

Enrichment

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Ministry Needs Company

by Chris Maxwell

My friends waited as I searched for words. A fire in the fireplace provided warmth and light during our time of prayer. Each friend prayed individually and then for me. The words and prayers of these friends went deeper than I expected.

Where were we? What were we doing? We were at our annual hideaway.

We head to the mountains and listen to the rhythm of the water and enjoy the cool air. We leave the routine of pastoral ministry behind and gather for prayer, study, accountability, and encouragement.

That night I did not know what to say. But they knew what questions to ask, how to get me started, and when to challenge me to make changes. An old phrase states that misery loves company. But our hurts may cause us to avoid help from others. Often, misery runs from the company it really needs.

Ministry frequently does the same. We preach sermons that challenge the congregation to have fellowship. We highlight how the Early Church devoted themselves to each other, expecting our parishioners to do the same. But do we build such relationships ourselves? I thank God for a family and a church that provides true friendships. I also thank God for the deep level of friendship He has provided with other ministers. I need that. Ministry needs company.

CONNECTION

Sports teams thrive on teamwork. Each player possessing unique skills must cooperate with those wearing the same jersey.

In life, people frequently become close friends only with those viewed as identical. We forget how point guards bless power forwards in the game of life. Looking and thinking alike do not provide all we need. Spiritual connection comes from a willingness to obey God and blend with others.

God has linked me with some men who are very different—our differences help reveal our strengths and weaknesses. We are all ministers, joined in basic beliefs; yet we are assorted. This blesses our bond. Diversity adds to victory. We blend well because we choose to accept or challenge issues as God directs.

George Wood, Assemblies of God general secretary, offers this insight on ministerial relationships: “Whenever you look at New Testament ministry you will search in vain for Long Ranger preachers. Jesus sent the disciples out two by two. Peter took companions to Cornelius’ home. Paul maintained a partnering and mentoring relationship with several dozen coworkers over the tenure of his missionary journeys.”

Too often ministers gather only to compare notes and evaluate success. Praise reports replace honest hurts at gatherings where sincerity longs for freedom.

When I get together with my friends, the masks fall. Hurts and hopes are discussed, suggestions are offered, and prayers are lifted. Prophetic, scriptural direction guides future plans.

In *Eight Habits of the Heart*, Clifton L. Taulbert motivates strong community behaviors (regardless of race or history): “Within the community, dependability is being there for others through all the times of their lives, a steady influence that makes tomorrow a welcome event; and responsibility means showing and encouraging a personal commitment to each task.”¹

COMMITMENT

Connection does not just happen; it takes hard work. Once, when we explained our unique relationship to other ministers, their response was, “How would anyone have time for that?”

My accountability team requires time—meals together, intercession, conversation, and an annual retreat away from the normal routine of pastoral obligations. Finding time is not always easy. But what do we tell our people who say they have no time for Bible study or prayer? What do we tell couples who say they are too busy for time together? We challenge them to find moments for God and for each other. Like every effective exercise, this one requires time. It requires commitment. Teaching others to find time is not enough; we must do it ourselves as well.

Before the minister stands before the bride and groom, he or she challenges them to stay true to their relationship—not to base it on feelings, convenience, or pleasure. We teach them to do what is right with consistency. Commitment must also find a home in our relationships with ministerial friends. Enduring relationships require loyalty. Like marriages, committed friendships with a small group of people require commitment.

Philip Yancy writes in his book, in *Church: Why bother?* That church life calls for people to “voluntarily choose to band together with a strange menagerie because of a common bond in Christ.” Moments with my friends do that, but they do not happen by accident—each appointment requires commitment.

COMMUNICATION

Sermons take textual truth from Scripture and reveal practical application for the lives of listeners. Much of the Bible includes dialogue. God talked to people, and people responded. God uses people as His mouthpiece to provide His instruction. His words are spoken to listening ears.

As ministers, we want an audience to hear our teaching. We counsel by listening, asking questions, and pursuing honesty. We expect people to communicate with each other.

In our moments of deep inner pain, listening friends can pray with us. We need a friend who empathizes with our difficulty. That friend can be a pastoral partner who gives time and concern. My friends and I have learned the blessing we give each other.

Read the Psalms. What did David do? He unloaded honesty in poetic release. He directed his words toward God, but many of them related his inner hurt or joy.

Relationships that encourage honesty in prayer take ministers to new levels. When one of my friends released a deep wound he had held internally for years, we wept with him. Our questions, his slow movement toward real answers, and his final release brought glorious freedom.

Again, George Wood’s words challenge us: “I need the *koinonia* relationship with fellow laborers in gospel ministry so I don’t get isolated, so I may receive encouragement or correction, and so I will continually recognize my ministerial aptitudes

and giftings are insufficient to accomplish all that God wants within the sphere of my ministry. Rather, the combined calling and giftedness of companions is needed if Christ's work is to be fully done."

If we pursue God's plan, ministry with company is necessary. If we praise life in the intermediate mode, it is optional. If we prefer shallow friendships, it is because of our individualistic order. Avoiding relational depth allows us to hide in the cave of personal seclusion. But is that what God wants? Is that what we really want? We will miss too much if we omit deeper relationships with spiritual family members.

Doctors need doctors. Ministers need to receive spiritual checkups from those they can trust, not from people they try to impress nor from those who try to please them to get pastoral approval. Ministers need that company. Which ones will pay the price to put it into practice?