

Don't Settle for Shallow Relationships

I don't like goodbyes, especially on the mission field. If you know me, you know that sometimes I get emotional in airports. Two weeks ago, it was bad when I left Singapore.

I had spent two weeks with people from nine different churches, and I invested a lot of time and energy encouraging the people—including members of Indian, Filipino and Indonesian congregations. I poured my life into a group of young disciples: Alberto, Peter, Billy, Hani, Sireesh, Chee, Chaundra and Tim.

I also reconnected with so many wonderful leaders, including Sanford, Anna, Naomi, Yang, Hazeel, Brenda, Nelson, Jonathan, Joshua and Leslie. We shared meals. We prayed together. We experienced the bond of the Holy Spirit.

When it was time for me to go through the security checkpoint at the airport, some of these people came to see me off—and a few stayed until almost 2 a.m., when it was time for me to check in. I gained composure after I reached my seat on the airplane.

But I felt like my heart was being ripped out of my chest.

Why do we feel such strong connections with our spiritual family? It's because Christianity, at its core, is about relationships. Our faith is not a solo act. We are not only baptized into a solitary relationship with God; we are baptized into His corporate body, the church. God calls us to follow Him with a loving community, not in lonely isolation.

Difficult goodbyes have become a normal part of my Christian experience. The apostle Paul had this dilemma, too. He missed people desperately.

He told the Romans: "For I long to see you" (Rom. 1:11a). He told the Thessalonians: "So having great love toward you ... you were dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:8). He told Timothy: "I long to see you again, for I remember your tears as we parted. And I will be filled with joy when we are together again" (2 Tim. 1:4, NLT).

Paul's gospel, and ours, flows from the heart. Our faith is based on the astounding truth that a loving God came to earth to repair our broken relationship with Him. And since then, God has sent people across oceans and mountain ranges to tell others about His love. They have often had to endure painful goodbyes.

Jesus modeled this affectionate love by investing time in His disciples. He didn't float around on a pillow like Yoda while dispensing otherworldly wisdom. He hiked through Israel with His friends. They got their feet dirty together. He fished with them, ate with them and just hung out with them.

Mark 3:14b (NASB) says Jesus appointed the twelve "so that they would be with Him and that He could send them out to preach." Notice that His relationship with them was not just about the task of ministry. He wanted their fellowship!

We get this backwards today. We tend to value religious performance, yet we are often bankrupt when it comes to friendships. We sit together in countless meetings but never open our hearts to each other. Even ministers have admitted to me that they have no friends. We've created a robotic, programmatic, clinical Christianity that counts heads but lacks the heart of New Testament love.

I tossed out that sterile version of Christianity a long time ago. I've learned that ministry is not about getting big crowds, filling seats, tabulating response cards or eliciting raucous applause. It's not about running on the church-growth treadmill. Religion that focuses on externals is dry and

performance-based. Real Christianity is warm and slobbery.

How would you assess your current relationships? Intimate? Professional? Distant? Cold? Do you have close friends? Do you live out your faith in solitary confinement? Or have you pulled away from close relationships in the church because someone hurt you?

I challenge Christians all over the world that they need three kinds of relationships in their lives, in addition to their closest family relationships:

1. **Pauls** are spiritual fathers and mothers you trust. All of us need older, wiser Christians who can guide us, pray for us and offer counsel. My mentors have encouraged me when I wanted to quit and pushed me forward when I lost sight of God's promises. God gave Ruth a Naomi and Joshua a Moses. Ask the Lord for a mentor.
2. **Barnabases** are spiritual peers who are bosom friends. They know everything about you, yet they love you anyway. They are also willing to kick your tail if necessary! They provide accountability in areas of personal temptation. And they will stay up all night praying for you when you face a crisis.
3. **Timothys** are the younger Christians you are helping to grow. Jesus never told us to assemble crowds, but He did command us to make disciples. Relational discipleship takes a lot of time and energy, but investing your life in others is one of the most fulfilling experiences in life. Once you have poured your life into another brother or sister and watched them mature in Christ, you will never settle for superficial religion again.

Jesus said it best when He told His followers: "No longer do I call you slaves ... but I have called you friends, for all things I have heard from My Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). The Christian life is a vibrant, friendship with

God—but it doesn't end there. Open your heart and discover the people around you.