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The Resource Page

... creative and practical ideas

Brought to you this month
by Bo Prosser



Church — it's about relationships

Recently, a colleague and I were lamenting the challenges of congregational leadership. With the unstable economic climate, the seeming conflicting values of believers and the ambiguity of our culture, leading a church seems more difficult than ever. For many, church is just about the delivery of religious goods and services; about providing quality religious entertainment. But for me, church is about relationships.

For years my mission statement has been “People go, where they know, they’ve been prepared for and are cared for.” The church’s focus must continue to be on people and connecting people to other people. One of our jobs as church leaders is to foster connecting points for multiple relationships to form, develop and deepen. The church leader who tries to be the hub of all relationships will soon burn out, act out or become irrelevant.

The following hints may help you to shift your focus from a provider of religious goods, services and “warm fuzzies” to a network of meaningful personal relationships grounded in Christ.

Pay attention to people. In church work we can easily become distracted with the “crowds.” Jesus saw individuals. Jesus listened. Jesus noticed when one person touched the hem of his garment. We would do well to be as focused. Certainly there are pressures of time, of trying to touch as many people as possible. Yet, as we focus on individuals, we learn more about their life situations, their hopes and their dreams. Soon, we are able to help them build friendships with people having similar situations and interests.

Be a less-anxious presence. The church is not immune to anxiety. People are looking to us to calm their fears, to reassure them of God’s presence in the midst of their fears. We must work at keeping our faith strong so that we are not infected by the anxiety of others. When anxious, most people turn inward and begin thinking selfishly. This attitude cannot define the state of any local congregation. We can be aware of the anxiety without giving in to it. As we stay above the fray, we can lead people into positive relationships that will give them courage and confidence for living bravely.

Listen, listen, listen. Too often we hear what people are saying, but we don’t internalize what is being said. We act like we are being attentive when we are only formulating our response to what is being said. We feign attention while we are merely thinking about the next meeting or the next person in line. We need to take time to listen actively; to focus on the person speaking, not what is going on around us; to keep eye contact with the speaker. If the conversation needs more time, we can invite the person to continue at another time.

Communicate, communicate, communicate. Our job as leaders is to articulate the mission of the congregation. As we communicate the “calling” of our church, people gravitate to share in the work. Too often, leaders focus on the morale of the church and try to infuse “warm fuzzy” programs to make people feel good about their church. The mission has to come first. As we clearly articulate what God is calling us to do, the mission becomes clearer, the morale goes higher and trust grows deeper.

Deepen your own spiritual life. As leaders, participate in prayer practices and disciplines that lead to spiritual depth, and invite your congregation into similar practices and disciplines. As the community of faith prays together, people grow closer to God and to one another. Nothing can take the place of a praying congregation.

Be careful of offering easy responses or quick solutions. Challenging times are rarely resolved. Be honest and reassuring. Foster relationship-building activities for sharing. Talk openly about challenges and questions. Help people understand that many of the challenges facing us as a country and as congregational leaders will not be repaired quickly, but that we are on a journey toward healing and repair. This is a time for preaching on faithfulness and on relational solutions.

Troubling times call for relationships that offer stability and confidence. Church leaders can be the models for faith and hope. Cutting budgets and providing more or different programs may help in the short run. But for the longer and more lasting view, meaningful relationships are still the key. **BT**

Resources

- Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership* (www.greenleaf.org)
- Hendrix, *Nothing Never Happens* (www.helwys.com)
- Prosser et. al., *Building Blocks for Sunday School Growth* (www.helwys.com)
- Companions in Christ materials (www.upperroom.org)

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