

The friendship factor

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The true teacher can impart to his pupils few things so valuable as the gift of his own companionship.¹

As chaplains we employ many tools to effect life transformation through the working of the Holy Spirit: prayer, Bible study, Weeks of Prayer, Friday night youth, inspiring chapel services, excursions, camps, student involvement, service projects, overseas trips, awesome music, funny and memorable preaching, good DVDs, authentic role modelling and more. Combined these elements make up an environment where a young person can give their life to Christ Jesus; however, I believe there is a powerful tool that we neglect, overlook and even avoid—friendship, friendship between the teacher and the student, between adult and young person. I believe friendship with our students is one of the most effective tools for guiding young people toward making a lifelong commitment to Jesus.

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I admit the idea is uncomfortable and scary. It's contentious ground. We raise our eyebrows, grit our teeth and assume there has to be another way. Our apprehension seems legitimate, friendship between a teacher and a student doesn't seem natural or right, and it has gone wrong too many times.

We are governed by legal and professional standards and must work within the boundaries of the child safety protection acts that govern us. Adherence to the law, however, does not automatically preclude a friendship with our students. To deem friendship a practise belonging to another era is tantamount to throwing out the baby with the bathwater and is essentially denying our humanity, not to mention our Christian mission.

The importance of adult friendship

Research confirms what we have always sensed.

The most frequently encountered positive role model in the lives of children, outside of the family circle, was a favourite teacher. For the resilient youngster, a special teacher was not just an instructor for academic skills, but also a confidante and positive model for personal identification... when schools focus on what really matters in life, the cognitive ends we now pursue so painfully and artificially will be achieved somewhat more naturally... It is obvious that children will work

harder and do things—even odd things like adding fractions—for people they love and trust... The number of student references to wanting caring teachers is so great that we believe it speaks to the quiet desperation and loneliness of many adolescents in today's society.²

A study of resilient young people revealed, “[They] all had at least one person in their lives who accepted them unconditionally, regardless of temperamental idiosyncrasies, physical attractiveness, or intelligence.”³ Young people are so used to being ignored by us that it is no wonder they, in turn, ignore our spirituality. We are failing to connect. Leading students toward a relationship with Jesus is our ‘core business’. Our primary function is academic education and character development but our underpinning purpose is to lead children and their families into faith in Jesus. At our school, we achieve this through making connections.

Teachers at our school have made a determined effort to connect with students, usually just a few at a time. Our teachers are involved in building friendships by playing OzTag one night a week, shopping, visiting the Easter show for the first time, going to a concert, visiting church members, watching movies, and listening to music, among other things. Our bus coordinator has an ongoing banter about the NRL and rugby union with a now baptised Year 10 student. It was during one of these discussions that he learnt that the student stopped watching the NRL games on Friday night, “Because it's the Sabbath sir!”

Friendships like these have led to new levels of commitment in a number of our students, often in those we would have least expected to accept Jesus. Some of the most spiritual discussions are not in my period five Bible study on a Tuesday but in my car on the way home from school or an event. I am often reminded of what a colleague once said to me, “Relationship is more important than content.”

A few weeks ago, one of the students I mentor came to me flustered, “Andre I have something to tell you. You're going to get so angry at me. I'm really sorry.” Then she blurted out, “I just smoked! I just had a cigarette. I'm so sorry Andre.” I realised her confession was actually a fruit of the friendship and subsequent trust we had developed over the years. It is the trust that comes from an environment of

friendship and allowing a margin for the student to make choices and indeed make mistakes that leads students toward growth and maturity.

Am I a suitable mentor / friend?

Some may wonder whether a flawed role model is desirable. What will our young people aspire to? We may avoid spiritual mentoring because we assume we are not able to live up to a standard that is holy enough to meet student expectations. In reality, students are not looking for perfection. Young people are quietly observing how the adults they respect navigate the tenuous terrain of the Christian life.

Your young people want to see how you deal with stress, temptation, crisis, disappointment, success and the challenges of life. Scary? That is where real growth and change occurs. Remember your young people do not expect you to be perfect. [They want to know that] you are real and honest about your struggles and mistakes. They want to know that you are giving it your best, and like them, you face challenges too.⁴

The effort to establish friendships is not to be the solo effort of the chaplain. It must be environmental. This organic approach is akin to the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child".

In my interactions with young people and their parents, I point out that even as a minister I am not immune to struggles. I share my mistakes, my victories, my happiness and my temptations. I try to convey that a relationship with Jesus is relevant to their every life choice and that the Christian walk is not a pristine, static or boring journey.

Because our school is located in a marginalised and deprived area, I tell many stories about growing up in a family where we didn't have it all. I talk about being a reject and a 'try hard'; being bullied; and of trying to form my own identity out of being an angry and confused New Zealand-born Samoan teenager who hated school and most times erred on the wrong side of life. The students have memorised the testimony of my rebellious young adult years and my battle with substances and even now my battle with all things worldly. I am not proud of these aspects of my life but I have to share them because I need to model for them that the love of Jesus is real and that his grace forgives me, and them!

Central to postmodern youth ministry is the idea that we are on a journey together, it is not a conversation between an expert and a novice but rather two humans (albeit of varying experiences, wisdom and ages) doing life together.

Authentic engagement is never condescending. It's not 'top down'...If we are to truly incarnate the gospel of this new world, we as Christ-followers would do well to learn the spiritual rhythms of non-Christians and a dance that is, first of all, truly

human. As we seek humble engagement instead of power, we will earn the right to draw others into the subtle rhythms of grace.⁵

Sadly, many teachers value control of their classroom over a warm relationship with their students. Ellen White, one of the founders of Seventh-day Adventism, cautions against this. She says teachers who are strict and proud of having students under their subjection "are not the most successful teachers". She says they fail because they do not cultivate friendliness with their students.

They often hold themselves too much reserved, and exercise their authority in a cold, unsympathising manner which cannot win the hearts of their children and pupils.⁶

Instead, she encourages teachers to befriend students.

Show [students that you] love them, and [take] an interest in all their efforts, and even in their sports, sometimes even being a child among children, [it] would make the children very happy, and would gain their love and win their confidence.⁷

A word of warning

Friendships with students can become unhealthy or even abusive. The public view of chaplains, teachers or pastors abusing or taking advantage of a vulnerable, young student exists because it can, and sadly does, happen. Some adults fail to exercise "healthy boundaries"⁸ and end up in sexual, or less sinister but equally damaging, co-dependent relationships with teenagers.

If our emotional needs are not met by God and the appropriate adults in our lives, we may inadvertently project these needs onto our students under the guise of Christian discipleship. The desire must be that young people can have healthy relationships with us and see Jesus reflected in us.

Let go and let God love them

Being a friend, I used to become so invested in the lives of these students that when they fell off the rails and indulged in excessive swearing, smoking, drinking, sexual relationships, parties, lies, hate, or gossip, I would get discouraged. I felt like I had somehow failed.

One Friday night after dropping off a group of students, I found out a student I was mentoring, one I thought had been making excellent progress in his Christian journey, had relapsed into some at-risk behaviours and was trying to get a girl to follow him. I remember being confused and discouraged. I complained to God as I drove home. I couldn't understand how the friendship, the talks, the modelling, and the praying had 'failed'. Philippians 1:6 came to mind, reminding me that the student

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belonged to God and not me.

God impressed upon me the reason I was angry, it was because my human love is conditional. I enjoy being a friend to the students when they show promise but I am stressed when they fail because I can't help feeling I have failed and that they have failed me. Only God can be a real friend to them, showing them a boundless love void of any selfishness. I became convicted that my friendship is a catalyst to their spiritual growth, not the end goal.

Conclusion

It was the willingness of Jesus to meet, speak and eat with just about anybody; the feeling he engendered that they could dare come to him as they were, that transformed them. The beautiful 'acceptance in their unacceptability' brought about repentance, forgiveness and the discovery of the joy that life with Jesus brings.⁹

Friendship was at the heart of Jesus' ministry and is what we need to model.

In your efforts to mentor, be simple, be creative, but most of all, be real...Through relationships with

you, the next generation will catch a vision of their worth to Jesus Christ, begin to see Him as their ultimate Hero, and ultimately take up the cause of the cross.¹⁰

My prayer is that you have purposeful friendships with your students that point them to Jesus our ultimate friend, so in turn, they can develop life-impacting friendships with others. **TEACH**

Endnotes

¹ White, E. G. (1952). *Education*. Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association.

^{2,3} North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. *Caring and support*. <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/atrisk/at6lk10.htm>

⁴ Caine, C. (2002). *Youth ministry: Principles for the 21st century*, p. 187. Castle Hill, NSW: Equip & Empower.

⁵ Morgenthaler, S. (2001). *Postmodern youth ministry*.

^{6,7} White, E. G. (1923). *Fundamentals of Christian education*, p. 18. Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association.

^{8,9} Sudworth, T. Cray, G., & Russell, C. (2007). *Mission-shaped youth: Rethinking young people and church*. London: Church House Publishing.

¹⁰ Martin, A. A. (1999). Mentoring: Found at the flea market. In A. Nash. (Ed). *Un-leash the dream*. Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association.

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