

# Deepening Relationships: BEING NICE IS NOT ENOUGH

**By Todd Svanoë** for *Journey*, an adult curriculum

In the 1988 best-selling book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum popularized the idea that life's essential wisdom can be boiled down to something a child can understand. Jesus himself said God had hidden the purposes of his mission from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to babes. (Matthew 11:25; 18:2)

Bethel children sing a Sunday School song which summarizes what some people understand as the essence of Christian fellowship: "Be kind to one another and build each other up..." Unfortunately, this simple and catchy song may be too simple.

Seminary professor David Augsburger in *Caring Enough to Confront*, contends that one of the difficulties in maturing Christian relationships stems from the popular assumption that the goal of Christian fellowship is simply to be nice and kind to one another. In reality, he says, we can do each other a profound disservice by being overly agreeable.

*Wholesale approval of another suggests that one is either totally unconcerned or radically uninvolved with the other. Cheap approval can be lavished on anyone at any time to any extent. But caring requires that one get interested in the direction the other's life is taking and offer real immediate involvement. If you love, you level. If you value another, you volunteer the truth.*

If Christian relationships are not growing, says Augsburger, it is likely that they are suffering from inauthenticity, from the automatic kindness and gentle sweetness that results from cutting off one-half of one's emotional spectrum and refusing to express any negative feelings. Too many no-risk conversations make Christian fellowship dry, predictable and impersonal.

Not only does such an atmosphere waste opportunities for personal growth, it is the breeding ground for dysfunction and sin, as the following story illustrates.

## DANCING AROUND THE TRUTH

Thirty minutes before a 7 p.m. meeting of the church leadership council, Jim, the president, receives a call from Sal, a council member and bank president, who says something has come up at work and he won't be there until at least 7:45 p.m. "It's okay, Sal, no problem," says Jim. But it's not. This is the third straight meeting Sal has missed, and his apologies are wearing thin.

Jim knows Sal would not miss a business meeting at work and feels slighted by his poor attendance, but it's always been Jim's style to be understanding and forgiving, so he holds his tongue.

Later in the evening, the meeting is dragging on past the adjournment time. This time Marline, another council member, is on the hot seat.

"Is she going to talk forever?" Janet asks herself. Jim has ignored three suggestions that they deal with the stated agenda while Marline has gone on and on with one of her

personal concerns. If this were the first time Janet might overlook Marline's long-windedness, as council members had many times before. But now she is about to blow her top. No one has ever approached Marline about this.

It turns out, this problem is a Pandora's box. Jim is re-elected president each year because he is a well-loved and loyal servant of the church. Unfortunately, he allows rambling, tangential conversation, which has frustrated successive council members.

No one has ever confronted Jim with their concerns. Not Sal, who is used to snappy meetings in the business world. Rather than talk to Jim, he stops coming to meetings. Not Arlene and Joe, who take out their frustrations by firing up the gossip network and giving former council members a play-by-play report of Jim's "ineptness" and Marline's "lollygagging."

## **SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE**

Speak "the truth in love," St. Paul says in a chapter of instructions about how to "build up" the fellowship of God's people (Eph. 4). "No more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth. In Christ's body, we're all connected to each other, after all." (Eph. 4:25, Message)

When we think about "building up" our relationships as Christians, confronting or telling "the truth" is probably not the first thing we think of. Yet building each other up and embracing or speaking the truth are interwoven throughout this chapter, appearing six times.

St. Paul said, "Everything we do, beloved, is for the sake of building you up," but added that he worried the Corinthians would render his work ineffective by their "quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder." (2 Cor. 12:19-20)

"Truth is in Jesus," he said (Eph. 4:21), and when we embrace this, we have a basis for rejecting "falsehood...bitterness...wrangling and slander, together with all malice" and speaking to one another honestly. (Eph. 4:31) We need not allow things like complaining, negative criticism and gossip to tear down our fellowship.

Confronting the dysfunctionality reflected in the story above, however, is not easy. One of the reasons, says Augsburg, is that most people associate confrontation with venting, flying off the handle, hurting others, or speaking caustically and cuttingly. But it need not be so.

Christians in a caring relationship—one in which mutual trust and respect, genuine affection and acceptance, sacrificial support and understanding have been communicated and established over time—^have a unique opportunity to rise above their pettiness. If you are on target in your criticism of another person and you fail to bring the matter to them, you cheat them of an opportunity to change and grow.

If we risk communicating in a clear, candid and caring way, we will find that correction can not only clear the air and bring reconciliation and healing, but it can build empathy and trust, and bring new vitality, direction and wholeness to community life.

## **RERUN THAT REEL!**

How could members of the church council have responded to one another in a more helpful and constructive manner? Let's rerun the story:

Sal calls to say he will be late for the meeting. Jim replies, "Sal, we really need you to be here. Your contribution to the council is valuable. This is your third miss in a row. Is your commitment to the council slipping or are you just under a lot of stress?"

"Well, Jim, I've been meaning to tell you, I feel like much of my time at council meetings is wasted," says Sal. "We have so many extraneous conversations. I've heard this has been an ongoing problem."

"I guess it still is," says Jim. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"Actually, I do. In our business meetings, we use parliamentary procedure, a motion and a second, even in determining what non-agenda items to discuss. Maybe you could try this."

During the meeting, the council agrees to implement Sal's advice, but Marline still waxes on with her views on an agenda item.

Janet faithfully expresses her feelings: "I'm not sure I was aware how important this issue is to you, Marline. We are out of time this evening and I need to get home, but I move that we try and finish our work in the next ten minutes." The motion is seconded by three council members simultaneously.

Joe and Arlene take to the gossip hotline to report Jim's new conversation policy and Marline's lapse. But every person they call says a version of this: "You really should take that up with Marline. This grievance is between you and her and is none of our business. We'll be praying that your meetings are more productive."

The key to constructive confrontation, says Augsburg, is speaking simply, honestly and empathetically. When we treat one another with equal value and respect, seek to see the situation from the other person's point of view, and use words that are immediately useful, rather than blaming, our words will normally be well-received.

## **WHO IS A THORN IN YOUR SIDE?**

Charlie was the newest member of a Connections home-group that was on the brink of deciding to fold. After the first year of this small fellowship, relationships were not clicking. People were pleasant enough, but meetings lacked meaning and seemed to have grown cold, making everyone feel guilty that they did not experience more of a sense of togetherness and purpose.

The group leaders sought their pastor's advice. Meanwhile, Pastor Stevens had just met Charlie, who was seeking a new church. "He's not very refined and sure isn't bashful," warned the pastor, "but he might be good for your group."

At the next meeting, Charlie introduced himself to each person. "Hi, I'm Charlie. Why do you come to this fellowship?" he asked one woman.

"Well, uh, it's been awhile since I've asked myself that question," she answered.

"Hi, I'm Charlie," he said to the next person. "Do you love Jesus? I know he loves me, but I've never quite felt forgiven by him. Do you feel forgiven?"

He turned to the next person in the circle, "Wow! You are one beautiful lady!"

"I don't mean anything by it," he said to her husband. "I'm sure that's why you married her."

"Hi, I'm Charlie," he continued. "You seem trustworthy. Would you pray for me? I just lost my job and my wife is threatening to leave me."

At first, everyone in the room except Charlie felt awkward, but the group leader decided to pick up on one of Charlie's questions and begin a discussion about why each person came to the fellowship, what they hoped to get out of it and what they felt they could contribute.

One couple confessed that their marriage was in crisis and said that, like Charlie, they sought the support of people's prayers. Another, who was about to change residences, spurred on by this prayer request asked people to help her move. Charlie immediately volunteered, offering to bring brats, and others followed in the first spontaneous work project the group had shared.

Sensing something new happening in the group, the leaders said what everyone was thinking, the group just hadn't come together. Both suggested that what the group needed was new leadership and offered to step down. A man and a woman said they would be happy to lead for the next few months. No one wanted to disband. The long-looming sense of stagnation was gone.

By the end of the meeting, everyone wondered why they hadn't had this discussion a year ago. All looked at the new stranger in their midst, wondering what sort of angel God had sent them.

## **LOOKING DIFFERENTLY AT OUR SOURCES OF IRRITATION**

Every community has a Charley. Many people treat the Charlies of this world like a mosquito or tick, a pest for which we can see no good purpose. Modern psychology teaches us that what we object to in others is often what we refuse to see in ourselves. Christ teaches us that the one who irritate us, or makes us angry, is a person for whom he died.

In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer reminds us that when we see such people through the eyes of Christ, "the other person, in the freedom with which he was created, becomes the occasion of joy, whereas before he was only a nuisance and an affliction." Only then do we become whole people with each other, seeing the value of every member in our fellowship and openly sharing both our burdens and our joys.