

Part 7: We are a relational conference.

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Be honest; have you ever glanced out your window and noticed door-to-door salesmen or particular religious groups coming towards your door, and you decided to pretend that you weren't home? (I cannot be the only one?) I'm not suggesting that God can't use any number of methods by which to draw people to Himself. What I am suggesting is that it is our human nature to find it intrusive when a stranger tries to speak into our lives or influence us. Why? Because that kind of influence is typically reserved for those with whom we are in relationship.

Since the mid-eighties, the Barna Group has specialized in research that is geared towards supporting and helping the larger Church. Every so often, a Barna research article will appear online and by way of social media, it will circulate for some time. Periodically, one is bound to come across an article that talks about why this group or that generation is leaving the Church, or "The Six Reasons that [fill in group name] stays in the church." Given society's curiosity about whatever generation is newest and therefore least known or understood, these articles are usually focused on younger folks. Regardless of the age or particular group that a given article focuses on, however, there is always one piece that seems to remain consistent: People stay in the Church when they have meaningful relationships. People leave the Church when they don't.

From the very beginning, we were created to be in relationship—both with God and with one another. The only mention of God deeming something not good in the entire creation narrative happens as God looks upon Adam in his loneliness and deems it not good for man to be alone. The Medical field, Psychology and Science have all come to similar findings—that we cannot thrive as human beings apart from relationship. Despite the independent, every-person-for-themselves culture in which we currently live, we cannot succeed in this life without meaningful relationship.

In large part because of its location, the Central Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church has existed as a relational entity since the very beginning of our denomination. The very roots of our denomination are as a gathered body who called themselves Mission Friends, and one of their defining characteristics was their warm fellowship with one another. As the denomination grew and spread out across the United States and Canada, they eventually organized themselves into Conferences. The purpose of Conferences? To further the mission in each particular area by meeting the needs of those around them. In other words, even as the denomination grew in number, they knew that a vital aspect of church growth was found in relationship, and so they continued to structure the denomination and its churches with relationship in mind.

The Central Conference finds its roots in relationship and we continue to foster that central characteristic to this day. Our relational nature is fostered through our annual meetings as well as in our individual church worship gatherings. It is why you will see men's and women's retreats offered to our Conference churches. It is why our pastors gather within their districts or all together for retreats. It is relationship that drives us to participate in collaborative efforts like the North Side Youth Collision or Church Planters gatherings. It is why we work so closely with our two Conference camps—Covenant Harbor and Covenant Point.

Somewhat in jest, our Annual Meetings or retreats are often referred to as family reunions and while we never want to be seen as an exclusive group, there is something uniquely profound about a Conference as large as ours having that kind of a feel to it. We value relationships and see them as a gift, as a privilege and as a necessary aspect of our faith journey and therefore our churches. We are, without question, a relational Conference.

Bible Study:

Acts 2:42-47; John 21:15-19

In Eugene Peterson's bible translation, The Message, he translates the words from John 1:14 this way: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." They are the words that speak of the incarnation of our God. These words paint the picture of a God who loved us so profoundly, that God came as one of us, to live as one of us, that we would exist in a tangible relationship with God.

Nearly every single moment with Jesus that we find in scripture could be tagged as a model for relationship. The people with whom Jesus chose to surround himself; the inclusivity with which Jesus lived and ministered; the ways in which he trained his disciples—each of these things points us to the importance that Jesus placed on relationships.

Acts 2:42-47 is titled The Fellowship of Believers and it speaks to the very beginnings of the Church. It didn't start with a building fund and a system of boards and committees. It began with relationship—with people gathering on a regular basis, sharing what they have with one another and making sure that everyone had everything that they needed. To know what another's needs are, they would have to exist in relationship. The very Church of Christ began in, with and through relationship.

The text in John 21 is often titled Jesus Reinstates Peter and it's the image of a post-resurrection Jesus talking with the very same Peter who betrayed him. As Jesus questioned whether or not Peter loved him, Peter grew more and more frustrated. We live in a culture today where we have to prove ourselves and earn the trust of other people. So were we to write this script, I'd imagine we'd have Peter begging for forgiveness and then if he's lucky, we'd put him in probation until he can earn his trust back. And yet how did Jesus tell Peter that he could

prove his love for Jesus? “Feed my Sheep.” Or in other words, “love and take care of my people, Peter.” Our love for God is lived out in relationship with God’s people.

Questions:

1. Looking back on your own journey of faith thus far, who were the people who influenced your spirituality? How did they draw you closer to Christ?
2. What are some of the similarities between your current church and the fellowship of believers pictured in Acts 2? What are some of the major differences?
3. How would you describe the relationships in your current church?
4. Of all of the tasks that Jesus could have given Peter as he charged Peter with building the Church, why do you think feeding his sheep was his primary responsibility, and what does it look like today to “feed God’s sheep?”
5. Jesus “became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” If we were to use that kind of mentality in our particular neighborhoods, how would that change the relationships that we have with our community?
6. In our current culture, what prevents us from building the kind of relationships that we saw in the life and ministry of Jesus? Who do we tend to include or exclude?
7. What things to do we tend to put above relationships in the church? Why?