

Unity

Relationally Connected to One Another

“In Essentials Unity, in Non Essentials Liberty, in All Things Charity.”

(Genesis 2:18, John 15:19-21 & 17:21, Philippians 2:2-5, Ephesians 4:2-3 & 31-32, Hebrews 3:13 & 10:24, James 1:19, I John 1:1-3)

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There has been nothing more important in my life, my family, or my ministry than relationships. There has been nothing more damaging to my heart, but also healing to my heart, than relationships. The Christian life, at its core, is all about relationships. We are called to love God and others with all of our hearts. My wife, Pam, and I live out this message and ministry of reconciliation by being and building Havens for the Heart. As we start and strengthen churches, Bishop Todd Fetters and I are focused on growing relational muscle, which involves living, loving, and leading from the heart.

The posture of unity and the pursuit of oneness will be important as we emerge from this discombobulating Covid-19 crisis with an ever-changing new normal, and enter into a divisive political season which polarizes people into camps. Unity is core to who God is as a trinity, just as oneness is core to Church as a community.

There is a battle that we must come to grips with if we are going to understand the dynamics behind division. There are often Satanic influences behind pandemics and the politics surrounding world events, but our sovereign God is at work in mighty and mysterious ways. Many are the plans of man and schemes of Satan, but God's purpose will always prevail—your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven!

This coronavirus is transforming the world as we know it and awakening the church to face its vulnerability, as well as embrace her calling. Many of God's people have become dependent on pastors and programs for their spiritual vitality and relational connection. This pandemic has surfaced a codependency that has revealed the immaturity of many believers, as well as the need for leaders to equip their people in how to walk with God and love one another.

The purpose of this article is not to reimagine or redesign church, but to help us deal with the relational conflicts that arise from pandemics and politics. In doing this, we will actually recapture the essence of what church is supposed to be about, which is a one-anothering community of friends and mentors whose authentic faith and genuine love overflow to the world. Anyone who has experienced divorce in their family journey or divisions in their denominational history can understand the devastating effects of relational breakdown. At core, this is a spiritual battle, not against flesh and blood (Ephesians 6:12).

The Reality of Life is Relationship, but the Reality of Relationship is Conflict

Understanding the human hurdle of longing and loss

Humanity is built to love and be loved. People are created in God's image for communion with him and companionship with others. Everyone is longing for relationships where they are unconditionally loved and enjoyed with no fear of loss. It's permanent. Although we desire connection, we often discover rejection, separation, and isolation.

As a child I remember longing to belong, to fit in, to be heard, to be seen, and to be included. I wanted to matter to someone. But I experienced abuse and abandonment, divorce and distance, loneliness and loss. I had to live with the deficits that this caused in me. The hidden shame, anxiety, and rage were all nicely packaged behind a smile, a basketball and a guitar. If they didn't want me, they'd at least want my performance.

After years of trying to be popular and powerful, the things I did and the masks I wore became my only identity...I was my performance. The satanic strongholds that were wrapped around my wounded heart and the self-protective strategies I developed in my relationships didn't surface until I got married and entered the ministry. Then I began to see what was behind the facade.

I remember asking a woman, who had pastors as parents and was a spouse of a pastor, about her identity and relationships, who she really was and what she really wanted. She said with tears, “I don't know. No one has ever asked me those questions. I've simply played whatever role was expected. No one ever cared enough to ask me what I wanted, so I don't know who I am or what I want. In fact, I'm afraid that if I peel the layers back, there will be nothing there.”

This human need to belong and really matter to someone shows up in sports, gangs, clubs, and causes. We all want a sense of security and significance as defined by intimacy and impact. Sociologists are showing us how the natural networks of community are crumbling or radically changing. Loneliness and separation are increasing as we experience the relational breakdown of families, neighborhoods, schools, businesses, and even churches. As a result, we have seen the emergence of many forms of false intimacies or pseudo communities—various ways and places we can experience a temporary sense of aliveness with the illusion of intimacy or impact (i.e. pornography, bullying...).

Since the 1960s we have witnessed the phenomenon of recovery groups. These small communities, in their varied forms, have surfaced and captured the longing to love and be loved—to be connected in community. More than the “together ones” helping the “broken ones” to figure out life, it's friends helping friends. These wounded healers, who offer mutual vulnerability with accountability, are often experiencing a truer expression of “one anothering” than many people find in church. In many ways, these communities have become their family. It's my desire that in the UBIC we learn to live, love and lead from wounded hearts that have been captured by the gospel. It's in our weakness that he is made strong. We need one another. I need you, you need me, we need God!

Speaking of false intimacy or pseudo-community, some of our churches are structured and programmed to make people feel superficially cared for, but never deeply connected. Some of

our churches have adopted a form of relating that requires no real mutual self-disclosure, but rather layer to layer encouragement. In the business world this is known as perceived care: they need their customers to perceive that they care about them, even if they don't.

Psychologists call this “pull-push” relational tug-of-war (I want you to know me and be close to me, but fear that when this happens you will hurt me and leave me) “the ambivalence of intimacy.” Theologians describe this interplay of human dignity and depravity as the reality of being created in God’s image and the consequences of sinful selfishness or satanic strongholds.

So, where do you go with your hurts and disappointments? What kind of style of relating or coping defense mechanisms have you developed to keep you safe, while not feeling too alone? I think many people live either a demanding or detached life relationally. Most people don't even know it, because they are socially engaged and friendly, but live with a self-protective “pull-push” in their relationships. Some people actually go in one of two extremes, from over-involvement to isolation. They either suffocate people or sabotage their relationships. These self-protective strategies are very subtle and cannot be dealt with in an article, but only in sacred spaces where redemptive communities of compassionate and courageous people can speak grace and truth to each other through the humble gentleness of Christ.

Let's Pray

(Take time and pray your heart to Jesus)

Lord Jesus, In one way or another, my whole life has been a quest for community. Behind all my shame issues, anxiety issues, and anger issues has been a longing to love and be loved. Your greatest commandment is to love you with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. I believe you gave me a new heart so that I could love in selfless and sacrificial ways.

You have loved, accepted and forgiven me. This has compelled me to love, accept and forgive others in the same way. I think that's what you meant in the prayer you gave your disciples and asked us to use as a pattern in seeking you. Before I can selflessly and sacrificially love others, accept their uniquenesses and forgive their offenses, I need to take the log out of my own eye and find you as my deepest source of peace and joy. Then I will realize that apart from you I can do nothing, but through you I can do all things.

So, during this pandemic panic and political posturing, give us the assurance and provision that leads us into a sense of thankfulness and contentment. We are in a battle against the flesh, the devil, and the world which promise prosperity, popularity and power, rather than the true peace that you give, the selfless presence you want us to have, and the redemptive purpose you would like us to live in the world. Clothe me with the fruit of your Spirit and armor me up so that I can fight or flee from the temptations of the evil demons or evil desires that seek to harden my heart and destroy my relationships.

I present my body as a living sacrifice, to be a blessing to others as I love from my heart, to accept by embracing the unique differences of others and forgive as you have done for me. I will be the salt and light, your aroma of justice and mercy. As your ambassador with the message and ministry of reconciliation, I will make disciples within my neighborhood and among the nations. Help me to bloom wherever I am planted and be a blessing to others with the overflow of your Holy Spirit. I now live to please you, enjoy you, and glorify you... Simply, to walk with you!

Posture of Unity and Pursuit of Oneness

I need you, You need me, We need God

Unity is not conformity, just as oneness is not sameness. Instead, it's a selfless devotion to a sacrificially submissive enjoyment and encouragement of one another. It's not the absence of differences, but the acceptance of uniquenesses. It's not the avoidance of grievances, but the forgiveness of offenses. It's an experience full of grace and truth.

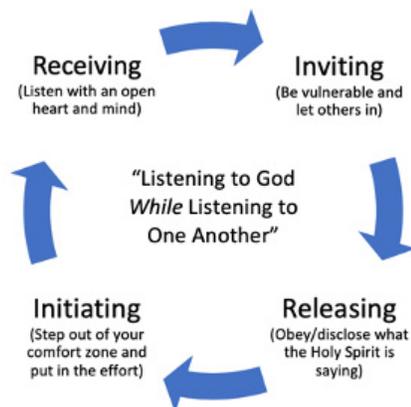
Most of our attempts to be unified or to be one in marriage and church seem to revolve around similarities. So, when the event is done, the food is gone, or our health and money have diminished, then we drift apart. The power of mutual interests and shared causes can be a unifying force for a season. Similarities and differences can bring us together or take us apart, but it's our grievances and offenses that divide unity and destroy oneness. Biblical unity and oneness are not built on agreements or alignments about pandemics or politics, but are rooted in convictions and commitments that accept one another's differences and forgive each other's grievances.

- Biblical unity accepts our uniquenesses and embraces our differences. It doesn't simply tolerate them, but honors one another above ourselves.
- Christian oneness forgives our grievances and releases our offenses. It doesn't sweep reality under the rug, but confesses our sins to one another.

There is one key discipline that we can all practice. It would help us stay unified and relationally connected to one another. This one-anothering dynamic will require humble gentleness with courageous honesty (fruit of the Spirit—the qualities of Christ).

In order for church members to embrace this spiritual/relational practice, they will need to begin to see church as an “us, not an it.” They will need to be devoted more to the people, than simply committed to the programs. In order for church leaders to embrace this spiritual/relational practice, they will need to see leadership as a “we, not a me.” They will need to be overseers of the family, more than managers of the system—from board members to disciple makers!

“We” as his people, all of “us” as his priests, must adopt a posture, learn a practice and grow in the process of listening to God and one another. Let the wise listen and add to their understanding (Proverbs 1:5). Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry (James 1:19). God uses his Holy Spirit to



search our souls, his active Word to uncover the intentions of the heart, and his wise people to draw out the purposes behind our actions.

We can experience God together as, “I listen to you and you listen to me while we listen to God.” The process of actively listening to God and one another involves:

- Listening that receives and invites both affirmation and admonition. If I need you then I must believe that you are valuable regardless of your intelligence, age, gender, ethnicity, or maturity.
- Listening that releases and initiates encouragement and exhortation. If you need me, then I must believe that I have something to contribute from my woundedness and giftedness, regardless of my feelings of insecurity or inadequacy.

Let's Pray

(please write out your own prayer and pray with others)

Dearest Jesus, I am devoted to loving you and others with all of my heart. Please free and fill my heart to love, accept, and forgive others just as you have done for me. With my wife and in our church family, I want a unity that goes beyond agreement of doctrines or alignment with causes, but that truly embraces the uniquenesses that others possess, which are so different than my personality, passions, and giftings.

This new commandment to love “one another” is very difficult and even impossible without you! To cultivate oneness and be genuinely relationally connected to one another means that I must humble myself, be vulnerable, and abandon all the ways I protect myself from the pain of rejection, the fear of failure, the worries of what they will think of me or what they will do to me. I no longer have to protect myself or prove myself. I am free to simply love and be loved.

Wow Lord, there's no way of doing church, building community, and embracing intimacy that won't require me to see others and myself as valuable (1 Corinthians 12). I will need to see you in them and receive, even invite, them into the world I keep locked up and carefully hidden. I need to be vulnerable. I need to let down my guard. I need to abandon my self-protection and trust you, not my own defense mechanisms. But Lord, help me realize that I also have something meaningful to contribute, even if it's not eloquent or clearly thought through. Even in the midst of my doubts, confusion, frustrations and inadequacies, I have something to offer from you to bless them.

Help me to ask questions that seem scary or share ideas that might seem intrusive and evoke defensiveness. Help me to not worry so much about my image or what others think of me, but to courageously and compassionately pursue their soul.

The Listening Loop

The listening loop that is central to becoming relationally connected to one another involves three levels of listening to God and others. I'd like to think of this as three spheres of our story.

- The Outside Story is what we see. Like the tip of an iceberg, it's visible. It is what we do, say and how we relate.
- The Inside Story is what we cannot see, such as thoughts and feelings. Like an iceberg, much of the realities of our lives are below the water unseen by the human eye.
- The Larger Story involves the invisible mysterious realities of God's presence and purpose. Like an iceberg that is floating in the sea, our lives are part of a larger spiritual reality that has been going on eternally.

Life events, such as shattered dreams, financial crises, or medical emergencies, can quickly turn to relational conflict. People can take their sadness and fear out on those around them. We seem to want someone to blame or at least believe that they can change the situation. What if the core problem was really spiritual? What if the real solution was really spiritual? It is my belief that, at the core, it is a spiritual problem that requires a relational solution.

Shifting individuals from surface problems to spiritual solutions will require relationships. We need to cultivate a safe place and facilitate a simple supernatural process for being relationally connected to one another. But the sad reality is that most of us live in “feedback free fix-it cultures” where nobody really speaks the truth about who we are, how we impact them, or what it's really like to be with us. If we want real transformation, we need to foster more honest and vulnerable communities with friends and mentors.

To make this loop of listening practical and doable, I've developed three levels of listening that help guide how we think and what we do with one another. The content of what we reflect on and the process of how we relate with one another is built on our understanding of listening. So, let me briefly review what listening is and what it involves (Prov. 20:5, Col.1:29, James 1:19).

- Listening is the selfless and sacrificial love that seeks to understand, intellectually and emotionally, what someone means. It's a desire to draw out what others are trying to say, wanting to say, or needing to say, beneath their words and actions.

- Listening involves the choice to set aside the distractions that are diverting us externally or driving us internally, so that we are free to see with our eyes, hear with our ears, and understand with our hearts. We need to be free of anxiety and anger, along with our assumptions and agendas, that cause us to shut our eyes and cover our ears.

To actively listen to God and others, we need to understand the spheres of reflection and the skills of relating. There are three levels in which we listen and love. The actual content that we need to assess in these three spheres is clear in Scripture, but it is very unique to each person in terms of language or images that connect with them. The actual process for addressing these issues involves asking questions and sharing truth as we are guided by the wisdom of God and governed by the Spirit of God.

James 4:1-3 and Luke 10:38-42 explains and illustrates a process for reflecting and a pathway for relating. It helps us move from external symptoms, that we often define as the problem and where we think the solution is found, to the heart of the issue and eventually to the heart of Jesus, where we find real liberation and transformation. The process goes from interaction, to self-reflection, to a relationship with God. It's always governed by the wisdom of Scripture and guided by the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Unity, at its core, can only be found in Jesus. Relational oneness will never be found in believing the same things or loving one another perfectly. When James (4:1-3) describes the causes of conflict that divide people, he always asks them questions of what is driving them on the inside, where all the issues of life stem. But like Jesus did with Martha (Luke 10:38-42), we are encouraged to take the “heart of the matter” to the only one who can love, accept, and forgive. He's the only one who can give peace and joy to a worried and upset heart, a soul that has contempt for self and others, a heart battling loss and lies that drive us to demandingness or detachment. So, let's cast our cares on him and let's con-

Content: What we address

Process: How we assess

Relational Dynamics What I do and what's done to me. (choices & consequences)
Psychological Issues What we're feeling and thinking. (cravings & convictions)
Spiritual Challenges Who God is and what He gives. (communion & commission)

Listening to the Outside Story

(visible reality)

Listening to the Inside Story

(unseen reality)

Listening to the Larger Story

(eternal reality)

Interactive Processing

Pursuing people and facilitating conversation

(with grace & truth)

Reflective Pondering

Questioning that enters and exposes.

(with compassion & courage)

Collaborative Praying

Inviting to let go and to take hold.

(with sensitivity & strength)

confess our sins to him. He can handle the differences and divisions people have with pandemics, politics, and personal relationships. If you're tired of trying to get other people to see your point of view or get them to align with you, if you're worried and upset about many things in the world, then humble yourself before the Lord and listen to him. He will speak in a still small voice.

If we as God's people humble ourselves to pray and seek his face and turn from our sinful/selfish ways, then God will hear

and heal! We need to trust in the Lord with all of our hearts and not lean on our own ingenuity to figure things out or fix them, but acknowledge Him in all our ways and He will direct our paths. Prayer is our pathway to being spiritually alive, relationally connected, and missionally engaged!

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