

gifted for leadership

Connecting Women

The success of many of our church ministries depends on the depth of friendships women make.



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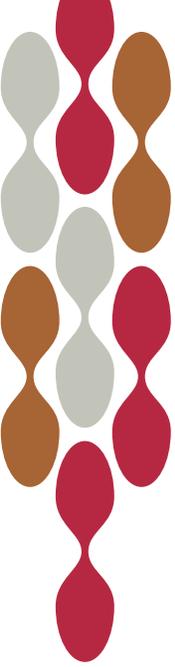
Introduction

Make an Effort to Befriend

By JoHannah Reardon



I've gone to the same church for 27 years now, and I've noticed that the people who have stuck around are those who have strong connections with someone else in the church. In fact, I heard one speaker say that people will not stay in a church if they don't ever share a meal with another person in that church, and I have to agree. Because for all the reasons we choose a church, if we don't form friendships there, we won't want to stay.



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Make an Effort to Befriend

That's why this download is so important. Karen Swallow Prior looks at why so many of us have so few friendships. She starts her article with the arresting line "Women drive me nuts." James M. Houston insists that only a soul friend can show us the ecology of evil within us. Anne Peterson looks at why we need to cultivate a large group of friends. Chandelle Claassen challenges us biblically to enrich our lives by making friends who are different from us.

We've also included an assessment tool to help you evaluate the bonds between your group members. So if you lead a small group, a women's ministry, or an entire church, this download will help you think about what will truly make your ministry successful over the long haul. It will also be a useful tool to help your group think about what it will take to form lasting connections.

Blessings,

JoHannah Reardon

Contributing Editor, GIFTEDFORLEADERSHIP.COM

Christianity Today

The Female Friendship Crisis

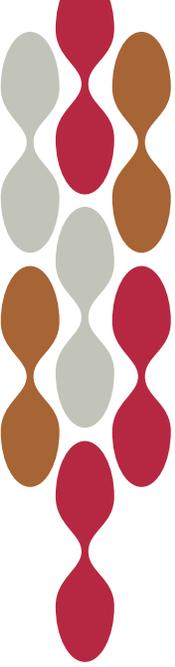


Friends are an indispensable part of growing in Christ. So why do many of us have so few?

By Karen Swallow Prior

Women drive me nuts.

Some years ago, following an act of civil disobedience, I spent several days in a makeshift jail with hundreds of women protesters. Before long, a couple of them approached me where I lay on a hard army cot, trying to get comfortable enough to read the copy of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* my husband had managed to deliver. What better opportunity than jail time would I ever have to read the longest novel in the English language?



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The Female Friendship Crisis

It was not to be. Instead I was asked to step up as a leader to address the squabbles and discontent arising among so many women of diverse personalities in such cramped conditions. *Suck it up, ladies!* I wanted to scream. But I didn't. As requested, I played the role of diplomat.

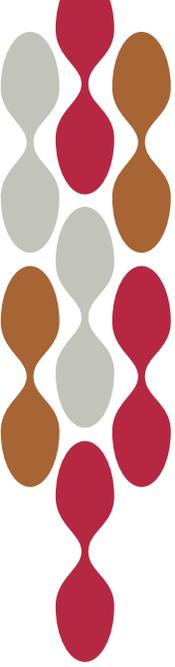
I emerged from jail with greater gratitude for God's creation of two sexes than I'd ever had before or since. To this day, I avoid to just this side of causing offense nearly any event preceded by the label "women's": conferences, Bible studies, retreats, home interior parties.

My difficulties with women go further back than this experience. Because I married young and went directly to graduate school from college, I had a hard time finding real peers. The other women in my graduate program were hostile toward Christianity, something I was ill-equipped to handle gracefully. And while my church included other young women who worked or were going to school, most of the married women did not. I spent a lot of time declining invitations to jewelry and kitchenware parties and softball games, not because I wasn't interested in those activities, but because I felt stressed and guilty about spending time on anything besides writing papers and reading books and journal articles.

I wanted women friends, badly. I tried to find them. I prayed for God to bring me to them. And, in his time, he did.

Of course, in all fairness to God, I didn't make it easy for him. I am pretty picky. On the other hand, in making friends, I seem naturally to follow the advice of Socrates: "Be slow to fall into friendship; but when thou art in, continue firm and constant." I don't form friendships quickly or often, but when I do, they stick.

Friendships come in many forms, but nothing can replace friendships with true peers. Because we are both physical and spiritual beings, I see a true peer as one with whom we share both of these aspects, physical and spiritual, of our being—in other



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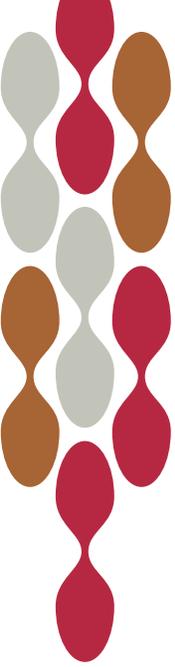
The Female Friendship Crisis

words, people of the same sex and of the same spiritual identity and belief. While certainly one can be good friends with members of the opposite sex, or of different beliefs and values, such differences tend to be a barrier to the sort of kid-gloves-off treatment necessary for iron to sharpen iron. In fact, I've often noticed that those who resist deep friendships with true peers—women who say they simply "connect better" with men (well, duh!) or with people not their age or religion—tend to be avoiding the unique accountability that genuine peers offer.

Seeking out such accountability, even when it is contrary to one's disposition, is the subject of a brave and important essay Noel Piper wrote recently.

Piper's essay was brave in baring aspects of her experience simply as a Christian woman, but even more so as the wife of a prominent pastor (John Piper). It's much easier, as many women are tempted to do, to hide under a veneer of a seemingly perfect life and ministry. But Piper exposes the myth of what I like to call the "Shiny Happy People" version of Christianity that prevails today. For one thing, Piper discusses seeking help from a counselor, something many Christians benefit from but don't like talking about. Yet despite our wishful thinking, sometimes more faith, more prayer, and more sacrifice aren't enough. (If it were, then much of the New Testament need not have been written.)

But this was not even the point of the essay. Rather, Piper brings up counseling as the catalyst that forced her—at age 60—to seek something in her life that Scripture tells us we need and that she had been avoiding. Not more holiness, not more Bible reading, not more quiet time, but friends. Not prayer partners, or accountability partners, or team members, or coworkers—although friends can be all of these—but simply good friends.



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The Female Friendship Crisis

Enuma Okoro writes that friends are "essential" to "any holy enterprise." And studies show that the benefits of friendship include longer life, increased brain health, and a lower risk of obesity. For women, particularly, friendships have proven to reduce stress and to produce natural calming effects. Even the workplace benefits from friendships there—which is a good thing since my closest circle of friends consists of women who are my colleagues, too. Whether we go out to dinner, a movie, the theater, or on one of our annual road trips, we can trust one another in sharing our joys and frustrations in the classroom and in life as well as our views about the latest news, politics, and trends. Over the years, we've attended weddings, funerals, and countless student performances together. We are bonded by faith and fun, and we sharpen one another.

My life would be so much poorer without my girlfriends. I thank God for them.

*Karen Swallow Prior is Professor of English at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia and a contributor to the **Her.meneutics** blog, where this article was originally published.*

Reflect

- ◉ *Has it been easy or difficult for you to make friends? Why?*
- ◉ *Our society stresses individualism and independence. Do you feel that as a whole, people are losing the ability to form friendships with one another? Why or why not?*
- ◉ *What most helps you make friendship—working with someone on a project, inviting them over, connecting over children?*
- ◉ *What is one step you could take to begin connecting better with other women?*

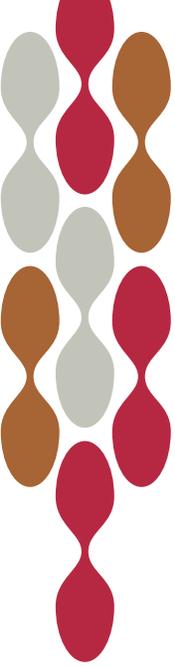


Independence Myth

Only our soul friends can show
us the ecology of evil within us.

By James M. Houston

Spiritual director, soul friend, and spiritual friendship—these buzz words in Protestant circles make us suspect someone has imported another fad from our society's culture of novelty. Do they signal one more encroachment on evangelical faith and practice?



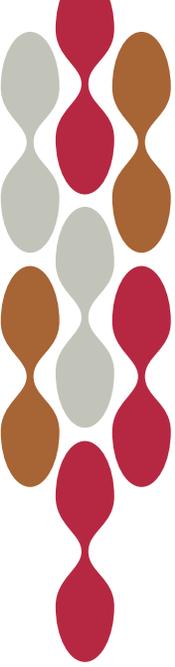
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Independence Myth

We live in the "Information Society" and are constantly informed, but don't show much sign of being spiritually transformed. Also, we draw our identities from what we do. It is fatal to Christian ministry to find one's identity in being the pastor or elder or deacon, instead of in being in Christ Jesus. If our spiritual significance lies only in our activities, no wonder we are such busy people and manipulators of others, harnessing them for our own empire building. Our understanding of training for leadership is not likely to be training in humility, or in living a "life hid in God."

There is also a moral leak among us. Many church members never grow in the faith, expecting their conversion experience to carry them through life. But despite the statistics of the "born again" movement in North America, we are a nation of the morally stillborn, or, at best, the morally retarded. The millions who say they are born again show little behavioral difference in regard to adultery, fornication, marital breakup, lying, tax evasion, and all the other sins rampant in our society.

These leakages indicate that the discipline and ordering of our emotional lives, of our attitudes and motives, are as vital as—if not more so—all our activities, programs, and organizations. Personal accountability to a circle of friends, a life inspired and enriched by spiritual friendships, emphasis on the relational rather than on the merely functional nature of Christian witness and service, the reinstatement of the home altar for family prayers and worship—these are directions we must take. And as we take them, we would do well to remember the classical practice of spiritual direction; for given the proper sphere, it can legitimately and authentically plug some of the troubling leakages in our life together.



The Inner Ecology of Evil

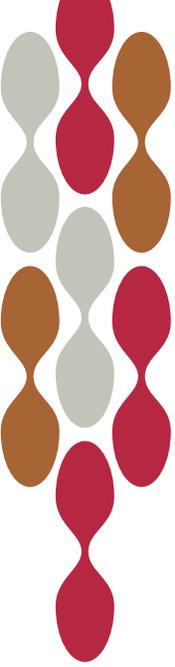
Motives, attitudes, and doctrinal assumptions will all play their part in the final character and judgments we make of any ministry. So we declare at once that if spiritual direction means giving and receiving directives on how to build up merit for our salvation, the Reformers were right to sweep it all away, abolishing the malpractices of confession as well.

We reject the doctrine that the efforts of nature are rewarded by the addition of grace. Luther and Calvin were right in their emphasis on the seriousness and effects of original sin.

But Roman and Anglican spiritual directors have something vital to contribute to evangelicalism, precisely at one of our weakest points. Capitalizing on their natural abilities, many evangelical leaders are blind to the depth and subtleties of original sin. This is where practiced spiritual directors have often a depth of experience and realism, because they listen to confessions every day.

This is the message of Calvin at the beginning of his Institutes: "Our wisdom . . . consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." It is not the psychoanalyst who knows us most intimately, but God's Word that mirrors the inward conditions of our being, as it is before God. So Calvin continues: "the miserable ruin into which the revolt of the first man has plunged us, compels us to turn our eyes upwards..." For, he adds, "there exists in man something like a world of misery, and ever since we were stripped of the divine attire our naked shame discloses an immense series of disgraceful properties."

When authentic spiritual guidance reveals the reality of human sin, and the relevance of Christ's lordship and redemption to our emotions and our minds, then it will help expose the intrinsically self-deceiving character of sin in our lives. In the apostle Paul's words: "I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me" (Romans 7:21).



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If sin is self-deceiving, then I need a soul friend to give me insights into the ways I am deceived, insensitive, or hardened by sin within me. I cannot do it alone. Self-examination can only take me so far. I need others to help expose my sin.

The exaltation of reason in our culture is another purpose for spiritual friendships. The emotional education of our inner lives does not have much priority in today's church. Having a heart for God does not get high rating in our seminaries, or even in our pulpits. Intellectualism reinforces the pride and autonomy of the human spirit, so that those in rational control of themselves are most likely to scorn the relevance of soul friendship.

If we were asked to describe the sort of person we should be most afraid of, we might well think of someone with great intellect but no "heart," whose feelings were dead.

Pride Is the Enemy

Science fiction makes much of such characters in its frightening dystopias. Why then do we assume that building up our faith by mere logical inference can ever substitute for the experience of covenant bonds of love in Christ, and of fellowship with other believers? Behind an over-rationalized faith, more talked than lived, there can lurk pride and concupiscence. Pride is readily reinforced by reason. Both keep us autonomous and closed in on the self. They deny the divine purpose in Creation to have us bear the image and likeness of God. Addictive behavior ensues, and the freedom Christ promised is not realized.

But often our soul friends can show us the ecology of evil within us, how a particular childhood wound, or fixation of emotion, or emotional frame of mind, have brought the addictions that now enthrall us, coloring and distorting all we do and are. It may be that only the courage and wisdom of true



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Independence Myth

soul friends can expose the ambitions and compulsions that lie behind our addictions to ministry, to pleasing everybody, or to being in the limelight.

Our natural response, however, is to ask, "But where are they?" Are such friends only one in a thousand? Are we not being tantalized by an impossible ideal?

We are, if we assume the next enterprise is to organize an "Operation Spiritual Direction," to mount an effort to create a new professional class of spiritual counselors in our churches. But sober reflection forces us to confess that there are no experts in prayer. There can be no professional friendship, no paid friends, spiritual or otherwise. To professionalize spiritual direction, then, would only hasten its death. There are certain areas of life that require spontaneity, love, self-sacrifice, wisdom, and godliness that no training can give, no money can buy.

These qualities only appear when the Spirit of God blows softly over dry bones as the prophet saw in his vision. And therein lies our hope. For as God breathes life into our fellowship and we open our lives to prayerful direction and friendship from a brother or sister, vitality will return and the witness and work of the church will be strengthened.

James M. Houston is Board of Governors' Professor, Spiritual Theology of Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia. This was adapted from an article that was first published in
CHRISTIANITY TODAY.

Reflect

- *Richard Foster opens his book **Celebration of Discipline** by saying, "Superficiality is the curse of our age. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people." Why are we often superficial in our relationships?*
- *How do you think our lack of spiritual friendships may contribute to the disconnect between our knowledge and our behavior?*
- *Why do you think there is such an emphasis on individualism among evangelical Christians today? How much is biblical? Cultural? Personal?*

The More Friends the Merrier

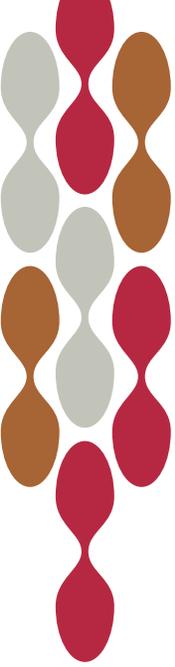


Learn how to cultivate a group of friends.

By Anne Peterson

We all experienced it when we were younger. We saw a group of kids that were having fun, and we took a chance. Slowly, deliberately, we made our way over to their game. We swallowed the frog in our throats, stammering out the question, "Can I play?" Then we waited for what seemed like forever to hear the verdict.

As we mature, the scenario really hasn't changed much.



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The More Friends the Merrier

It's possible to feel lonely in a room full of people. The truth is, many people are lonely. Taking a moment to scan a crowded room can fill you in right away. Not everyone is connected to someone. When Jesus was in a crowd, he noticed someone, Zacchaeus, who was by himself and reached out to him (**Luke 19:1-7**).

It's a stretch to reach out for some people. When we have things in common, it makes it easier. When we don't, we have to work at it. Jesus didn't have anything in common with Zacchaeus, but he still sought him out. In fact, it wasn't popular for Jesus to even make a movement toward this man.

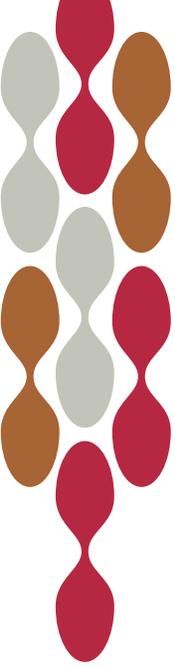
Larry Crabb says in his book **Connecting**,

"Ordinary people have the power to change other people's lives. The power is found in connection, that profound meeting when the truest part of one soul meets the emptiest recesses in another and finds something there, when life passes from one to the other. When that happens, the giver is left more full than before and the receiver less terrified, eventually eager to experience even deeper, more mutual connection."

So how do we do it?

Recognize that Christianity is non-exclusive.

When we were children, we would vie for our parents' attention. Siblings were rivals. Getting time one on one with a parent was always special. Jesus spent this kind of time with his disciples—for example, John, "the disciple that Jesus loved." But Jesus didn't exclude people.



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The More Friends the Merrier

It's easy to exclude people, whether we're aware of it or not. It takes more work to have a conversation with several rather than just one. You have to listen twice as hard. But the benefits could be double. If we are to connect in our churches, we have to start by practically loving one another.

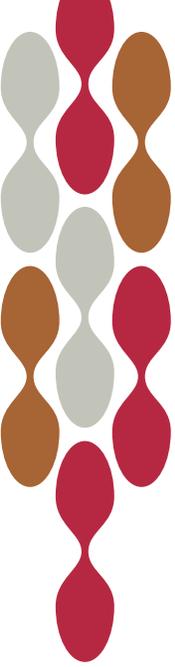
Understand that relationships take time and effort.

We live in a busy world. People hardly walk anywhere. Whether you see someone in a store or in a car, they usually have a cell phone attached to their ear. We have work, families, and church. How can we have time for relationships when we have only 24 hours in a day? It's true: relationships take work as well as time, but the benefits far outweigh the cost. If we don't make the time and effort necessary to have friends, we are the ones who will ultimately lose out. People can share our joys as well as our sorrows, if we let them.

It's not a 1-2-3 formula where you just make a decision, and presto, you have friends. But nonetheless, it is an investment that can yield great returns. And if you do have one or two friends, why not add another to the mix? It's tempting to think, *Why add any more people to my life? I have enough friends; I am content with the way my life is right now.* The danger in this thinking is that you are closing the door to what God may have in store for you. Instead, why not be open to whatever he has in mind? After all, he sees the whole picture. If you are closed to adding any more people to your life, confess your rigidity to God. He is the great stretcher of our minds.

Having relationships means taking risks.

You may think this is too scary to reach out to someone: *What if they don't have a good time? What if they don't get along?*



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One way to minimize the risks is to start slowly and plan outings that are less threatening. Getting a group together to watch a movie may be less intimidating than making plans for something requiring more participation. Set reasonable goals. Some women organize get-togethers every couple of months; others may plan just a yearly event. One determining factor could be the stage of life of the women. Again, keep in mind that Jesus took a risk in reaching out to others (**Matthew 9:9-13**).

Keep in mind that there is strength in numbers.

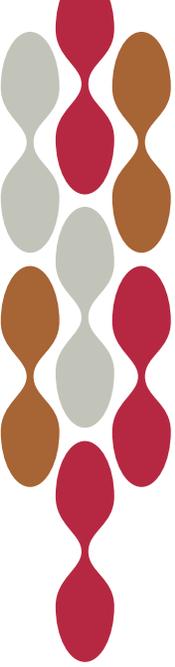
Sometimes a good friend can lighten a load, but when a heart is really hurting there is strength in numbers (**Ecclesiastes 4:12**, **Proverbs 11:14**). Sometimes a group of friends can stand with you and give you strength when a difficult decision needs to be made. Many a time a person in turmoil has turned to friends and seen her situation more clearly than ever before.

At times it's easier to reach out to others than it is to let them know you are hurting. Having a group of friends could increase the chances that there will be someone you feel comfortable reaching out to. In groups, friends check on friends.

Sharon Hersh says in **Brave Hearts**, "I have discovered that deep within every woman is a heart of longing for relationships. It is woven into the very fabric of the one in whose image we were made." We desire relationships because that's how we were created.

Friends are God's idea. He has instructed us to love each other, submit to each other, and forgive each other. Friendship gives us the platform to put into effect the things God has asked us to do.

Friends can multiply our joy and divide our grief. They can weep with us, rejoice with us, and storm heaven for us. And we can return the favor. We can love them with a love only God provides and invite them into our homes, lives, and hearts.



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The More Friends the Merrier

The people in our lives are not there by accident but by God's design. If we look to him, he will show us how to reach out to others and invite them in. Our friendships don't have to be an exclusive club—the more, the merrier.

Anne Peterson is a poet, speaker, and freelance author. Visit her at [Facebook](#) or at [annepeterson.com](#). This article was adapted from a [ChristianBibleStudies.com](#) Bible study.

Reflect

- *Name the biggest challenge you would face in expanding your list of friends. What would be the biggest benefit?*
- *Think of three people God has in your life right now who could become friends. Share some practical steps you could take to encourage this.*
- *Share a time when you felt intimidated in a social gathering of people. What was expected of you? How did it turn out?*
- *Share a time when you wanted to join a group of any kind but your fears got the best of you. What was the result?*
- *Are you aware of those who seem to be on the outskirts of a group? What practical thing can you do the next time you are in a group and notice someone on the fringes?*
- *Are you an introvert or an extrovert? How has this helped or hindered you in getting to know other people?*
- *Name a couple of reasons we choose to do things with just one person instead of inviting another along.*



Make Unlikely Friends

Enrich your life by making friends with those who are different from you.

By Chandelle Claassen

Having been created in the image of a relational God, each of us needs a variety of relationships. One of the sweetest relationships we can experience is a close friendship. Typically, close friends are defined by their similarities, the common ties that bind or draw them together. But I want to challenge you to look beyond similarities with others to find potential friendships all around you. We need to move beyond our comfort zones, to form unlikely and enriching friendships. Perhaps you are willing, even anxious, to form friendships, but there seems to be no one around with whom you have something in common. Consider moving beyond looking for your carbon copy and delving into the realm of the unfamiliar in search of your next friendship.



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Make Unlikely Friends

So how can we do that?

Reach out to your opposites, or even your adversaries.

In **Acts 15:36–41** Paul and Barnabas split over John (also called Mark). But Colossians and Philemon have accounts of Mark being included in Paul's group about 12 years later. Second Timothy tells us that Paul's admiration for Mark grew so much that he asked Mark to come and be with him during his final days.

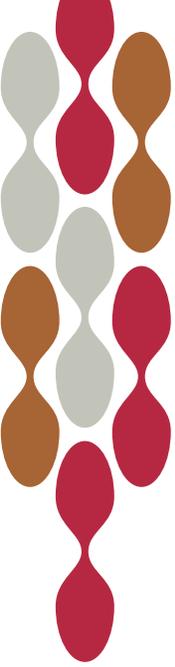
Another example comes from **1 Samuel 23:15–18**. David chose not to hate Jonathan just because of his relationship to King Saul, who was threatening David's life. David kept his mind open to a man who was strongly associated with his adversary. As a result, David and Jonathan's lives were positively impacted through an enriching friendship. By keeping our minds open, we are able to grow spiritually mature, loving others as Christ does.

Recognize that friendships can flourish across generations.

The Bible is full of stories of love and care for family members, including relationships among different generations. Some examples include Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi; Abraham and his nephew Lot; and Paul and Timothy.

Not all of us will see family members save us from life-and-death situations as Abraham did for Lot (Genesis 14, 18–19) and Paul's nephew did for him (Acts 23). However, we can support one another by doing things together, sharing our lives and emotional needs with one another, and most important, praying for one another through different spiritual battles and milestones along life's journey.

We can also establish friendships with people from different generations outside of our families. We can follow the



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Make Unlikely Friends

guidelines for caring given to the elders and young men in **I Peter 5:1-7**. We can physically, emotionally, and spiritually support and encourage the elderly in our communities and churches, or mentor someone younger than us.

Start praying today for how God can use you as a friend to your extended family and for the opportunity to establish a friendship outside of your generation and family. Your life will be changed while impacting others, and friendships will flourish.

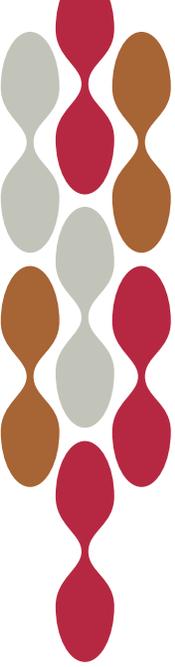
Love others as Jesus did.

God created his children with a longing for fellowship. Throughout the Old Testament, there are stories demonstrating the relational attributes of God. Some examples of God's relational intentions include how all three persons of the Trinity walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden, Abraham's covenant relationship with the Lord, and how the Lord spoke face-to-face with Moses as a man would speak with his friend.

The New Testament documents the greatest demonstration of love, as God sent his Son, Jesus, to minister 33 years on earth. Jesus, having gone through everything we would experience, continually set an example of how to care for others. Most important, Jesus was and is the one and only perfect sacrifice to atone for our sins. Through relationship with Christ, we enter into relationship with God the Father—and with other people we previously couldn't get along with.

Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus spending time with people. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, blessed the children, befriended sinners, and spent time developing close friendships with the disciples, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Jesus was a selfless friend.

Jesus didn't befriend others just for his own benefit, but for theirs. We can be encouraged by Jesus' example of making



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Make Unlikely Friends

friends with an assortment of people. Perhaps we will be motivated to befriend a lonely person at church we hardly know, the parent sitting alone on Sunday morning, or the woman on the same committee at church. Maybe it is time to reach beyond comfort zones. We can love and care for people, growing friendships along the way, in a selfless, Christ-like manner.

We are created to be relational beings. Sometimes relationships can be spiritually challenging, but they cause us to grow. We want to focus on the selflessness of Christ and his love and care for others. By doing so, we are able to see clear examples of how to befriend others—by aligning with people we have previously found difficult or different than us and by caring more deeply for and forming prayer relationships with older or younger women. There are various ways to reach beyond our comfort zones. By being willing to do so, we grow in Christ and will almost always experience a truly enriching relationship in return.

*Chandelle Claassen is a freelance writer. This article was adapted from a **ChristianBibleStudies.com** Bible study.*

Reflect

- ◉ *What qualities do you look for in a friend? Why?*
- ◉ *Can you think of anyone who is different than you are, but who sparks your interest? How might you reach out to her?*
- ◉ *We can be inspired by how the apostle Paul took Timothy under his care and mentored him, including leading him to Christ during his first visit to Lystra. Timothy traveled with Paul on many missionary journeys as well. How might God use your friendships to further his kingdom?*
- ◉ *Can you think of anyone of a different generation that you'd like to be friends with? How can you begin a relationship with this person?*
- ◉ *Invite someone new to your home for a meal. Or invite a junior or senior high youth in your church or community to meet weekly with you for 10 to 15 minutes of prayer and encouragement. Carry this relationship on throughout the teen's school years. (You may also want to reverse this concept and select someone older than you to meet with and serve as your mentor.)*

Assessment: Building Relationships

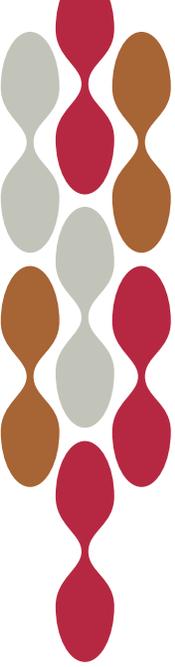


How rock-solid are the bonds between your group members?

By Rachel Gilmore

As leaders, we definitely want to see bonds form between the people in our groups. In fact, we can feel like a proud parent when we see people talking and laughing and enjoying life together. The social aspect of a group (including a ministry team) is both good and necessary, but there are still times when it feels like a necessary evil—especially when we don't know how to evaluate it.

We need to be sure solid relationships are in place so that people can open up and share the real messiness in their lives. And that's what is going to cause someone to stay in a church and experience life change. But usually the only opportunity we have to gauge relationships involves surface-level interactions. So how can we measure if those deeper connections are being made before they become necessary?



Connecting Women

Assessment: Building Relationships

To help you evaluate your group's progress in forming rock-solid spiritual friendships, consider these biblical models of friendship and reflect on the questions that follow.

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

David and Jonathan are perhaps the most famous "best buds" in the Bible. In fact, one translation says, "and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Samuel 18:1, NRSV). Can you imagine the energy you could harness for serving God's kingdom if your group members developed those kinds of relationships and then turned that love loose on the world?

And what about Ruth and Naomi? After the death of Naomi's son (Ruth's husband), Naomi wanted to send her daughter-in-law back to her own people. But Ruth said to her: "Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!" (Ruth 1:16–18).

That's some kind of love!

Read through **Ruth 1** and **1 Samuel 18–20**, and then think about these models for loving friendships in the context of your group. Rate your response to the following questions, with 1 meaning "No," 3 meaning "Sometimes," and 5 meaning "Yes."

Do my group members appear to genuinely love one another in spite of human quirks and flaws—demonstrating patience, kindness, gentleness, and other fruits of the Spirit?

1

2

3

4

5



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Assessment: Building Relationships

Do my group members offer support and encouragement to one another within the group setting?

1 2 3 4 5

Do my group members offer support and encouragement to one another outside the group setting?

1 2 3 4 5

Have I seen growth in my group members in terms of their willingness to get to know all members individually—asking about their family, their job, their interests, etc.?

1 2 3 4 5

Do my group members make an effort to include everyone in the group, even those who may be more quiet and reserved?

1 2 3 4 5

Where Two or Three Gather in My name

Mary, Jesus' mother, and her cousin Elizabeth had a deep, spiritual friendship based on their utmost trust in God. Just as women today seek out connections with other moms-to-be when they are pregnant, Mary went to visit Elizabeth, who said upon her arrival, "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" (Luke 1:45).



Connecting Women

Assessment: Building Relationships

The friends then spent the next three months together, no doubt continuing to praise God and encourage each other to faithfully follow his rather unexpected plans for their lives.

An unexpected friendship also deepened the faith of Elijah and his successor, Elisha. Having been plucked out of his family's field while plowing one day, Elisha probably wondered what God had gotten him into. Yet he faithfully followed Elijah as a prophet in training, and he was so encouraged by his mentor that he asked this of Elijah before his death: "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit" (2 Kings 2:9, NRSV). Talk about a spiritual friendship.

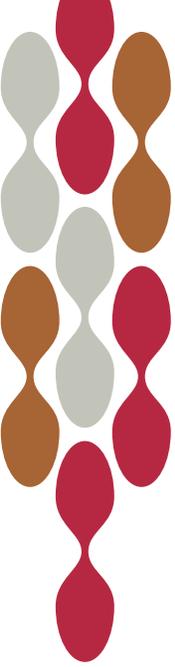
Go back and read through **Luke 1:39–56**, **1 Kings 19:19–21**, and **2 Kings 2:1–15**. Consider how your group members reflect the qualities of these spiritual friends. Again, rate your response to the following questions, with 1 meaning "No" 3 meaning "Sometimes," and 5 meaning "Yes."

Am I seeing any mentoring going on in my group—an experienced person taking a special interest and walking alongside someone less experienced?

1 2 3 4 5

Do any of these mentoring relationships spill over into life outside of our group?

1 2 3 4 5



Connecting Women

Assessment: Building Relationships

Do group members trust each other enough to share God's Word with one another as they offer advice and encouragement?

1 2 3 4 5

Have I seen growth in the way members challenge one another to stay faithful to God in difficult circumstances?

1 2 3 4 5

Have I seen members encouraging one another to take on new leadership roles at church or in ways that will use their gifts to serve God?

1 2 3 4 5

Therefore, Prepare Your Minds for Action

Friendships that stimulate our brains to grow in the knowledge of God are also part of his plan for community. Think back to Paul and Timothy—how much encouragement Paul gave to his young friend to keep his thoughts focused on Jesus:

"Work hard so you can present yourself to God and receive his approval. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth. Avoid worthless, foolish talk that only leads to more godless behavior...But God's truth stands firm like a foundation stone with this inscription: "The LORD knows those who are his,' and 'All who belong to the LORD must turn away from evil' (2 Timothy 2:15-16, 19).



Connecting Women

Assessment: Building Relationships

Another of Paul's partners in ministry, Phillip, befriended an Ethiopian eunuch at God's direction. Phillip challenged this new believer to think deeply about God's Word. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Phillip asked the man (Acts 8:30). When he admitted he did not, Phillip walked him through the Book of Isaiah, line by line.

Read through **2 Timothy 2** and **Acts 8:26–39**. Think about how Paul's and Phillip's dedication to the Word can be a model for encouraging intellectual friendships to flourish in your group.

Do my group members come fully prepared for study and discussion?

1 2 3 4 5

Do my group members seem comfortable asking questions, both for clarification and deeper processing?

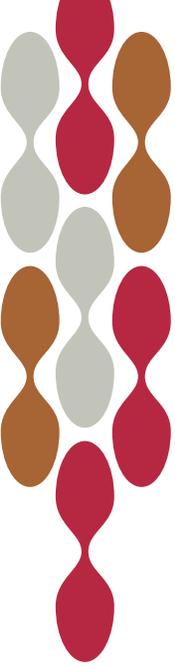
1 2 3 4 5

Do my group members ask each other questions, challenging one another to grow in their knowledge of God and one another?

1 2 3 4 5

Do my group members bring information to the discussion that shows they are reading and studying outside of group time?

1 2 3 4 5



Connecting Women

Assessment: Building Relationships

Do my group members challenge me to prepare thoroughly and faithfully for each lesson?

1

2

3

4

5

*Rachel Gilmore is author of **The Complete Leader's Guide to Christian Retreats and Church Programs and Celebrations for All Generations**. This article has been excerpted from the **SmallGroups.com** training tool called **Do You Lead a Life-Changing Small Group?***

Reflect

- *What types of friendships have I done well at fostering in my group?*
- *What types of friendships do I need to work harder at developing within my group?*
- *What is one thing I can do to move my group over the hurdle and forward in our spiritual friendships with one another and God?*

Additional Resources



Articles, books, and Bible studies to help you further

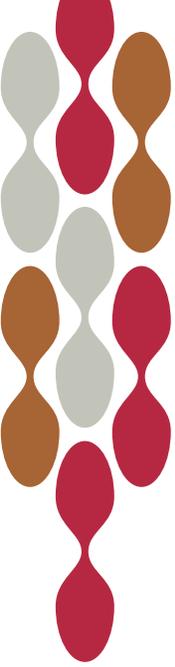
Articles

Discipleship Through Community—*Learning to trust others can be the best way of growing in Christ.* By Stephanie Voiland, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

Isolation Nation—*Research confirms the benefits of friendship. So why are so many women lonely?* By Holly Vicente Robaina, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

Living Life as a Mentor—*It's easier and more natural than you think.* By JoHannah Reardon, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

I Found Community—*Sure, it's risky doing life together in a small group. But the rewards outweigh the risks.* By Hollie Baker-Lutz, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com



Books

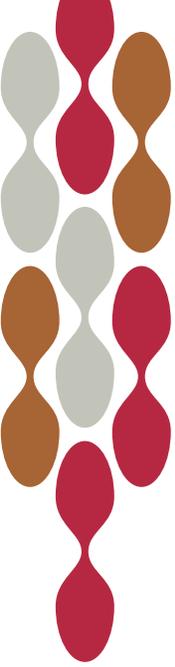
Six Keys to Lasting Friendships by Carol Kent, Karen Lee-Thorp (NAV Press, 2000). Many women have fond memories of childhood friendships. They loved being part of a group of friends who made them feel special. But after women grow up, they get busy and it's harder to find the time for those friends. Still, the need for friends remains as strong as ever—maybe even stronger. Women are faced with many questions: Should they marry? Should they go to college? Should they work, or raise children? Or, work and raise children?

Getting to the Heart of Friendships by Amy Baker (Focus, 2010). The longings in our hearts are reflected in our friendships. This book will teach you how to have relationships that reflect the joy, unity, and delight God designed for us to have with our friends.

Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission by Christopher L. Heuertz, Christine D. Pohl (IVP Books, 2010). When we befriend those on the margins of society by practicing hospitality and welcome, we create communities where righteousness and justice can be lived out. Heuertz and Pohl's reflections offer fresh insight into Christian mission and what it means to be the church in the world today.

Bible Studies and Online Resources

Check out the **Friends and Community section** of Today's Christian Woman to see more downloads like this.



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Additional Resources

Authentic Fellowship—This Bible study asks how the church is different than a social club. Available from **ChristianBibleStudies.com**.

Lasting Friendships Between Women— This 6-session Bible study looks at how we can make more and lasting friendships, and instructs us in how to put into these relationships the kind of work that helps them to last. Available from **ChristianBibleStudies.com**.

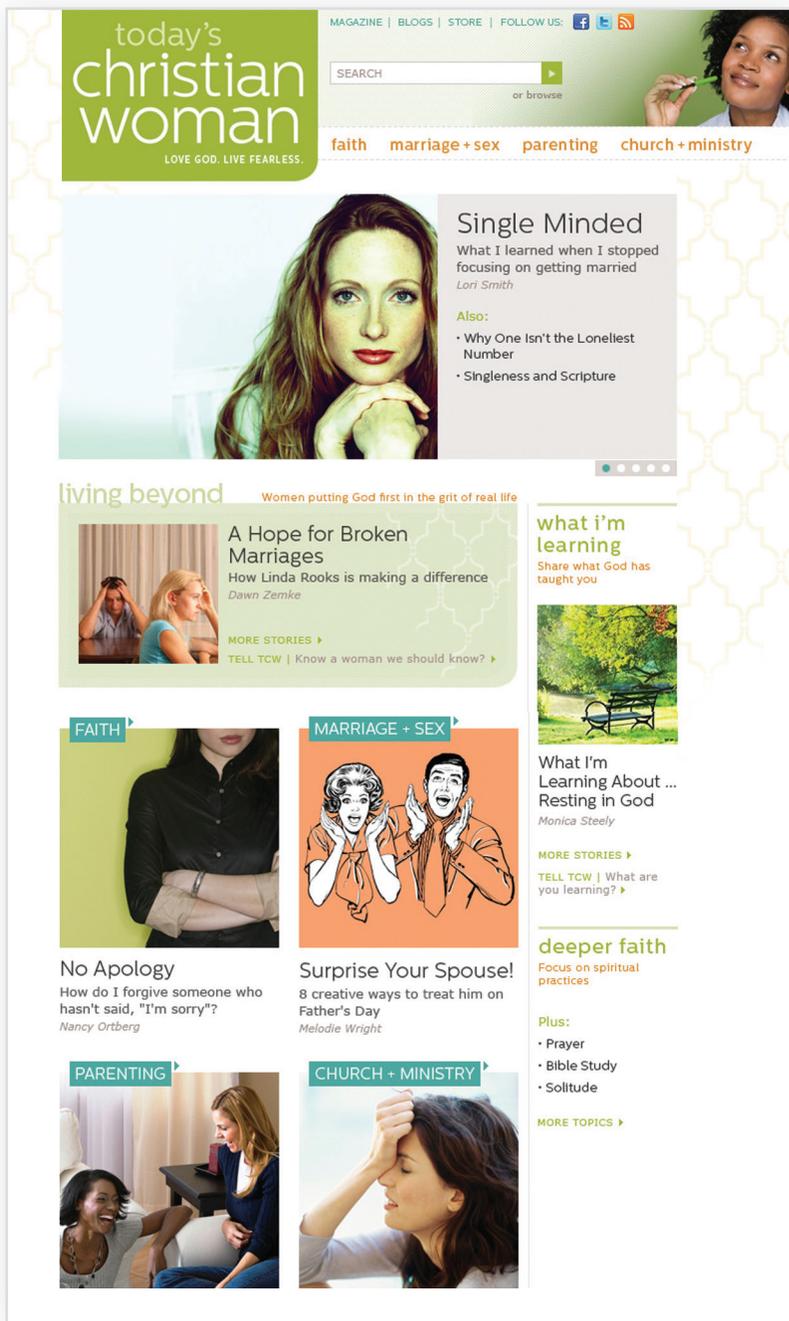
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