

Sacred Companions

BY CHRISTY MORR

By showing how close friendships within congregations are important not just for personal fulfillment but also for spiritual transformation, these three books point us away from “Jesus and me” individualism and toward “Jesus and we” spiritual community.

Individual fulfillment and the value of self-reliance saturate the mindset of most North American Christians. Is it possible to move from a “Jesus and me” mentality to a “Jesus and we” value system? What will it take to see the importance of relationships, not just for one’s personal fulfillment, but for one’s spiritual growth? The three books reviewed below defend and clarify the need for friendship and community to bring about spiritual transformation in the lives of individuals.

FOLLOWING JESUS’ EXAMPLE OF FRIENDSHIPS

One of the clearest and most convincing reasons for our pursuing close interpersonal relationships comes from studying the life of Jesus. Richard Lamb, in *The Pursuit of God in the Company of Friends* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003, 240 pp., \$15.00), draws on the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry to “look at Jesus, at his invitation into friendship and his strategy for making and hosting friendships, focused together around the pursuit of God” (p. 24). Weaving together his personal ministry experiences with his reflection on Jesus’ movement towards various types of people, Lamb addresses vital topics related to the development of close friendships with others and with God.

Humans’ pursuit of God is rightly couched in the presupposition that God is in the pursuit of friends. “The phrase ‘God in the pursuit of friends’ just doesn’t seem right, does it? Yet this is what the Gospel writers tell us: Jesus of Nazareth, God-become-human, spent his early time with people in moves of friendship, initiating and even receiving initiatives from people in ways that would be familiar to us” (p. 24). While this may be a hard concept

to grasp mentally, emotionally, and theologically, it is a necessary beginning place for the reciprocity required between true friends.

On the vertical plane (God pursuing us), Jesus modeled the hospitality and healing of God as he pursued people to become his friends. Hospitality, in a variety of forms, is the oxygen that causes relational growth. Jesus modeled hospitality by creating physical space for relationships to happen, giving his time and emotional energy to hurting people, and developing a spiritual dimension to relationships. By recognizing God's pursuit of us, we can move out to others and welcome them into our lives with the hospitality we have received. When Jesus literally touched and healed a man suffering from leprosy, he brought the man out of alienation and back into community. Sometimes, though, we are dependent on our friends to bring us to the healing touch of God as was the case with the paralytic. These powerful Gospel stories, when interpreted in light of God's movement towards creating friendship and community, provide enriching insights for the journey of spiritual formation in the company of friends.

On the horizontal level (people pursuing friendships with one another), Lamb addresses issues of conflict, comparison and competition, listening, intimacy, and forgiveness that are inherently part of authentic relationships. In each of these discussions Lamb draws from Jesus' example as depicted in the Gospels. An interesting application that he makes of Jesus' itinerant ministry is our need for "road trips" today. "Road trips" include ways to get a group out of their routine and into each other's lives. This could involve going on a retreat or to a conference together, or even traveling to a foreign mission field to serve together. Lamb is not so naïve as to think that merely going on a retreat with others automatically builds close relationships. He wisely observes, "No small-group meeting is so long that we cannot, if we so choose, maintain decorum and composure in such a way that people never really get to know us" (p. 99). To develop close relationships that have the openness and authenticity that lead to a sense of community with others, we must be committed to live life together and follow Jesus' example.

The Pursuit of God in the Company of Friends provides helpful frameworks and strategies for overcoming the barriers of individualism, privacy, and superficiality that pervade the North American Christian mindset. Lamb's winsome style makes accessible a variety of more heady sources from the realms of spiritual theology, philosophy, and social sciences. Reflection questions provide thoughtful ways to process each chapter for group discussion or self-enrichment. Reading this book would be an excellent way to cast vision and promote a countercultural value that embraces the importance of friendships for spiritual growth.

SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE AND DIRECTION

Companions in Christ is another excellent practical resource that guides groups toward the pursuit of God. The "Participant's Book" (Nashville, TN:

Upper Room Books, 2006, 320 pp., \$20.00) provides daily exercises for personal spiritual growth, walking believers through the basics of the Christian faith. The “Leader’s Book” (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2006, 246 pp., \$17.00) is a worthwhile supplement to the participant’s book, imparting training and direction for weekly small group meetings. Because these books are designed to help Christians grow experientially in relationship

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to Christ, the format, goals, mood, and dynamics of the small-group meetings are different from traditional Bible study and Sunday school settings. Both resources provide a comprehensive curriculum to pursue God in the company of friends during a twenty-eight week period. Mem-

bers commit to individual reading and daily exercises (most often reflecting on Bible passages), a two-hour weekly meeting, and an ending retreat.

The “Leader’s Book” clearly sets a vision for what an experience in a spiritual formation group can become through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit using time-tested wisdom of Christian traditions and disciplines. “*Companions in Christ* is designed to create a setting where you and other people in your church can respond to God’s call to an ever deepening communion and wholeness in Christ—as individuals, as members of a small group, and as part of a congregation” (p. 13). In order to achieve this, the small-group time is intended to be a safe place where members can express with one another their worship, their experience of God during the past week while completing the daily exercises, and their desire for deeper intimacy with God through a spiritual formation element that is directed by the leader. Creative ideas and practical insights guide leaders to think outside the box and promote formative experiences in the life of Christ during the weekly small-group meetings.

The twenty-eight week *Companions in Christ* curriculum explores five large themes of the Christian spiritual life. It begins with envisioning the Christian life as a journey, then emphasizes ways to meditate on and pray through Scripture, proceeds to guide participants into a deepening prayer life, subsequently challenges individuals to respond to God’s call, and finally, addresses the role of interpersonal relationships in discerning God’s will for oneself and others. Each theme is subdivided into five or six topics for discussion during the weekly small-group meetings. The “Participant’s Book” provides deeply engaging readings and daily exercises designed to help members develop “a life where Christ rather than our own self-image constitutes the center of who we are.... Empty of self importance and self-

interest, human life is free to be what God intended: holy, humble, joyfully obedient, radiating the power of love" ("Participant's Book," p. 25). The journey to this lofty vision is clearly marked by the road signs developed in this curriculum package.

These resources provide a wealth of material from a variety of Christian traditions. Sidebars contain poignant quotes from authors such as Teresa of Avila, Augustine, Calvin, and Thomas Merton. While some may be uncomfortable with the experiential and non-content-driven format of the small group experience, it is a worthwhile endeavor to move us out of our heavy reliance on cognitive approaches and into deeper intimacy with Christ and others. An additional word of caution may be necessary concerning the use and interpretation of Scripture. Reflective exercises based on a biblical passage are given no historical or literary context. The danger of eisegesis or reader response (reading into the text what the original author never intended) is high if participants have not been previously grounded in the basics of sound biblical interpretation.

DATA AND PRACTICAL TOOLS

How can local congregations invest their resources to emphasize friendships in the fabric of church activities? Group Publishing enlisted the Gallup Organization to conduct an observational study of current trends in church satisfaction, attendance, and relational variables of churchgoers. *Friendship: Creating a Culture of Connectivity* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2005, 94 pp., \$14.00) provides the results of this survey and some practical suggestions for acting on the analysis of this data.

This workbook-style resource contains two main sections. The first contains the display and analysis of the most important research findings. The three chapters in this section address church satisfaction, why people are attracted to and stay at a church, and spiritual growth issues. For example, satisfaction with one's church is correlated to having a best friend at church, attending church weekly, sensing the care of spiritual leaders, and eating meals with other congregants. One of the key findings regarding spiritual growth is an association between having a best friend in one's church and how one's faith is lived out. "Seventy-four percent who worship with a best friend say their faith is involved in every aspect of their life; only fifty-four percent of those without a best friend at church say the same thing" (p. 39). While the statistical significance is not addressed by the display or the analysis, the data does indicate that satisfaction increases when positive relationship variables are present.

Ministry ideas to promote relationships in the local church among children, youth, and adults follow the analysis in each chapter. Ideas for children's ministry include planning informal gatherings such as swim parties and barbecues for children to make friendships outside of the church Sunday school hour. For youth, they suggest that leaders meet a teenager for a

meal and ask the individual to bring a childhood photo, one special object, and a prayer request, so that youth are connecting to adults at a deeper level. In adult ministry, getting people connected can be facilitated through movie nights, seminars for felt needs, and service opportunities.

The second section of the book offers a lesson plan for presenting the findings of the Gallup survey in a user-friendly way. The PowerPoint slide show included in this resource packet contains graphically appealing representations of the findings and some interactive questions and answers to stimulate discussion. The survey response data at the end of the book are helpfully sorted according to demographics and church relational patterns.

While the author who analyzed the data states that causal relationships cannot be supported from this type of survey, the written analysis tends to make strong correlations with cause-effect type assumptions driving conclusions. "Perhaps most important is the finding that spiritual development—long a priority of church leaders—is not dependent on a particular program or initiative. In fact, pastors and leaders may be surprised to learn that the key for helping parishioners deepen their faith is relatively simple: create a faith community that values relationships; spiritual transformation will follow" (p. 35). This is misleading for those who have never studied statistics or the fine art of social scientific research. To draw such strong conclusions is an irresponsible use of the data, which unfortunately happens throughout each chapter and in the training session. While there are strong associations among the variables under investigation, the conclusions cannot be supported by this observational design methodology. In addition, no attempt has been made to triangulate these findings or to explain the connection between the questions on the survey and the sweeping conclusions drawn in the conceptual analysis. This resource cannot be used as forcefully as portrayed in the training session, presenting the "silver bullet" of spiritual development as love and friendship (p. 35). Extreme caution needs to be taken in how to interpret and implement these research findings.

Together these three resources will be very useful in helping Christians move from individualism to community. Richard Lamb's book presents a rationale for why relationships are important, while *Companions in Christ* provides a guidebook for personal growth and development of relationships. *Friendship: Creating a Culture of Connectivity* presents some practical ministry ideas for promoting relationships in a church context.



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