

Relationship Building Is Not the Goal

By CYNTHIA ANDERSON

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“This missionary is amazing!” My friend’s words piqued my interest. The woman he referred to had worked for several years in a devoutly Muslim community. I leaned in closer, wanting to hear exactly what was happening. “She has built such good relationships here. Everyone knows her!”

I listened further, curious to know how many had come to Christ through this amazing field worker. “She has hosted events on Christmas, Easter, and other times in the year. The people here love to come.” This was all good. I was encouraged to know that this unreached community had such an active and committed field worker.

As I continued to listen and ask questions, I was saddened, however, to discover a common reality playing itself out yet again in this unreached community. Only a few women had come to know Jesus. I dug a bit deeper, probing with further questions. Soon, I understood that although there were many great relationships, few spiritual conversations took place. ESL programs, events, and many positive things were happening, yet the gospel message was not proclaimed. The community was still unreached and likely to remain so unless changes took place.

Jesus Never Focused Only on Relationship Building

I admit it. My natural preference is to build strong relationships before bringing up the gospel. It’s far more comfortable to avoid the risk of rejection that comes when we begin to share about Jesus with those who don’t yet know him. I hold a firm commitment, however, to follow Jesus’ pattern of ministry. This is true, even when it’s not comfortable. I deeply desire, like most reading this, to be like him. I want to do what he did.

As I search the Gospels, I find times when Jesus had longer conversations with people like the woman at the

well or the rich young ruler. At one point or another, those conversations always turned to the kingdom. I see no evidence, though, that Jesus first built a relationship for a few weeks, months, or years before he engaged in kingdom conversations. Though he was often indirect, asking questions and telling stories for those who had *ears to hear*, he never only built relationships.

Moving from Good Contacts to Good Conversations

Coaching my friend who worked with the above-mentioned missionary, I encouraged him to write out a list of the people with whom they had good relationships. I asked him to make a “relational chart.” Who do they know, and who are the others connected to that person? As he drew that out on paper and we discussed it, I saw they had many excellent opportunities. It was a great beginning to making disciples there, if they now took the next steps.

“What you need to do now is find out which of these people are spiritually open,” I told him. There is a difference between being *relationally* open and being *spiritually* open. Some of these people are relationally open to you but haven’t shown signs of being spiritually open. The only way to discover if someone is spiritually open is to have a spiritual conversation.

The fear of engaging in God conversations with those you’ve built relationships with is a major hindrance to the release of a disciple making movement. We must overcome our fear and be willing to lose relationships when we proclaim the gospel message.

The goal is not to have good relationships in a community. The goal is to make and multiply disciples of Jesus. Let’s not become confused about our purpose or delay too long in pursuing our true goal.

Some Relationships Need to End

Dr. Henry Cloud, author of the well-known *Boundaries* book, wrote another powerful book called *Necessary Endings*. It is not directly written to address disciple making and church planting but includes principles that have impacted many aspects of my life. The basic premise is that we must make tough and courageous decisions, allowing some things to end so that new and more fruitful things can emerge.

While there is indeed a risk to the relationship when you enter into a spiritual conversation with someone, there is also the possibility that they may be open and receptive. You don't know what will happen until you have the conversation. If it causes distance in the relationship or a rejection, at least you have gained valuable information. It will inform your prayers and can tell you whether you need to move on to look for others who are more open.

You have limited time and resources to invest in kingdom work. Even if you are a full-time worker, you have only 24 hours a day and many other demands on your time. You cannot afford to invest years of your life in building relationships with those who are not spiritually open when thousands of other unreached people wait to hear the good news.

This may sound a bit harsh and not very relational, especially to those with more pastoral giftings. Our time, however, is something we must steward carefully. It's one of our most valuable commodities. Please don't misunderstand. I'm not saying we shouldn't invest in relationships or love people simply because they are our neighbors. I'm not saying that the only reason we build relationships is to convert people. We must be extravagant with our love and build genuine relationships with those who don't know Christ. We don't talk to people only so we can make them Christians. They will sense that from a mile away!

But if we truly love someone, we will share the good news of Jesus with them. If we are true friends, we will talk to them about the most important person in our lives, the one who transforms us into new people.

Delaying a spiritual conversation with someone is evidence of both a lack of love and a lack of faith. Start by praying daily for your list of unsaved contacts. Pray

with consistency and faith that God is at work in them. Then, step into an opening that comes to speak to them about Jesus. You might initiate a conversation with a question like, "What's the most wonderful thing that's ever happened to you?" Or perhaps, "If God could do a miracle for you, what would it be?"

If you have noticed resistance to spiritual matters or Christianity, ask questions that express your curiosity. You could say something like, "I noticed when I bring up issues of faith, you seem a bit uncomfortable. I'd love to understand more about why that is. What's your story? Did you have a bad experience with a Christian before?" Be a good listener and pray fervently that their hearts will become open and soft to the message of Jesus' love.

Share Stories Freely as Jesus Did

Someone recently told me, "You are a good storyteller!" I was grateful for her compliment but responded, "I haven't always been. It's a skill you can learn." Jesus was a masterful storyteller. Wherever he went, he told stories and asked questions. Our goal should be to become like him, sharing stories that people can relate to, and communicating spiritual truth that piques their interest to hear more.

One of the best stories we can share is our own story of transformation. It's an important skill to learn and become comfortable using. In the training we run, we equip everyone to share their transformation story in three minutes or less. You begin by sharing what your life was like before Christ. I usually ask people to choose three main characteristics. Then you learn to share how you came to know Jesus, using non-religious and relatable language people can understand. Lastly, you share what is now different in your life. At the end, ask a question. "Do you have a story like this?" Or "Would you be interested to hear more about this sometime?"

When sharing this kind of story with someone, you find out if they are spiritually open. If they show interest, take the next step to invite them to read the Bible together. Make these conversations natural and conversational, not preachy. Don't get in a rush to get them to pray a prayer of salvation. Take your time, but begin to talk of spiritual things.

God may also highlight a story in your mind to share with someone. A few weeks ago, I was in California staying in a hotel and met a man named Oscar. He was waiting tables at the breakfast buffet. I had spoken to him several times before, affirming him, and thanking him for his service. One morning, I went on a prayer walk. I prayed for him. God put it on my heart to share with him the story of Joseph. Returning to the hotel, I walked up to him and another man he was talking to.

“Hi Oscar! How’s it going?” I said. “This may sound a little weird, but I was praying for you just now and felt like I was supposed to share a story with you from the Bible. Would that be okay?”

He said, “Sure.” I then asked if he had ever heard the story of Joseph. Neither he nor the other elderly man standing beside him had heard it before. I shared the story briefly. They both were interested in it, showing surprise at the story’s twists and turns. At the end, I said, “I think you are a bit like Joseph, Oscar. God sees your hard work. If you will obey and follow him, he will lift you from these jobs and promote you into other positions.” I don’t often get prophetic words for others, but I deeply sensed I should give him that word of encouragement. Since I was leaving the next day, I gave him a card for the church I was training at.

A story. A word of encouragement, calling forth into his destiny in God. I found out that Oscar was spiritually open, not closed. He was someone who had *ears to hear*.

Overcome Fear and Step Out in Faith

The woman I mentioned at the beginning of this article is indeed an amazing missionary. She is working hard and building great relationships. I hope she will also take bold and courageous steps to begin to share the gospel with others. Some people might reject her, even becoming enemies, but some will receive Jesus. No one will receive him if she and her team aren’t willing to lose some relationships in the process of bolder proclamation.

In recent months, several in that community have moved to other parts of the country without getting to hear about Jesus. They met Christians who were friendly and who built relationships but never shared the hope that was within them. Perhaps that will have some effect, perhaps not. With 42% of the world living among unreached peoples, we can’t afford to build friendships with lost people yet never share the message of Jesus.

We should heed Paul’s admonition,

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry (2 Tim 4:1–5, NIV).

Our goal is not to make many contacts for contacts’ sake; it’s to make disciples of Jesus. Let’s overcome our fear of loss or rejection and be willing to initiate gospel conversations with those who desperately need to hear of his great love. 📌

