

Building Relationships

By Pastor Alan Utting



'The health of our relationships reflects the health of our walk with God.' Rick Warren

Making difficult decisions in ministry can unintentionally cause offense and damage relationships, something I've personally experienced and regretted. Often there is something that is not known to the aggrieved one and cannot be shared. Yet I've also gained lasting friendships through ministry, even when at times our opinions differed. Strong relationships help ministry flourish, while lost trust can harm the effectiveness of ministry.

Biblical Perspective

Jesus prayed for unity among his followers 'I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you' (John 17:20), yet even early leaders like Paul and Barnabas had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus... (Acts 15:39). Fortunately, it appears this breakdown in relationships was restored later as Paul writes to Timothy 'Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry' (2 Timothy 4:11). As in Paul's day, so even today, churches still face relational challenges like the early church. For example, these things can divide us:

Social discrimination (James 2:1-12).
Loyalty to personalities (1 Corinthians 1:12).
Worldliness (1 John 2:15-17).
Differing moral standards (1 Corinthians 5).
Beliefs (2 Peter 2:1), and
Differing worldviews (Romans 14:1,2).

Observations

1. Building strong relationships is essential for effective ministry and outweighs task completion. I always prefer working with someone relational over someone gifted but less easy to connect with.
2. To stand you need to understand. We are sometimes in danger of jumping to wrong conclusions too quickly so slow down and ascertain what is going on underneath the surface.
3. When relationships are handled poorly it breeds among other things cynical attitudes in people and many drop out of church never wanting to enter it again. That saddens the heart of God and us.
4. Ministry built on divisions don't normally last. Given time the same problems reoccur.
5. In seeking to sort out poor relationships be aware of triangulation, a situation in which opposing parties reconcile with each other and subsequently direct their anger towards you. This outcome is a recognised risk associated with serving as a peacemaker.

6. If you are experiencing burnout or close to it, then you are more likely to experience fractured relationships. Pull back and be kind to yourself and others.
7. A researcher on a Ted talk on 'What makes for a good life' did a very comprehensive 75 years of study starting with over 700 boys and men. These people from various walks of life were interviewed every 2 years over 75 years. The answer to 'What makes for a good life?' was that high quality relationships keep us happier and healthier, and conflict is bad for our health. The Bible itself gives us constant teaching of how to relate well. For example, 'A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger' (Proverbs 15:1). 'And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love' (1 Cor 13:13) and so on.

Cross cultural considerations

1. Navigating healthy relationships in cross-cultural settings is often complex, so many Mission agencies require training in cultural issues before placement and encourage ongoing development in the field. This training helps avoid relational problems and improves how individuals perceive and interact with local people.
2. Developing communication skills and learning other languages is an advantage. On my first trip to Indonesia, I told a church leader in front of others that he was like 'steel reinforcing concrete, strong but unseen'. Our translator not understanding said 'steal' instead of 'steel' which I found out later the mistake, leading to an awkward situation which fortunately I was able to clarify.
3. When considering cross-cultural relationships, ensure that shared knowledge is accurate rather than collective ignorance. We often assume our values are correct, even though cultures often differ; for example, some prioritise a strong work ethic, while others value community and hospitality more, while still others put family above job or personal comfort.
4. If you are serious about cross-cultural involvement, then learn to understand that culture. There are many excellent study courses and books to increase our understanding.
5. In cross-cultural settings, remember you are a guest, and unintentional mistakes may cause offense due to unfamiliarity with respectful communication. Unfortunately, in these situations a national may be reluctant to correct you and so you remain ignorant.
6. When group dynamics break down, amongst other things, corporate repentance is needed, yet this demands a humility rarely shown, since we tend to believe we are right and others wrong. When confession happens often there is a new sense of God's Spirit.

'How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!' (Ps 133: paraphrase.)

Resources

D Stone, B Patton and S Heen, *Difficult Conversations*

J Marturano, *Finding the space to lead: A practical guide to mindful leadership, (ch 6&7)*

Stephen A Grunlan and Marink Mayers, *Cultural Anthropology: A Christian perspective*

B Fikkert and S Corbett, *When helping hurts*