

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Relationships

Making and maintaining friendships on the field has been so difficult. You begin to wonder if there is something wrong with you. Why are relationships so difficult? What do relationships have to do with the Great Commission anyway? How can we make friends? What if some friendships just don't work? Let's consider some of these questions.

What do relationships have to do with the Great Commission?

They are central to it. In the Great Commission Jesus told us to go and make disciples of all people groups. If people are going to become disciples, they have to recognize that you are disciples—and want to become like you. Jesus said that people will know that you are his disciples if you love each other (John 13:35). In the previous verse, he had called his command to “love one another,” a new command, but it was really a re-newed command. It was first given back in Leviticus, then quoted by Jesus when he was asked about the Greatest Commandment. He said to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Certainly the Great Commission involves preaching and teaching people to love God. However, that may be easier than obeying that second great command, the command to love each other. When nationals look at friendships among missionaries, do they say, “Look how they love each other!” If not, perhaps your friendships need some improvement so that you can better carry out

the Great Commission of making disciples. If people do not recognize that you are disciples and want to become like you, your ministry may be quite fruitless.

Why are missionary friendships so difficult?

Making and maintaining friendships is difficult for most people. People are different in many ways, and may feel threatened or may let stereotypes keep them from forming close friendships. Some people are morning types, others evening types. Some work fast and have everything done early, others complete things at the last minute. People have different personality traits, such as some being extraverts and others introverts. Some people are quite mature, others immature. In addition to these general factors, other more specific ones make it even more difficult for missionaries to develop and maintain close friendships.

- Time. In your “home” country everyone is busy, but on the field there is even more to keep you busy. The hassles of everyday life, such as getting and preparing food, paying bills and getting things repaired all take longer. You have to maintain relationships with supporters.
- Mobility. At “home” people move, but changing your residence twice every five years is built into missionary life—on the field four years, home one. At home, deputation keeps you on the road. On the field, you frequently move even during your term.
- Expectations. Although people back “home” disappoint you, other missionaries may do so even more often because you expect more of them. They ought to know

what you need and meet that need. Where is their love?

We have a good example of this in the disciples who were an evangelism team of twelve to reach Palestine. Jesus was the field director. The disciples had been called, had gone through the selection process, had left their jobs, had gone through orientation, and had gone out in teams of two. They had gone through training and had served for nearly three years. You would certainly expect that they would have things down pretty well.

Let's pick up the story in Mark 9. The disciples had been arguing about who was the greatest. Jesus calls them around and points out that whoever wants to be first has to be last and servant of all. In Mark 10 they meet the rich young man who would not give up his possessions. When Peter points out that the disciples had given up home and family to travel and spread the good news, Jesus agrees and reviews the teaching about the first being last and the last first. Even after two clear lessons, as they travel on toward Jerusalem, James and John (or their mother) ask to be first in the kingdom. When the other ten hear about this, they become indignant with James and John—those two should know better! However, rather than scolding them, Jesus calls the disciples around and again reviews the lesson: Whoever wants to be great must be the servant of others.

How do we form such relationships?

To live so that people will know that we are his disciples by our love for each other is not easy in today's world, but it can be done. Of course, you cannot be intimate friends with everyone, so after you have chosen people with whom you would like to

develop such a relationship, try the following to form friendships.

- Time. Friendships take time. Your response may be that you just do not have time, that you have to prioritize your schedule. If you believe it is important for people to recognize that you are his disciples, you may want to start scheduling your priorities. Time allotted each week to developing missionary relationships will make you more effective, less likely to quit missionary work, more likely to be happy, and less likely to become ill.
- Affirmation. One can live for several weeks on one good compliment. However, most of us go for months without giving or receiving any. When was the last time you gave a firm compliment to build someone up and strengthen relationships?
- Trust. Spending time together in an affirming atmosphere is likely soon to lead to the development of trust. As time increases so may the trust—but you must be very careful never to betray a trust. Trust takes months or years to build, and only seconds to destroy.
- Communication. Some people have never really had someone give full attention and really listen. Sometimes we hear what people are saying with words, but not with their hearts.
- Vulnerability. When trustworthy people care and really listen, we tend to open up and become more vulnerable, more honest with each other rather than being “on guard.”

We all need a group of supporting friends. People from individualistic Western cultures often think that all they need for their

ministry is “Jesus and me,” but they are suffering from “angel syndrome,” believing that they do not have the same needs as ordinary people just because they have been called into the Lord’s service.

What about cliques?

Isn’t there a danger of forming exclusive groups that ignore others on the field? Of course, there is, but you can take precautions to see that it does not happen. For example, agree that you will not spend time together at church or at field events. Make it a point to have someone else in your home for each time you have someone from your group over.

What if it doesn’t work?

That will almost certainly happen with some people. It is unlikely that every attempt at friendship will result in the kind of relationship described here. If not, try again elsewhere. Except for those in very isolated areas, most missionaries today are near missionaries from other organizations, and that is a good place to look, even a good place to begin. If your friends are all from the same agency, you may be setting yourselves up for burnout as you increasingly discuss mission business rather than building relationships.

Do it!

As is so often the case, we know what we should do, we just don’t do it. In Luke 10 an expert in the law asks Jesus what he has to do for eternal life. Jesus asks him what was in the law. The man replies by giving the great

commandment, including, “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus tells him he is right, “Do this and you will live.” However, trying to justify his lack of relationships, the man asks who his neighbor is. Jesus tells the story (a cross-cultural one, at that) about the Samaritan who helped after the two religious men had ignored the man in need. When Jesus asks who was the neighbor, the expert in the law answers correctly. Jesus again tells him to go and do the same.

Like the expert in the law, our problem is often not in finding out what to do, but in actually doing what we see to be right. In Mark 12 another teacher commenting on Jesus giving the great commandment observes that to love God and “to love your neighbor as you love yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices” (v. 33). Jesus notes that this is a wise answer. That is, loving your neighbor may be more important than many of the “professional missionary” things you do.

Spending much time in the “business” of missionary work may be a symptom that one is avoiding the hard work of building and maintaining relationships--that one is trying to fill the need for close human relationships with “busy -ness.” The single most helpful earthly resource for combating stress is social support—feeling comfortable sharing with others and then actually sharing with others who are positive and supportive.

If more missionaries developed intimate friendship relationships, they would be happier, healthier, and would require less missionary care. By the missionaries’ love for each other, nationals would recognize that they were Jesus’ disciples and may want to become disciples as well.

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