## **Empowered through Spiritual Friendships**

 “Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another: "What, you too? I thought I was the only one."

 - C.S. Lewis

***Part of a bigger purpose***

It is tempting to think of the church like a spiritual convenience store. When you need something like a spiritual Red Bull you hop in the car, drive to the store, find what you need, pay, and leave. If your relationship with God was all that church was about, then that model would probably work. However, God has something much bigger in mind. Jesus spent a lot of time preaching about, and pointing us toward the kingdom of God. The kingdom is a difficult, often counter-intuitive vision of life because it emphasizes things like radical justice, unconditional love, and praying for enemies. The kingdom of God also emphasizes looking out for one another and actively helping others with their day-to-day living, as well as with their spiritual lives.

In Jesus’ great plan of transforming the world into the kingdom of God, the church is to play a central role. Part of our purpose is to give the world a preview of the kingdom. God wants others to look at our community and see just what this promise holds. We are to build a community of people whose life together is a sign of what God is up to in the world, as well as a witness to the depth of God’s love for us all. The church’s ability to live out its purpose is tied to the spiritual health and maturity of its members.

***Spiritual friendships and the health of the community***

When members and newcomers alike encounter poor relationships in the church, they immediately begin to question the veracity of Jesus’ vision to change the world; “If church people can’t even manage to be nice to each other, how can they expect that of anyone else?” This is one of the reasons why poor behaviour cannot be tolerated in the Christian community. No one can be permitted to treat others with anything other than respect, honour, and grace – the stakes are too high. In this respect all friendships in the Christian church are spiritual friendships. The rule is that we treat each other exactly the same as we would treat Jesus himself, or how we would treat the most vulnerable person in the community.

A community is a grouping of people who have something in common. What the Christian community holds in common is Christ. His vision, his example, and most importantly, his spirit are what glue us together. This is radical stuff! Where else in your life do you encounter a community which primarily exists for the benefit of those who are not yet its members? Where else can you find a community that places the health of the relationships of its members above almost everything else? Where else can you find an organization that goes out of its way to knock down the barriers which separate us, one from another? That is what Paul meant when he wrote:

**Galatians 3:28**

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

In the middle of the 1st century, can you imagine a more radical statement than to claim that in the Christian community the dearly held identities that we all have, such as ethnicity, status, and gender, are all meaningless. This is another way that we model for the world how we should relate to one another. It doesn’t matter if you are White, Black, Brown, Asian, First Nations, or something in between. It doesn’t matter if you are a ninth generation Canadian or a recent immigrant. It doesn’t matter if you are rich or poor; employed, unemployed or retired; a child, youth, or an adult. It doesn’t matter if you have a doctoral degree or you never had any schooling. It doesn’t matter if you are a man, woman, or transgendered. It doesn’t matter if you are lesbian, bi-sexual, gay, or trying to figure out your sexuality. It doesn’t matter if you have a past. It doesn’t matter if you think you are worthy of God’s attention, or whether you think that you have no right to expect anything from God. It simply doesn’t matter in the church, because it doesn’t matter in the kingdom of God. Everyone has a place at the table, and it is the place of honour.

The church can only hope to live out the vision of an alternative community if it is willing to be constantly changed. Churches can’t legitimately say, “Come, join us, as long as you want to become like us.” Instead, we must say, “Come, join us. Add your unique set of gifts and personality to our little piece of heaven. And don’t worry about being different in any way; we want and need you to change this community with your presence.” It is only when we are willing to add in the gifts of everyone, that we can ever hope to become a faithful expression of the kingdom of God.

Thus, you can see why nurturing supportive and encouraging friendships are so vital to the health and effectiveness of any Christian community. Spiritual friendships are an integral part of how a community who wishes to live out the kingdom values must operate, since they focus directly on moving us toward spiritual maturity.

***Spiritual friendships help foster relationships with God***

Developing a relationship with God probably doesn’t come easily to most of us. As we have been exploring in the sections on prayer, worship, and scripture there is much to do in order to develop and strengthen a relationship with the divine. The reality is that it is too much to do alone. We need others to share this journey. We need those who are a bit ahead of us to show us the way. We need those who are like us to share the journey. We need others who are beginning to help us to articulate our experience with Jesus. All of which builds and nurtures our relationship with God in part as we build and nurture our friendships with each other. Ultimately, that is what builds the kingdom of God in our community.

***What is a spiritual friendship?***

As you might have guessed, the purpose of spiritual friendships is to help individuals deepen their relationship with God as well as provide opportunities to be of real, life-changing service to others. These types of friendships can take many forms; everything from a friend who takes walks with you and talks about God, to other Small Group members, to a more formal Spiritual Director. What all spiritual friendships have in common is intentionality and accountability.

For a friendship to become a spiritual friendship, as we’re using the term, there needs to be some explicit understanding that one of its purposes is to help one or both participants strengthen their connection with God. Otherwise the temptation will be to talk about other important parts of your life, rather than the less comfortable spiritual aspects of it. If you go to a Spiritual Director, that will be the primary, if not only, purpose of your time together. When you participate in a Small Group, a portion of your group time is dedicated to working on your relationship with God.

The other aspect of a spiritual friendship is accountability – not in the sense of being checked up on, but rather in the recognition that the Christian life is neither simple nor easy. In the face of busy lives and heavy demands, it is easy to let your time with God take the back seat. Having the simple accountability of meeting regularly with others to talk about your spiritual life keeps God on the top of your priority list. Likewise, we need trusted people in our lives who can gently, but firmly help us to see when we fall short in our faith lives. There are only a handful of individuals in our lives who are positioned to be able to give good, loving criticism that we can actually hear. They are people with whom we have put down our guards because we trust them to have our best interests in mind. The church should be a place where we can foster those types of safe friendships.

***How to find and foster a spiritual friendship***

The easiest place to find others interested in deepening their relationship with God and with you is in a Small Group. There you will have opportunities to not only pray and encounter scripture, but also to talk about where God is active in your life. It is also a place to meet others and discover new friends. All of this on top of whatever activity draws you together; be it knitting, going to movies, Bible study, walking, eating, and so on.

It is also common for people to get together in smaller groups or in pairs to practice spiritual friendships. As long as the gathering has intentional time set aside for explicit exploration of your spiritual life, then it qualifies as a spiritual friendship.

***How to be in Christian community***

As with all relationships, authenticity and integrity are absolutely essential. If you or the people around you do not feel safe in their relationship with you, very little of substance can occur. Therefore, being in Christian community requires you to be authentically you. Trying to be someone you aren’t is very off-putting for those who want to be in relationship with you (not least of all, God). Start with the realization that God created you for the pleasure of getting to know you. The real you is the one God loves. And it is the real you that the rest of us want to get to know. Even though you may not feel good enough, smart enough, or bright enough, what makes you attractive to others is what lies deep within your soul; not the external persona that you want to project, but the God-given, wonderful, vulnerable you who lies beneath.

Integrity is also a key issue in promoting trust and safety in any relationship, including in Christian community. Integrity has to do with maintaining the same set of values and principles, no matter what the circumstance. That is, others need to witness that you treat others equally, that your life reflects what you say is important, and that you are honest in regard to your motivation for doing certain things. The opposite of integrity is hypocrisy because it shows an inconsistency between what you say is important and what you do.

Perhaps the number one skill in any friendship is conversation. We all know that some people will talk on and on about themselves, while others may need to be coaxed into saying anything at all. What is crucial as a friend is to spend at least as much time listening as talking. To recall the old adage: “We have two ears and one mouth so we can listen twice as much as we speak.”[[1]](#footnote-1) As part of Christian community, we listen to each other talk about our lives – including our spiritual lives. To do this, we need to have a safe place in which we explore and speak about that faith. In a time when it is virtually taboo to talk publicly about your faith, the space to do so needs to be intentionally opened up – through conversation with individual members, as well as in larger groups. Simply remember the purpose of a spiritual friendship is to help each other deepen their relationship with God.

At its core, a good friendship, and a healthy community, is about trust. And developing trust takes time. Deep trust only grows when we experience that others are there for us to help and encourage us. Most of us remain tentative in our friendships until we become convinced that the other person is really interested in understanding us, accepting us, and is able to create a safe place for us to explore the parts of our lives which make us feel vulnerable.

***Spiritual friendships are nothing new***

In the many Mainline churches, the notion of having spiritual friendships feels like something new, but it really isn’t. Think about all the informal spiritual friendships you have had over the years; family members, acquaintances, Sunday School teachers, and the like. What impact did those friendships have on your journey with Christ? Although your time together may or may not have been intentionally focused on nurturing your relationship with God, it has helped you to this point.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had his congregations meet in mid-week small groups (called Classes) to study scripture and help mentor each other in the faith. They were highly successful and led to the rapid spread of Methodism in Britain and in North America.

Today, all of the growing, vital, effective, discipleship churches have some sort of small group ministry at their core. For we have rediscovered the importance of walking with each other on the way of Christ.

1. Epictetus, 55-135 CE [↑](#footnote-ref-1)