

Relational Church

Some Eucharists

Holy Communion is arguably the most central symbol of any Christian church coming together to unite with God. Denominations have ruptured over the mechanisms, meanings and practices of this ancient rite. I have taken consecrated wafers of the “Body of Christ” and drank from a common cup. I have distributed Girl Scout cookies to be eaten in unison, followed by Muller Thurgau in Dixie cups drank as a toast to our bridegroom. I have sat around a table after a feast as we sang and prayed and each drank and ate on their own. I have passed the elements either via intinction or a common cup where we were each served. I have gone to a table on my own as the elements were offered to the group and we meditated until all who had desired had served themselves. I have laid half my offering of bread upon an altar of rocks and watched as the remainder of a jug of good wine is spilled on the ground as Christ’s blood was spilled. These experiences were all within the past year and all in the same church – Quest.

A Short History of Quest

The most distinctive church that I frequent is Quest – A Church Community. It looks like a house church although there have been times when this community met in and sought to fill public venues: Country Garden Bistro in Redmond, Woodinville Alliance Church, and Jonah’s Bar in the Bellevue Best Western. Over the past decade, Quest has experienced a continuing metamorphosis of how we express and experience out interaction with God. Quest’s eventual form may even be a mystery to God; if God

knows, we certainly aren't being told. Relational church is more ecumenical than evangelical, more inwardly focused and increasingly intentionally relational.

She has been nurtured by evangelical churches and her only paid pastor was first ordained in the Christian and Missionary Alliance, but she is only nominally part of the CMA. As for her evangelical standing, we gather annually for a Benedictine retreat where as a church we have received Mass. Much of our church family has attended or been members of much more conservative churches and in many ways participate in Quest as a place of healing from those scars.

Many evangelical churches like to market themselves as safe places to observe and witness the gospel. Quest used to hold these as high values. We used Taboo buzzers to prevent churchy talk that might alienate an outsider or allow an insider too easily to give an answer to a difficult question. We marketed. Early on, asking for support from established evangelical churches, there was a sincere goal of becoming the Eastside's first GenX mega church. Quest is no longer safe in that way. Its openness is accepting but demanding of participation. Seeker, born-again or atheist - all are welcomed but Quest makes her leanings toward God felt strongly. Jesus compelled interaction and so do we. If this bothers people, then we'll be happy to refer them to another Christian community; whenever we're gathered as more than twenty or thirty people we feel crowded any way.

For those that do stay, Quest has become much like an extended family that gathers together all at once three or four times a month but does life together continually throughout the rest of the week. We live together physically and spiritually. We eat lunches and dinners with one another. When we play, we often bring our Quest friends

along side of us into our other communities. Our lives push us to continual prayer. Outside of Quest itself, we are connected and spend time with a larger community that seeks to revision the Church Universal and we do life with them as well.

Questioning Quest

Quest's dynamic existence is made possible by the myriad of individuals who have come together to create it. It is the people who are the center of Quest and all emerging relational models of church and not our established traditions or backgrounds from before. Given that I believe very strongly that church should be relational and in transformation, I asked and received permission and polled the people with whom I do church. Mostly these friends are from Quest but some from Jacob's Well in Kansas City with whom I fellowship remotely and one primarily non-attende of church. I asked the following (admittedly highly modernist) questions of my friends to help me understand our process of churching together.

- ❖ What has drawn you to a relational model of church and/or keeps you there?
(How does this differ from the model of church that you grew up in and may still frequent?)
- ❖ What aspects of worship are most significant for you (Note that the class is titled Worship)?
- ❖ What other question should I be asking? (and your answer s'il vous plait)

In response to confusion and in interactive dialectical relationship with my friends, I clarified the meanings of my questions. Relational suggests that the *raison d'etre* of the organization is relationship within the community and from within the community to be directed to God. Relational church does not differentiate between

relationship with the community and with God but assumes that both vertical and horizontal connections are required and promote each other.

The contrast to the emerging relational churches would be marketing/program driven and traditional modes of church. Televangelism is one example of marketing driven but certainly not the only one. These all place emphasis on certain other points than relationship (such as being the one true keeper of the right way). Most churches arguably have some emphasis on relationship - Quest and Jacob's Well in Kansas City are much more intentional about it.

The Allure

Jamison replied, "I like relationships; I don't know that there is such thing as a non-relational church, though really." Julie adds, "I guess I think that all churches are relational. Sadly, I wish my current "relational church" were MORE relational. (My church), as a church plant, has made being relational our focus in theory. I think the practice of being relational is a bit more of a challenge." Brenda and Jen replied in unison, "I like

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it better; Often God speaks through other people." Dan echoed their awareness of God, "Obviously, the relationships. More specifically, how I learn to see God in and through those relationships. Also, I must mention that my presence or absence makes a difference."

Jacob told me that he is learning that God is not asking for his actions or performance but his being. He is now focused on being a good person throughout his

life. Julie concurs, “As people of God, we shouldn't just say good things, but that we should BE GOOD. We should be good to the earth, to our neighborhoods—be a little more Greenpeace-y--in general because Christians get the bad rap of being insensitive conservatives--more interested in self-preservation and the coming ethereal kingdom than in the protection of what is God's creation before us now.”

I believe we are fundamentally created for relationship and that when we engage in relational spirituality, we honor the Creator and bless one another. The church community I am involved in now is very relationally based. I appreciate the call to live all of life in relationship with others in a way that brings glory to my God and I treasure the setting that has been provided so that I can continue to grow and change in the midst of life with others. I don't see myself thriving spiritually without relationships that challenge and encourage me in my relationship with Christ. I did the lonely spiritual life for too long and, although it's possible, it's not vibrant and it doesn't offer much breath for the soul.

– Carrie

What draws me to a relational church is the genuine focus on the element which is the core of any community, let alone, any Christian community...relationship. It is through the intentional relating of one person to another to another to another etc. that the web of human experience for the individuals involved becomes deepened and the sense of value and self worth also increases. That is, of course if the reciprocating individual is equally as intentional about his/her relating, and does so in a genuine, affirming, and loving way. It is this last element, I believe, which separates (or should separate) the Christian community from the glee club, a trade union, or any other community of relating human beings. It is when people come together in the name of Jesus Christ, instilled by the holy spirit of love, that the most authentic, revealing-and thus sometimes painful human relationships can occur.

The Difference

My father is a pastor and a relational man. His way of "doing church" was always relational. He saw the gospel as relational and life as relational, so it follows that he felt church should be relational. As I grew up, I became aware that not everyone saw church that way. Even people in my father's congregation would refuse that offer... it was too personal for them and they wanted what they'd always had. I also saw it change other people's lives drastically and those people became life long friends

I was raised in a Southern Baptist church with over 4000 members ... the difficulty in establishing, let alone, continuing in-depth relationships is obvious. It's sheer practicality.

– Peter

(Relational church) was too personal for them and they wanted what they'd always had...
- Carrie

of our family. The last ten years my father has not had a congregation and we've been part of other churches. My six year experience in one particular church left me craving relationship in my spiritual life and feeling dissatisfied with the big church program model even though I had been very heavily involved in the life of that church.

- Carrie

I felt an emptiness in the large denominational church I was attending and I recognized that I had a deep longing for relationships with people who could walk "with" me through life. The model of church I grew up with treated Sunday morning and its liturgy as what was of greatest emphasis. Relationships with fellow attendees was secondary.

- Deb

There was no intimacy involved in church, no community beyond the surface. It makes little difference whether or not I attend unless I am "leadership."

- Dan

The old (impact group) I attended tried to "end on time" and was run in such a hyper-structured way that I found it less than helpful in forming deep bonds.

One reason that my former group fell prey to mere structure was that it was made up of people of all different walks of life, all different ages, and as much as this sounds like the ideal, it made being open and honest a challenge for several of us. There is something to be said for starting relationships based on certain commonalities.

- Julie

Significant Worship

Many of my friends responded that they were seeing how relational church expanded worship to include all of life as Dan replied, "Lately I've had some good conversations with my massage therapist." More, however, continue to see worship in more traditional models even within relational church. Julie answers succinctly for many of their sentiments.

Probably the best part about church is going around afterward and mooching hugs off as many people as I can.
- Julie

Sadly (or not sadly), I don't necessarily consider "worship" to be a part of something that has to do with whether or not a church is relational. To me, "worship," in its most basic sense, means singing praise songs. As much as this singing sounds nice when a lot of church members do it together, I don't think it necessarily matters if I know them well or not. I'm jealous that Quest has what Jen referred to as "art nights" where people share their creativity. Now, THAT would be relational. It's nice to sing weekly with other believers. I think that is the most significant thing. It is also good to hear a pastor talk about how to be Christian in this world. Probably the best part about church is going around afterward and mooching hugs off as many people as I can. Occasionally I also listen to someone else and bless someone with a minute iota of wisdom or something like that. If I get to do that, I feel really warm and golden inside.

- Julie

Jen answered, "We had some fun with some blue-grass/rockabilly yesterday- I like having fun. Ultimately, it is more about the people than the performance, but when you have the privilege of going to a church with very fun, talented musicians, it is a nice benefit."

Missing Pieces

Julie suggested that I should be asking "How could our churches be MORE relational?" She answered, "The obvious answer, I would say, is willing vulnerability-- or maybe a modeled vulnerability (top-down). I think the proximity thing is very helpful. I don't have any answers on how that would happen."

Mark asked about the inherent value of church – even for those that don't participate. He responded from the standpoint of a non-believer:

Some people are served tremendously by the idea of a greater being. It can bring hope to a dreary life. Also, I find value in the community actions, such as charity work. I personally would prefer that the works not be religious in nature, e.g. groups that are Christian but perform a service with no proselytizing. It would seem self-serving (and therefore hypocritical) for a charity to require 'payment' of time and/or belief to experience what are supposed to be good works. *Overall though, I think both Christianity and the rest of the world would be better off if the Christians stopped being evangelical.* It seems to turn off more people than it turns on.

- Mark

Carrie, Dan, Deb and Jacob provided a fuller list of questions for continuing the discussion:

- ❖ “What are the ways people are genuine with each other?”
- ❖ “In what ways are the terms 'relational' and 'transformation' intimately connected?”
- ❖ “What is the role of the professionally trained pastor in the emerging relational model of church?”
- ❖ “Is ‘worship’, as defined by your community, focused primarily inwardly or outwardly?”
- ❖ “How has worship helped to change/transform you?”
- ❖ “Where do you see worship moving you in the future in regard to relational church (and vice versa)?”
- ❖ “What is the most challenging aspect of relational church for you?”
- ❖ “How do you see yourself as participating in relational church?”

Back to Beginning

Our churches exist to be relational and to be places that foster communion with God and each other and the world. Much of the time however that is not the focus even when it is the focus. Relationship is not easy. It is the failure of relationship that drove Adam and Eve from Eden and for which Jesus wept. Our broader relationships are fostered by the intimacy that we have earlier established with those closest to us. We move outward. Relational church common weekly gatherings form a switchboard for

creating connections amidst the gathered congregants; they are not an end in themselves but a facility for forming relationship beyond their confines.

Our world is increasingly hungry for relationship, even when it is hard. This same world, however, looks toward our internal relationships before joining the church. It won't let us move outward unless we are inwardly connected. This problem can't be solved by better marketing to consumers that has learned to disregard clever advertising from birth. Only by fostering holy internal connections within and between churches and God that value each person and community will we be able to establish connections to the world that longs for but does not yet know the names of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This dialogue begins again with asking each other, "How might we be better in relationship with each other?"