

Working Titles:

Progressive Cell-Methodology for 21st Century Churches

The Holy Grail of Church Satisfaction

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So you want to know the number one statistical ingredient to retaining church members? More than *great preaching*, more than *great facilities*, more than *great programs*, or *great theology*, the most comprehensive studies are showing, the number one cause of happiness within a local church is ridiculously simple: *Quantity of close friends*.

Not long ago, I was talking to a guy who was attending a church that was virtually dead. He railed on forever about how the worship and preaching were mediocre. Their board was dead-locked over silly issues. Their outreach was non-existent. So finally I asked him: “*Why in the world are you still going there?*” And after a long pause, he said: “*Well... two of my best Christian friends go there. And, the thought of seeing them every Sunday is just enough to keep me coming back.*”

At first, I was a bit astounded by his answer. And perhaps I’m a bit more superficial than most. (I’d probably be going to the church with the biggest lighting system). But, by the end of the conversation, I had to agree with him: Close Christian friends are one of the greatest assets that a church has to offer.

I mean, when I think back on the most “satisfying moments” of my life, they all occurred when I was surrounded by my best friends – when we vacationed together, ministered together, cried together, and raised our kids together.

For example, I don’t remember many of the dynamic Bible studies that I participated in; but, I definitely remember when one of our Bible studies turned into a bizarre and macho wood-chopping contest in my friend’s back-yard. And after gut-laughing for about a half-hour – watching each other attempt idiotic feats of manly strength – we all poured our hearts out to one-another around a camp-fire. There was intimacy, camaraderie, and adventure (like when the axe slipped out of one guy’s hands).

But, you see, most of our fondest memories usually have an unspoken “relationship factor” that was secretly making the experience fulfilling. So when I began studying the statistical causes of “true church satisfaction,” it didn’t surprise me to find friendships at the top of the pile.

In fact, Group publishing recently commissioned the Gallup Organization to study how churches can best “*attract and keep people.*” Of course, there were many interesting answers. But, one simple factor thundered above all the rest – an answer that was grotesquely simple: *provide every member with intimate friends.*

Frankly, when I first read this, I was irritated. I mean, I’ve spent *years of my life* trying to perfect the ultimate church service. From the worship to the multi-media to the sermon, I’ve completely devoted myself to Sunday mornings – obsessing over the details – in hopes that people would return. And, yes, these things are *definitely* important. If we can’t even get a person to return next Sunday, then, the best mid-week discipleship program in the world is irrelevant.

Even more, great preaching, cool videos, and engaging worship bands are sweet. And who could argue with adding “whip-cream to an ice-cream sunday;” yet, deep down, we all know *that not all ingredients are equally important*. For example, our church may have the best multi-media presentation in the whole city; but if we are miserable at connecting people to their new “best friends”, then we will utterly lose the battle of creating “church satisfaction”. And the statistical evidence speaks for itself:

According to the Gallup study, if your “best friend” attends your church, you have a 98% chance of being “satisfied” with your church ([Friendship pg 8 ...see below](#)). In other words, if we could simply generate amazing friendships for every person who walks in our doors, then we will be 98% of the way to providing them with a satisfying church experience!

Even more, the study found that “[*Those*] who have church-based friendships that extend outside the weekly worship services – either in small groups, through informal gatherings, or other settings – report exceptionally high levels of satisfaction” (8). In fact, people who had a high number of intimate friends noted significantly higher levels of both “*spiritual transformation*” as well as more “*first-hand encounters*” with God! And if this is true, then simple friendship-making could very well be the Holy Grail of a transformational organization. But none of this should surprise us. After all, we all know from scriptures that intimate friendships are essential to transformation.

In Acts chapter two, we read about a community in revival. And it says that the Christians were “*devoted to fellowship*” (v. 42). In other words, they weren’t merely *interested* in it. They were *devoted* to it. The Greek word translated as *devoted* carries the sense that these Christians were “constantly and in persistent fashion” giving themselves to fellowship.

And understandably so; because, if you “*walk with the wise you will grow wise*” (Prov. 13:20). In Hebrews, it also teaches that true fellowship prevents “*deception and hardness of heart*” (3:13). Therefore, in Chapter ten, the author climaxes this idea by saying: “*Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing*” (v.25). Why? Because intimate community is perhaps the greatest weapon we have against sin in the church!

But the Apostle James definitely took it the farthest when he commanded: “*Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed*” (James 5:16). In other words, Christian friends aren’t enough. You need to have intimacy to the degree where you could actually confess your sins. And, he wasn’t suggesting it. He was commanding it. And this isn’t talking about “confessing sins to God” in some private worship moment. The context was about having fellowship with “righteous men”. And until we do it, healing may evade us.

Of course, when I first meditated on this, this was a pretty revolutionary idea for me. I had been struggling with several “long-term” sins that I couldn’t seem to get beyond. I wanted healing; but, I was hoping to receive it through a less humiliating method than James 5:16 was suggesting.

Of course, every week I’d listen to dynamic pastors preach dynamic messages; yet, even still, no amount of sermon CD’s seemed to solve my problem. I also thought that perhaps if I squinted a little harder – maybe shed a few tears in worship – *perhaps then* God’s power would magically transform me. Yet, to no avail, I wasn’t gaining victory. Of course, I knew about James’ command ... that confession and prayer preceded healing; but, *believe me*: I was not about to walk up to someone and start spewing out my sins.

I mean, I was “the pastor”. You know... the guy who’s supposedly a “near-perfect person” – who has all the answers, who reads the Bible and prays twelve hours a day for sister-so and so’s aunt’s gall-bladder surgery. So certainly I, of all people, couldn’t confess such dark issues. And I’m sure that most Christians can relate to this at some level or another. But my wake-up call had finally arrived.

Around a decade ago, one of my greatest pastoral mentors was found to be in an affair. And what disturbed me the most was *not* that *he* had fallen into sin; rather, if *he* could fall into that type of situation (& he even did forty-day fasts), then certainly, *I* could fall just as far. I mean, he was one of the most insightful people I knew. He had one of the fastest growing churches in the country. His church provided some of the best worship experiences around; yet, even still, none of these weren't enough to prevent the greatest of breakdowns. Being surrounded by the best Christians or best Christian knowledge doesn't mean that we're applying it.

And I realized that, I can memorize endless scriptures and listen to endless teachings to seduce myself into believing that I'm making spiritual progress. But if I don't have intimate accountable connections with other Christians who are holding me to progress, then I'm just a shipwreck waiting to happen. And no amount of tear-filled praise choruses are gonna change this.

Once again, I'm not against sermons and worship experiences. It's just that the blood of Christ which heals only flows through the *body* of Christ – which is a network of Christian friends. And we're hurting our churches by allowing them to think that they're connected to Christ by being a spectator at a church service.

So when I talk about “connecting people with intimate friendships,” church satisfaction and “membership retention” are not the only things at stake. We're talking about *our very ability to help people live transformed and satisfying lives*. I mean, without intimate community, the very foundations of our authenticity are at stake.

So, it begs the question: *How* do we do this? How do we get people into small groups? How do we get people to connect beyond the church services? What are some practical things we can do to promote healthy friendships above all else? After obsessing over this for years, our community began employing dozens of creative strategies to make it easy for people to truly fellowship.

First of all, we constantly emphasize the necessity of intimate fellowship from the pulpit. Since the day we planted Substance Church, we wanted to redefine the idea of “church” in people's minds: “*Church is not about attending a church service; it's about doing life with other people.*” Almost every week we say in some way shape or form: “*Church doesn't start until the service is over.*” “*Church is what happens between Sunday services!*” And, of course, we're always advertizing a broad number of small group opportunities that will appeal to just about anyone.

We make it super-clear that unless a person is involved in a small group of some sort that they are not yet a member of Substance Church. “We're not a church *'with'* small groups. We're a church *'of'* small groups.” Yet, even though we had machine-gunned a wide host of slogans at people, we realized that we needed to define fellowship a little more specifically.

In fact we have a buzz-word that we use so often, almost every member is virtually forced to memorize it. After years of preaching on fellowship, I finally decided to distill the top five ingredients of fellowship into an easy-to-remember acronym called S.P.A.C.E.: “*Same sex, Prayer, Accountability, and Confession with people of Equal passion.*”

S = *Same Sex*: 2 Sam.1:26 (like David & Jonathan) Prov.27:17 (men sharpening men)
P = *Prayer* James 5:15, 16b; Luke 11:5-11; 18:1
A= *Accountability*: I.e., challenging you; setting goals! Prv.27:17
C= *Confession*: James 5:16; 1 Jn.1:9; Mt.6:14-15
E= *Equally Yoked in Passion*: Prov.13:20; 1 Cor. 15:33; 2 Cor.6:14ff

In other words, if you aren't experiencing all five ingredients of “S.P.A.C.E.” at least once every

three weeks, then you're probably missing God's best for you. I've seen many churches define membership strictly in terms of doctrine and giving; but, at Substance, we define membership as a "*delightful and ongoing experience of S.P.A.C.E. within our community.*"

The Prayer and Accountability part of this acronym are self-explanatory. But allow me to unpack the other three ingredients a little more.

By "Same-Sex", we're merely referring to the idea that, there are many sin-issues that are easier to tackle along-side Christians of the same gender. For example, most women don't want their husbands holding them accountable for their weight. In my family, if I said: "*Hey honey... how 'bout you eat those carrots instead?*" ...it just wouldn't fly! And guys, most of us don't want to have our wives nagging us to step up in our marriages either. You see, there are certain challenges that are just easier to take from a small group of "same-sex" friends.

When we talk about confession, however, I'm not talking about some Catholic-styled "tell-your-sins-to-the-leader" type of experience. Rather, I'm talking about finding a tight group of safe and comfortable friends with whom you can be brutally honest.

Most Christians like to see confession as something we do between ourselves and God during some private moment – a "vertically oriented" confession. But almost every time the Bible mentions confession in the New Testament it's couched in the context of fellowshiping with *other people*. I.e., it's "horizontal" confession. In fact, it's this very life-style of honesty that makes us "children of the light" (1 Jn.1:7-9).

However, this type of honesty and vulnerability makes a lot of people nervous. And understandably so. It's hard to find safe and mature people. And even when you find these friends, it's still downright humbling to share some of those idiotic habits of your private life. And if you or your church suffers with any level of legalism or politics, then confession feels more like a death wish than a liberating God-opportunity. So, obviously, use caution! And that's where the last letter of the "S.P.A.C.E." acronym comes into play.

The "Equally Yoked in Passion" part simply refers to the idea that you can't just fellowship with anyone (2 Cor. 6:14). For example, you don't want to confess your sins to "joe-big-mouth". A confession is a sacred trust. And if you're trying to do this with insecure, legalistic, or political Christians, you probably won't get good results. Hence, it's important to find other safe Christians who are running towards Christ in the same way that you are.

But the ultimate point here is this: We need to define fellowship as more than "showing up at a church service" or merely having shallow relationships with people who happen to be Christians. Fellowship is not "being busy with Christian activities." It means that someone's got your back. It means that you have real accountability for the real issues in your life. And remember what's at stake here: The very health and contentment of your church!

Also, it's important to note that quality of fellowship is *not* related to church size. Contrary to popular myth, studies have found that quality fellowship is a value that's independent of church size. Ironically, many mega-churches have scored fellowship ratings that far exceed many home churches! You see, you can have a small church and still have no "S.P.A.C.E." between church members. Thus, we must not narrowmindedly associate "quality fellowship" with a particular church method. No one in their right mind would say, "*Smaller churches have more faith*" because, clearly, faith is a *value* not a method. In the same way, Fellowship is a *value* not a church size or church method. And the bottom line is: your church either advocates this value or it doesn't.

On the other hand, if you are a mega-church (or wanting to be), it's hard to claim to value fellowship without some sort of critical cell strategy. Large church growth studies like those of Natural Church Development have long been proving that it's impossible to maintain church health if your small groups are merely an add-on to your church service. So, at

Substance Church, we see our church service primarily as a tool to funnel people into small groups. And even within our cell structure, we employ two varieties of small groups which help us incrementally move people towards intimate fellowship.

The first variety we call “Networking Groups”. Generally, these groups are infinitely diverse, ranging from basketball fellowships to parenting workshops. Any interest you could possibly have, we’ve got a group for it. Most of our networking groups are based on a typical “Affinity Based” small group model (a.k.a., Free-Market Cell method). But, no matter what the topic of the group, their ultimate goal is to create a Christ-centered atmosphere that networks people towards their new best friends. And once people have found these friends we encourage them to move onto our second level of groups called a “S.P.A.C.E.” group.

S.P.A.C.E. groups may still be diverse in topic; yet, they’re much more intimate and thus “closed to the public”. In other words, we use our widely published networking groups to incubate relationships. But ultimately, we’re funneling people into a S.P.A.C.E. experience. Of course, we don’t regulate S.P.A.C.E. groups. People choose them on their own based on chemistry and comfort level. They’re usually small (less than five people); but, as happens in most cases, this deep fellowship ends up spilling over onto a good number of other people (such as wives and kids).

But what about those people that just don’t seem to get it? Despite our endless pleas to get people into small groups, there are still a good number of people who are determined to remain anonymous spectators. Quite often these people don’t even realize how desperately they need transformational fellowship. So how do you reach them? Well this is where our “Shepherding Team” comes in.

At every service we have, there is a covert team of relationally savvy people ranging throughout our events. Their sole purpose is to befriend people in a meaningful way. And I’m not talking about some glorified version of a greeting ministry (although that’s an important ministry as well). However, we take this idea a step further by authorizing this team of people to spend money every week in their attempt to connect with people.

For example, we offer each of our Shepherding team members around seven dollars a week to take people out for coffee or dinner. All they need to do is submit an automated internet form summarizing their meeting, and we issue a reimbursement.

Thus, our Shepherding Team ranges throughout every event looking for disconnected people to help. And, if necessary, they will take a person out for coffee, lunch, or dinner, just to make certain that this person is experiencing the best fellowship possible.

In fact, one member recently confessed to me that after their first time to Substance, they already had three different invitations to do dinner! Of course, we don’t want people to feel like we’re stalking them either. Most seekers want to feel anonymous the first couple times they attend. Yet, after hearing this report, I was also proud that we’re making it hard for people to fall through the cracks.

Of course, many pastors have also asked me: “*Doesn’t that get expensive after a while?*” Perhaps. But if you knew that there were going to be *Sixty* extra intimate and meaningful gatherings occurring between weekends for only \$420 dollars a week, that would be a bargain! If you had a pastoral staff member booking appointments 24 hours a day, you couldn’t get results anywhere close to this! And every month we get measurable data emailed to us regarding everything that’s going on.

Our Small Group leaders and ministry captains function the same way. Every last one of them can quote their mission in their sleep: “*Provide four-to-seven friends and a ministry for every person I come in contact with!*” And one of our mission statements is similar: “*To create ministers out of spectators, and S.P.A.C.E. out of strangers to the glory of God.*” And, almost

every ministry has its own set of systems and incentives for creating community.

Currently, we're attempting to create more and more financial reimbursement systems to help provide incentives for providing community for others. When any of our cell group communities tops thirty people we begin creating stipends - which the leaders can use for any number of purposes (from celebrating with their assistants to purchasing more group resources). We tell them "*the fuel goes where the fires are...and the fires are where the most friendships are!*" So there are a lot of leaders who are eager to prove their worthiness.

We also have an endless number of coaching systems to continue encouraging healthy community. On the third and fourth Sunday of every month we have meetings which are devoted to educating and encouraging various leadership tiers within our leadership structure. And I realize that this takes a lot of time. But keep the big picture in mind:

We live in the "age of information" where Christian knowledge is everywhere. Our generation has access to more books, more sermons, more Christian information sites than any generation of Christian who has ever walked the planet. If I wanted mentoring on "Christian Disco-Dancing", there's probably a dozen books on it already - along-side a few hundred podcasts on the subject. Just look at all the sermon web-casts going online each day. Or, walk through your local Christian book store and you'll see: "Christian knowledge" is exploding. We have more information to prevent divorce and addiction than ever; but, does this mean we're winning the war? Not at all.

You see, before the age of information, Christian knowledge was one of the most valuable commodities that the church had to offer. But times are changing. And the most valuable commodity that your church has to offer is no longer *knowledge*. However, finding good friends and good accountability with which we can apply this knowledge... now *that's* a rare treasure!

You see, despite the ever-increasing sea of books, teachers, and church web-casts, there is still no substitute for a shoulder to cry on. There is still no substitute for a group of friends who desire to intimately "do life together". And if we want to tap into the newest and rarest commodity of the 21st century church, then we need to become good at creating *intimate friendships*.

And again, I'm not saying that good preaching and good worship aren't important. But I'm definitely saying that, if you want your church to provide an increasingly rare commodity... if you want to dramatically increase your "rate of spiritual transformation"... and if you want to create a church full of satisfied members, then you *must* become excellent in one thing: Fellowship.

Works Cited... & permission information...

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