! (Forgive a little hyperbole here). Sitting in the library adjacent to the kitchen, I could overhear snippets of conversation, and they weren’t talking about Mexican dishes. These ladies (it just happened to be a group of ladies) were talking about their families, their husbands, their jobs, their churches, and even their faith! Didn’t they know they were supposed to be talking about Mexican cooking?

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Of course they were talking about other things. That's what happens when we provide the space for relationships to develop. The point here, in case you missed it, is that relationships naturally occur when we make room for them. Significant conversations happen even when the theme is not focused on discipleship.

As I work with churches in looking at ways to foster these kinds of relational connections, I often use a limited version of an Asset Mapping Exercise. I give each participant six Post-it notes (this works best with groups of 15 or more). I ask them to write down three things they are good at—one on each of three Post-it notes. Then I ask them to identify three things they would like to learn how to do or learn how to do better—again on each of three Post-it notes.

It is important to let them know that the things they identify don't have to be churchy things. For example: cooking, organizing, playing guitar, financial management, sewing, quilting, and investing are all great things. I emphasize that things like talking, sleeping, eating, caring, or loving are not the kinds of generic life activities we're looking for here. Finally, I ask participants to place the Post-it notes of things they are good at on one side of a wall or white board and the things they would like to learn how to do or to do better on the other side.



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In the scores of times I have led this exercise, it has never failed to produce the same result. There are people who are good at things that match up with people who would like to learn how to do those things or learn how to do them better.

So the questions become:

- Would people be blessed if we got the 'good at's' together with 'want to learn's'?
- Would new skills be developed?
- Would new relationships be built?
- Would significant conversations happen?

The answer to each of these questions is a resounding, "Yes!"

And perhaps we should be asking an even more significant question: If there are this many people within the congregation who want to learn how to do this particular skill, how many more might there be in the community around us?

What if we were to announce a meetup.com group around one of the themes identified? 'Meet up' groups are just neighbors getting together to learn something, do something, or share something. While writing this, I checked on 'meet up' gatherings in my community, and there are 54 different groups registered! Could it make a difference in people's lives, in our communities, and maybe even in our churches if we made room for people to get together and build relationships and share their stories? For some of our churches, space is definitely one resource we have to offer. Why not fill that space with the men, women, and children from the community who are participating in wholesome activities from book groups to fitness classes? Most of our congregation members have hobbies and interests beyond their participation in worship and Bible studies. Why not provide facilities and support for some of those interests as a way to connect with the unchurched so that they can get to know us?

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Here are some other ideas to support the development of relationships through your congregation:

Gathering Events

You may find this hard to believe, but people outside of the church often have the perspective that church people are boring. They have the false impression that all we do is sit around and read the Bible and talk about Scripture verses, or go to dinners where we're served rubber chicken and endure monotone lectures about deep theological topics like predestination. Maybe we should bear witness to church people being normal, regular folks who like to have as much fun as the next person.

My friend, Jim Griffith, calls these “elbow events.” They are opportunities for us to invite people and take them by the elbow to join us for a time of fun and relationship building. Lots of churches already do these types of events:

- Valentine's Day dinners/dances
- Talent shows
- 50's celebrations
- Game nights
- Live nativity scenes
- Biker Sundays
- Worship at the park
- Community service projects

The list of possibilities is almost endless. Back in the days of my youth ministry, we described this approach by visualizing a funnel. The top (widest part) of the funnel represented gathering events that were easy to invite other youth to be a part of. As the funnel narrowed, the activities became more focused on discipleship, but the stuff at the top was all about creating opportunities that were easy to invite people to come and enjoy, no pressure and no commitments.

These types of gathering events are not restricted to church-sponsored activities.

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My daughter called recently and invited us to a ‘neighborhood movie event’ at her home. They set up a movie screen, a card table, and projector linked to an iPad with a movie downloaded to play. The screen was set up in the grass in her front yard close to the street, and people brought their own chairs or blankets. Drinks were provided, and people brought popcorn and cookies to share. All in all, there were about 40 people gathered (about half children) enjoying a kids’ movie and conversation.

Low key. Easy. Fun. Relationship building.

There is no limit to the variety of things that could be done as ‘gathering events.’ For example:

- Participate in planting sea grass to protect the dunes at the beach.
- Hold a ‘Biker Sunday’ and invite bikers of every stripe to join you for worship, a cookout, and ‘biker games’—be sure to bless the bikes!
- Set up a ‘bouncy house’ and cook hamburgers to give away to all who come and enter into conversation.
- Set up a parents’ morning out at the park and enjoy conversation while the kids play, or the parents could bring the kids to a McDonald's PlayPlace and enjoy refreshments while the kids enjoy themselves.
- Set up a ‘movie in the park’ or neighborhood and invite anybody you see to join you.
- Invite neighbors and friends to join you for a BBQ in your back yard, or just set this up next to the street with a sign that says ‘free food.’
- Have a soccer or flag football game at a local park.

You get the idea!

Connect Groups

Sometimes referred to as affinity groups, these are regular gatherings of people with a common interest. This is the easiest way I know to get people connected with other people and provide space for those six relationships necessary for people to have a high probability of staying involved in the church. The kinds of groups are almost limitless:

- Cycling
- Biking
- Quilting
- Sewing
- Bowling
- Hiking
- Fishing
- Golfing
- Book clubs
- Investing
- Kayaking
- Cooking groups

Use your imagination. The key is to have a person who can serve as facilitator who is passionate about that particular interest. He or she will be the glue who is excited about the work of organizing the group and keeping the energy level high. I suggest that leaders of these groups be asked to include in the gathering time a few minutes of prayer/scripture/devotional. This sets the group apart from the community organizations like Kiwanis or Rotary or other groups. It also begins to form a bridge to participation in a more focused discipleship group.

Not only do Connect Groups provide space for the building of relationships. They provide space for deeper conversations and reflection. They also witness to the fact that disciples of Jesus can have fun!

Community Service Opportunities

Want to help people build strong relationships? Get them to serve together making a difference in the surrounding community.

Want to help people grow in their relationship with Jesus? Get them to serve together making a difference in the surrounding community.

Want to witness to those outside the church that the church is relevant and cares about the community? Get church people to serve together making a difference in the surrounding community.

There's just something about getting people working together to make a difference that builds relationships that go way beyond the service activity. One church I worked with supported teams for a Relay for Life event (a national event with iterations in local communities that raises money for cancer research). Some walked, others served refreshments, and still others ministered through a 'prayer tent.' It's a great way to sponsor an event by the church but leave plenty of opportunities open to include friends, acquaintances, and co-workers to support a fundraiser or community service activity that they feel good about.

A new church plant started taking teams around the community directly surrounding the church, just picking up trash on Saturday mornings and witnessing to their concern for the community and the world. People asked why they were doing this, and they responded "because we're the church and we care about this community." Pretty soon, non-church people from the surrounding neighborhoods began to join this weekly service project. After a while, there wasn't nearly as much trash, because others in the community began to care as well. What a great witness!

Several churches I have been working with in recent months have established community gardens. Some of the vegetables and fruit go directly to local families in need. The rest is used to support the local food pantry, providing fresh vegetables in addition to packaged

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“I CAN'T IMAGINE GOING THROUGH LIFE'S TWISTS AND TURNS WITHOUT THE LOVE OF GOD - STRUGGLING THROUGH THE VALLEYS WITHOUT THE COMPASSION OF THE SON; REACHING THE MOUNTAINTOP WITHOUT CELEBRATING THE POWER OF THE FATHER; OR WATCHING MY FAMILY GROW WITHOUT THE GUIDANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. I CAN'T IMAGINE.”



- SUSAN, LINE STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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goods. Many times, even people who are skeptical of theology or have had difficult or painful church experiences in the past are motivated to make a difference in tangible ways. Partner with them as a way to establish relationships (and do the kind of good the Gospel calls us to do).

What are the needs and opportunities in your community?

Dinner for Eight

Everybody likes to eat, and most people enjoy getting together for dinner with someone else. Why not help this happen in a way that encourages and supports the building of relationships?

Dinner for eight is simply four couples getting together for dinner. This could happen in someone's home or at a local restaurant. With just a little support from the church, this could happen in a way that connects people that have not been in relationship previously. What a great way to facilitate making new friends.

In many churches that have tried a version of this, it's used as a way to get people within a congregation to know each other better (and is a strong tool for doing so), but a really big win with this format would be to have three couples from the church connecting with a couple from outside the church to introduce them to some great new people. This is a natural process in the sense of inviting along a couple to whom you are already in a relationship, however casual an acquaintance, so that they can meet other couples for whom faith is a major part of their lives, but do so in an atmosphere that isn't threatening.

A new church plant I am working with is using this format to get people from the congregation connected to those in the community. One of the couples represents the leadership of the congregation just in case a question comes up about the church that the others don't know how to answer. This church has grown to over 100 in worship in less than eight months!

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Prayer

Last, but certainly not least, I want to suggest that we pray for people who do not yet know how much God loves them and how life could be so much more abundant in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

I visited with a man as I was doing an on-site consultation with a local congregation who bore witness to the power of prayer for those not connected to God. He described how his wife and her sister had prayed for him to come to know Jesus for nearly three years. That was a solid three years in which he showed no sign whatsoever that their prayers were having an effect, but still they prayed faithfully. He is now a leader in this local congregation and attributes his relationship with Jesus to the power of prayers offered on his behalf.

One of the ways this should be happening is during the corporate/pastoral prayer offered in worship each weekend. I'm not suggesting that we go through the phone book and start praying for people by name. Just that we recognize that there are lots of people in our community that don't know the love of God. We can make it a specific point to pray for an opportunity to be Christ in their lives.

Another powerful tool is encouraging people to be in prayer for specific friends, acquaintances, or recognizable strangers whom they sense need a caring and encouraging relationship. What could happen if we were to get all the people in our congregations to pray specifically for three to four people each year, asking God to open doors for us to be in ministry to them and share our lives and faith stories with them? I think the lives of those who prayed such prayers would be transformed, not to mention the potential transformation of the lives of those for whom they are praying. Such a church would certainly be living into its mission.

Incarnational Hospitality happens most effectively when we are in relationship with people outside the church, seeking ways to be Christ in their lives and to invite them to discover the abundant,

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eternal life that is offered to them. It is the relationship that establishes the credibility and provides the opportunity. It is the sharing of our stories that helps people discover the Good News of Jesus for their own lives.

Reaching the Millennials

Before we conclude the conversation about making friends—real friends—in the church and beyond, it seems important to share some thoughts about connecting with the generation most congregations seem to be missing in significant numbers: the so-called millennials (young adults defined in general as having reached adulthood around the year 2000, or more broadly, those born between approximately 1982 and 2004).⁴

There actually are churches that have been successful in engaging this distinctive demographic. And the consensus about why they are successful seems to boil down to at least four significant themes.

First, **the importance of authenticity**. This means that people are real with each other. We acknowledge that there are things in life we still struggle to overcome or deal with. We're honest about the fact that there are things we don't understand. We celebrate the truth that we're all on this journey together (even pastors).

Second, **the focus on relevance**. Our faith has to apply to our lives. It has to mean something about the way we do life as individuals and how we do life together. One of the great powers of relationships is that we get to share how we see God at work in our lives.

Third, **the value of individual experiences**. Not everyone's experience of God is going to be the same. One of the powers of authentic community is that we can learn from each other's experiences and accept that they might not be our own.

Fourth, **the centrality of compassion**. This, of course, takes many forms. It may include serving the needy or standing up for the dis-

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enfranchised. It may take welcoming someone into our home or accepting someone with a different lifestyle. The key is a relational component that reflects the love of Christ through us.

While these seem to be the major themes that capture the hearts of millennials, I think they really go beyond the longings of just one group. They might just capture the longings of all of us who seek to dynamically live out the core values of our relational faith!

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Questions for Reflection

Why is it important for the Church to encourage Incarnational Hospitality?

What are the 'wins' resulting from successful relationship building and faith sharing?

How could your congregation equip people to share their stories?

What types of 'relationship building' support are happening in your congregation now? What might be helpful to include?

What is a next step your congregation could take to equip and support the development of incarnational hospitality?