

Building A Future Together

Relationships! The dictionary defines relationship simply as a connection, whether in thought, blood, law or physical connection

More often we think of relationships in terms of those commitments that govern our life. Sometimes we want a relationship but can't find one; sometimes we have a relationship but it doesn't work properly; sometimes we don't want a relationship but are unaware that we have one; and sometimes we celebrate what we have.

I have two friends who have been together since they were 19. This year they celebrate 60 years. They met in 1949. They were members of the Gainesville MCC when I became pastor. About 12 years ago they participated in a discussion group on relationships, that I was facilitating, and surprised everyone by saying "we've broken up three times." Then added with a smile "but the last time was thirty years ago". So on that reckoning if you make it to eighteen years then you'll be okay – or maybe after that the trivial dramas get put into perspective.

Relationships, however, are not just about our pursuit of Ms. or Mr. Right – they are the very fabric of community and church life. The Bible is a book on relationships beginning with the relationship of God's self – Parent/Creator, Christ and Spirit. God exists in relationship – three in one.

The scriptures unfold relationships between the divine and humans, and a multitude of diverse historical examples: tribes, extended families, base communities, rabbi and disciples, alternate families (Mary & John at the cross, Paul & Timothy, David & Jonathan, Ruth & Naomi). Ultimately we find relationships established in the early church movement – first in homes and later in larger communities. Check out Romans 16 for an eye-opening alternate community. Bible scholar Tom Hanks gives some great insights in his book "The Subversive Gospel"

Through the biblical stories it's rare to find people working in isolation, e.g. Jesus always sent out his followers in pairs, never alone.

All of this is so that we might understand the concept of community, and in the religious context, the church. Church is not me and God, but it is where two or three are gathered (Matt.18:20)

To understand church we need to think relationship. Church is bigger than family, and sometimes that's where we get stuck – too often we see ourselves as one big "happy" family yet "families" are often reluctant to welcome people from the outside (e.g. the stereo-typical daughter-mother-in-law relationship). "Households" (I use the term very generally) are one unit of individuals relating together, whereas church is multiple "households" relating together.

What makes relationships work? When we focus on what we bring to a relationship.

What makes a relationship fail? When we focus on what we get out of it?

So it is with church. If we only think about what we can get out of it, then sooner or later we're going to get fed up and either a grumbler be or we'll leave.

Church functions best when we focus on what we can bring. Often, when we join a good church community, especially one such as ours, that tends to work on the edge, we initially just want to soak up the affirmation, the love, the care, the attention – it's like falling in love – so much of what we've longed for is available to us.

But you probably know if you've been in a relationship for any length of time, after six months or a year; maybe when you move in, maybe that first major crisis, that romantic "in love" feeling begins to fade and suddenly you find you have to work at keeping it alive, less you become domestic or disillusioned.

Church comes alive and congregations grow when the focus is on what we can bring, what we can give, how we can be part of the mission. That can be a challenge, simply because of how the church has become structured. Certainly since medieval times church has been a hierarchy, and congregations have been controlled by priests, pastors, church councils etc. Much of this was because historically the church accumulated a great deal of wealth that it needed to control, and in times of restricted education the church leaders saw themselves as guardians (and censors) of the faith. Those days are gone, but we have become used to a small group of people doing much of the work. This can create challenges:

- a) When a small group of people have contained most of the work, it can be a challenge to share.
- b) If a small group of people have led well, it becomes intimidating for an outsider to be involved.

Part of my role in our building a future together is to help us understand that we are each a part of this body and every member has a ministry – we just need to discover what that ministry is. Right now, there's just one pastor, but it doesn't mean there aren't others with a pastoral gift – a gift to care for people. As our congregation grows so those gifts can be utilized; but it's not effective in a congregation of thirty to have ten pastors. [Statistically, there is one lead pastor for 150-200 regular worshippers, but there should be a "care" person for every 15-20 regular worshippers. So in a congregation with 150 people in worship each week, there would be a pastoral team of 1 fulltime pastor and ten volunteer assistants.] Pastoral care is a team ministry.

Earlier this afternoon, I conducted a training session for worship volunteers – these are not the pastoral team, but the worship team – those whose gifts enrich and direct our worship experience. We identified the role of greeters (the most important ministry), readers and those who distribute the sacrament. Worship ministries also include ushers, musicians and choir members, people who set up, people who prepare and operate media, people who prepare bulletins, people who provide hospitality and people who clean up afterward. Worship is a team ministry.

All of this just takes care of the church hidden in these walls. There is also an entire ministry to be had outside of these walls. These include teaching through home groups, ministry to the elderly, hospital visitation, working with the homeless, underprivileged, disenfranchised, new

residents – not becoming social services but taking an interest in their personal and spiritual welfare. Outreach is a team ministry.

It's great to have enthusiasm for multiple things, but to be effective often means having a commitment to a particular cause; not flitting between a dozen different concerns.

The needs are always there, only most people don't see them. There's a great TV advert currently running about brain damage.¹ Most people are blind – they just see someone begging but are blind to the circumstances or needs. If we have a call to serve, then we need to remove our blindfolds and go and look for them and compassionately learn their stories. We won't save the world alone but we can each make a difference in the lives of two or three people.

Last week, I said that there are three foundations to stewardship:

- i) what we do with our TIME
- ii) what we do with our TALENT
- iii) what we do with our TREASURE

The 2nd foundation is about what we do with our talent, our natural gifts, our skills and our spiritual gifts. We each have some of each. Some of it is suppressed, some of it yet to be discovered.

- a) Our natural abilities are those gifts we were born with – extrovert or introvert, caring and nurturers, adventurers, people who like being among the crowds, people who like to give attention to detail.
- b) Our learned skills include music and voice, artisan and artistic skills, number crunchers, bakers and cooks, teachers, listeners, technicians.
- c) Our spiritual gifts include insight and discernment, faith, miracles, healing gifts, encouragement, proclamation, compassion, prayer, even suffering (without complaining).

Often there's not an official title or job, but we don't need to be appointed or identified, after all I'm not sure that I want to be the official sufferer. Jesus said of himself, "I have not come to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45). Paul also reminds us that it's by our fruit (our results) that we will be known.

Let's bring our gifts to this work that we might build the future together.

¹ <http://www.see-us.ca/video.php>