

Road to Transformation - Relationships

INTRO: How many of your Facebook friends are real friends? In other words, how many of your online friends would help if you were in trouble? Professor of evolutionary psychology Robin Dunbar put that question to the test. Citing a "dramatic revolution in our social world," he wondered if the size of your social media network had any correlation to having more friends in real life.

The average number of Facebook friends possessed by people was around 150. But, out of those 150, only 28, on average, we recognized as low-level "friends." But when participants were asked how many of those friends would help out in a time of need, emotional distress, or other crisis, the average answer was four. Around 14 would at least express sympathy.

We might have 150 or even 5,000 Facebook friends, but our true relationship with the majority of these people is essentially insignificant.

TRAN: As we continue to talk about our Road to Transformation, we need to understand that relationships are a crucial part of the life of any church. For church growth to occur, we need to understand relationships, and how they function to help the church grow.

- I. The language of the New Testament is the language of family
 - A. From Acts through Revelation the Bible uses terms for Christians that are terms of family
 1. Brothers and sisters
 2. Sons and daughters
 3. Family
 4. In fact, in all, the NT uses family references for Christians about 50 times
 - B. One of the defining characteristics of family is relationship
 1. There is an assumed, loving relationship when you talk of family
 2. Brothers love sisters and sisters love brothers
 3. Parents to their children
 4. Children to their parents
 5. It is one of the things that God designed for the church to be - one family
 - C. Genuine relationship is one desire that people in the world crave
 1. We see that in those that multiply digital friends
 - a) I never quite believe those that have 1000 or more Facebook friends
 - b) I think most of us know those aren't genuine friends - acquaintances at best

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2. The irony of this digital age is, while we have more ways to be connected than ever before, most feel less connected than ever
 - a) I had this conversation with Trent when he was here this summer
 - (1) He liked to use Facebook and Instagram to advertise what was going on in the Youth Group
 - (2) I had some parents or kids say to me that they did not know about such and such activity
 - (3) That is because as connected as we are, people miss things online, or some are not connected online
 - b) Even more than that, just because you are connected online does not mean you are connected to people in real life
 - (1) People continue to feel lonelier than ever
 - (2) And our relational skills continue to drop
3. Face it, on Facebook, to “friend” someone is a passive thing
 - a) You click the button and you are friends
 - b) In real life, to friend someone takes time, it takes energy, it takes emotions, it takes real effort - effort that many people have forgotten how to invest
 - c) And that is what we need to look at in our church - do we know how, and more importantly, are we investing effort into real relationships

II. How relational are we as a church?

- A. Every church intends to be relational, and every church thinks they are friendly - However, we have to take an objective look at this to really see
- B. Many churches are convinced they are friendly - but are they really
 1. How is this friendliness quotient established?
 2. Often times it is established by how we feel other members or regular attenders treat us
 - a) We are accepted and cared for, therefore, new people must feel the same way
 - b) Is that really true - shouldn't we judge that by how visitors feel about our church?
 - c) And do we do “friendly” only to get them to come back next week, or to really seek a relationship with them?
 3. Allow me to give you an early application of how we can improve on being friendly
 - a) Former Mayor of New York Ed Koch was famous for asking a question - “How am I doing?”
 - b) If we want to know how we are doing in friendliness, perhaps this a question we need to adopt

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- (1) Actually, if we want to know how we are doing in all areas of ministry, this really should be a question to adopt
 - (2) From the preaching to the worship to the kids ministry - if we want to get better at reaching people for Christ, we should not be afraid of this question
 - (3) Imagine if, after you have chatted with a new person, maybe introduced them around, as you conclude your conversation with:
 - (a) Is there anything our church can be doing for you or your family, or anything we can pray for?
 - (b) And then, “Oh, how are we doing? Since you were new today, we want to know how we did to welcome you and make you feel at home. And we invite honesty, it is the only way we improve.”
 - (4) What kind of revolution would begin if we looked at visitors as if from a customer service stand point - how did WE do?
- C. Is friendliness the only factor for a visitor?
1. Because of the irony of being disconnected in a connected world, friendliness is not all people are looking for
 2. People are looking for friends!
 - a) They want relationships
 - b) That is why they dare darken the door of a church - they want to connect on a deeper level
 - c) That brings us to a completely different set of questions
- D. Another question to help us diagnose our effectiveness as a church - how intentional are we in building relationships with new comers?
1. Many of us are great at holding conversations with new people - and that is awesome!
 2. How about building a relationship with them?
 - a) Too often what happens in churches is an understated idea that it is the new person’s responsibility to connect with the church
 - b) Here is a little of what they need to overcome to connect with a church
 - (1) First, is the “fit-in” test
 - (a) In other words, do we fit in with these people
 - (b) Is there enough we have in common that allows for greater relationship?
 - (2) Then there is the involvement qualification
 - (a) Does this new person or family attend events at the church
 - (b) If so, they might fit in around here
 - (3) Third, is the dreaded “Christianese”

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- (a) Using terms that are difficult for new people to understand about the Bible or Christianity
- (b) While new believers as well as seasoned veterans should understand basic theological terms, how mindful are we about this
- (4) Fourth, using terms specific to the church - “Taylor Chapel” or “Heritage Room”
 - (a) Or perhaps trying to enter the church on a Wednesday through the front doors - “Who doesn’t know you enter the doors off the parking lot”
 - (b) These poor folks have to try to figure that out
- c) If these folks figure out the riddles in all of these scenarios, they may fit in
 - (1) Church shoppers (those that don’t want to get to be known by others) look for friendly
 - (2) Spiritual seekers (people that are really looking for spiritual transformation) are looking for relationship
 - (3) They want to know if this is a church that will make space for them and desires to have genuine relationship with them
- 3. These riddles are stumbling blocks for most people
 - a) I’ll tell you up front, the ONLY stumbling block that anyone should ever encounter in church is the cross
 - (1) The Bible tells us in 1 Cor. 2:14 “The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit”
 - (2) The word for “foolishness” also means silly or stupid
 - (3) No matter what we do, some people will find the message of the cross stupid
 - (a) We cannot compromise the message of the cross - ever
 - (b) But we can evaluate our methods to make sure that nothing is a stumbling block to new people
 - b) That could be a scary thing for many because it means that ways we have done things may be the very thing that keeps people from sticking around
 - (1) Some traditions that we have
 - (2) Some methods that we use
 - (3) Some events or activities that we sponsor
 - c) When we understand this, we have to ask ourselves what is our driving motivation

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- (1) Are we driven by traditions, and methods, and events?
- (2) Or are we driven to reach the lost?
 - (a) Do we crave to see people come to know Christ?
 - (b) Do we want to see people transformed by the gospel?
- (3) If so, we need to think through our church, and our relationship quotient, ensuring we do all we can to make it inviting to the lost
 - (a) Making space for relationships may very well mean that we have to eliminate other things
 - (b) From the life of the church, as well as from our own life
 - i) We don't have a good handle on the sacrifice God asks of His followers
 - ii) To win this world for Christ, to expand God's kingdom requires sacrifices to be made by all of us
 - iii) God never called us to a life of comfort, He called us to a life of following Him on His mission of building His kingdom

III. Here are some things that we need to do to work toward creating an environment that is relationally intentional

A. We mentioned the first earlier - we need to seek to produce a spiritual family

1. With the hunger out there for genuine relationships, when people that need Christ see Christians loving one another as the Bible describes
 - a) Doing all those "one another" in the Bible
 - b) Caring for each other, forgiving one another
 - c) There is something very attractive about that
2. We cannot live the Christian life properly without one another
 - a) When we try, we short change how we grow
 - b) We need to have one another in our lives to become the people God wants us to be
3. Because we live in such an individualistic culture, seeing a loving group live out the Christian life together becomes almost an oasis in a dry and weary land
4. So one of the actions that must come of this is a much stronger small group ministry
 - a) Small groups are where relationships are formed and strengthened
 - b) We need to get the all of our members and majority of our attenders involved in a small group (ladies Bible study, men's, Life Group)
 - (1) It will not only benefit you in that you form relationships with others to help, as Hebrews says, "spur one another on to love and good works"

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- (2) It also is a benefit in providing a means of connecting new people in the church in relationships too
 - c) This may mean that we need to train more small group leaders on how to choose curriculum, or how to teach the curriculum, or how to study the Bible for yourself, or where to find answer to questions that come up, etc
 - d) Whatever it means, it will mean some sacrifice
 - (1) Of time to be in a small group
 - (2) Of time to learn to lead a small group
 - (3) Of investing in each other's lives
- B. Second, if we are going to create a relationally intentional environment, we also do that one on one
- 1. Large gatherings like church provide times of worship, and instruction
 - 2. Smaller gatherings provide instruction and relationship
 - 3. It is the one on one time that helps cement spiritual transformation
 - a) Jesus preached to large crowds
 - b) Jesus hung out with the disciples
 - c) It was in those one on one times that genuine transformation happened
 - (1) Think of Jesus and the woman at the well
 - (2) Think of Jesus inviting Matthew
 - (3) Think of Jesus comforting Mary and Martha
 - d) Jesus' words to people were usually not the same
 - (1) The reason is because everyone is at a different point on the spiritual journey
 - (2) Everyone is wired differently and needs different kinds of attention - one size does not fit all
 - 4. One on one times are those sweet times when you are talking with someone in the hall, or after church
 - a) They are the time someone shares their struggle with you at the table during coffee hour and you can pray for them
 - b) Or when a student comes up to you after youth group to talk a little longer about something that hit them in the lesson
- C. Third, relationally intentional environments make room for difficult people
- 1. If we cannot find a place for recovering alcoholics, or single mothers, or handicapped people
 - a) A couple struggling through a divorce
 - b) Or someone addicted to painkillers

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- c) If we can't find space for these people, than we are displaying how narrow our view is of God's power to transform, and of what the people in the kingdom may look like
2. Too many people expect to have the people in the church be as emotionally healthy as they are
3. In essence we play a game of favoritism
 - a) James 2:1 "My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism."
 - b) We really need to treat those we are less comfortable around the same as we treat those we are very comfortable around
4. Welcoming the broken is a blessing, and if we are going to create a relationally intentional environment, we need to understand that
- D. The last thing about creating a relationally intentional environment - relationally intentional environments have systems and processes
 1. What this means is that the systems we put in place for our church serve the purpose of discipleship
 2. Too many churches are driven by what program they offer, rather than thinking through how do those programs serve the greater purpose
 3. We have it on our bulletins, and the leadership has been working on it more in recent days - the purpose of the church is to make disciples
 4. In order to make disciples we need to have a path as to discipleship
 5. It means:
 - a) Think through how a person enters the ministry of our church
 - b) Then, what is the next step, and the next step, and the next step
 - c) Just as important, how is the next step being encouraged
 6. So let me give you this by way of example
 - a) A new person comes to church - perhaps with someone from our church that has been witnessing to them, or they came on their own
 - (1) They have now entered into our ministry
 - (2) What is the next step we want them to take?
 - b) Let's say it is becoming involved in a small group where they can get to know more Christians in a more intimate environment
 - (1) So now, how is that taking place - how are we encouraging that?
 - (2) Announcements from the pulpit, sure
 - (a) Let's be honest folks, after I announce things I still have many of you still ask me, "Was that announced?"
 - (b) So the effectiveness of simple announcements is marginal
 - (3) How about this, if all of us are involved in a small group, it now becomes easy to invite this person to our small group
 - c) So then the next step may be to get involved serving

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- (1) So someone invites that person to help serve with them for some event, or ministry (like coffee hour or nursery, or the sound booth)
 7. The whole time, what is at the core of the movement toward discipleship?
 - a) Relationships
 - b) It is by relationships that we are encouraging movement toward the goal of discipleship
 - c) Discipleship is the goal, being intentional with our relationships is the vehicle to get people moving toward the goal
 8. We try to keep this to a clean simple process
- IV. Takeaways or action steps for us to start putting into place right away
- A. Be a customer service agent
 1. Find out how we did as a church
 2. Ask the hard questions to help us improve
 3. Don't get offended or hurt, we are asking them to evaluate us
 4. And don't forget to ask how we can help them or their families and how we can pray for them
 - B. Get involved in a small group
 1. If that means you want to start one but you feel you need to be trained
 2. If that means you want to join one
 3. Get involved in a group
 - a) You are only short changing yourself when you remain uninvolved
 - b) Can small group life be messy?
 - (1) Is your family messy sometimes?
 - (2) Were the disciples messy
 - (3) Yes, it can be messy
 - c) It is still one of the best ways for spiritual growth
 - C. As the focus for the church becomes clearer, commit to understanding the process and the flow
 1. Know the plan of how people enter our church ministry
 2. Know the next step, and how you can help that person get to the next step
 3. Even more importantly, make sure you have walked this road of discipleship yourself
 - a) If you are not in a small group - get there
 - b) If you are not serving a ministry - figure out where you want to serve

PRAYER CHALLENGE: Lord make me a notice-er of people. Help me go beyond friendliness to building relationships. Create in me a desire to walk with people through the process of transformation and discipleship. May my simple efforts be used by You for Your glory. Amen.