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Introduction

“Though we are nineteen clicks away from everybody on the Web, we are only one click away from our friends.”¹

—Albert-László Barabási, *Linked*

On an ideal Saturday, I wake up just after the sun rises. Before reaching the kitchen, I exit the house to scoop up the day’s *Wall Street Journal*, and return to pour fresh coffee into my favorite mug.

Over that first cup of coffee, I peruse the newspaper and snip several articles for further review. Then I try to read more news online. But sooner or later—usually sooner—curiosity overcomes me, and I check to see if I have received any significant e-mails overnight. Then I check Flickr.com to see if friends have posted new photos, and finally, move onto Facebook and respond to two or three notes there. Later, I will talk with a friend on Skype; I’m looking forward to seeing him as we catch up.

Although I am an introvert who prizes his privacy and prefers conversation with one or two friends to a party room filled with dozens, this ritual of connection and support gives me energy and joy each day. And I know I am not alone in this feeling.

Friendship and Church Life in a Connected World

In a postmodern and high-tech age characterized by both unprecedented digital connectivity and personal isolation, friendship is on everyone’s mind. Social networking websites are the hottest sites on the Internet. Facebook now boasts some 300 million users²—nearly matching the total population of the United States! Twenty-first

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century technology has shrunk the world so it can fit on your computer or cell phone screen.

How should we respond to the opportunities and challenges posed by the technological advances that are transforming human communications, relationships, and culture around the globe? For almost two thousand years, the Christian church has led the way in creating community. Can we discover a transformative paradigm for church growth—not only in terms of the number of people who join but also in regard to the maturity of disciples who participate in the life of the church?

The key is to visualize how friendship interfaces with the church's call to be a community of faith-filled disciples seeking to share the good news of Jesus Christ with their friends, acquaintances, and others. Friendship, community, discipleship, evangelism, and social witness all play starring roles in the church's fulfillment of God's will.

Friendship Is “the Secret of the Universe”

Any serious study of friendship must begin by recognizing that a standard definition of *friendship* does not exist! In *Simple Words*, the distinguished Jewish scholar Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz examines the meaning of a host of common terms—such as *nature*, *good*, *faith*, and *death*—to reveal wisdom about how humans see themselves. Sandwiched between chapters on masks and family, he probes the meaning of the word *friends*. Steinsaltz writes: “The term ‘friendship’ does not have an exact, universal meaning. Its precise definition may be, like pornography, a matter of geography, and indeed, its meaning varies from country to country and from culture to culture.”³

We may not agree on a universal definition, yet friendship captures the hearts of all who dare to imagine that we can transcend loneliness and solitude. Henry David Thoreau wrote: “No word is oftener on the lips of men than Friendship, and indeed no thought

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is more familiar to their aspirations. All men are dreaming of it, and its drama, which is always a tragedy, is enacted daily. It is the secret of the universe.”⁴

If friendship is, indeed, “the secret of the universe,” then it’s not surprising we can find no simple, universally shared understanding of the term. But let’s not be too quick to abandon the search! Exemplifying the best of Jewish wisdom seeking, Rabbi Steinsaltz asks us all to spend a little more time examining the issue so that we can create a paradigm of friendship. Having made allowances for cultural and historical differences, the rabbi calls us to consider the creation of a framework for defining friendship:

The process of clarifying the meaning of friendship draws an outline, explores the boundaries of what exists, and creates the framework for developing the potential within the friendship...Without this process of recognizing, defining, and naming, if the friendship happens at all, it happens by chance. If so, it may not be appreciated until after it is gone, and the difference between “an acquaintance” and “a friend” realized only after the fact.⁵

Having made an impassioned case for a deeper examination of the definition of friendship, the rabbi returns to the crucial question and supplies an answer that serves as the key presupposition of this book:

What, then, is the essence of friendship? It is the voluntary sharing with another of things that are important for me, whether it is sharing my possessions or my persona, my time or my secrets. In fact, the sharing does not always mean giving, but rather it is the will to allow somebody else to participate in something that is dear to me.⁶

A Journey of Sharing—and a Shared Journey

Both Thoreau and Steinsaltz bring to the fore important aspects of authentic friendship. When Thoreau writes, “O my friend, may it come to pass, once, that when you are my friend I may be yours,”⁷ he rightly highlights the yearning we have for mutually satisfying companionship with others. We want to share life with those we love and appreciate. Most of life’s events are richer when we experience them with people close to us, or share our stories with those who care enough to listen closely to us.

However, if we view friendship only as a mutual admiration society, we risk falling into an abyss of narcissism. If two people truly hope to experience the depths of authentic friendship, then they must recognize that their relationship does not exist in a vacuum. Friendship is not an end in itself, but rather it has meaning only in relation to our social context. Thoreau might exclaim, “Friendship is first, Friendship last”⁸—but most of us would recognize that, like most everything else that is good in this world, true friendship gives birth to something of worth and significance that moves us beyond ourselves. The love between a husband and a wife often leads to the birth of a child; in Christian cosmology, the eternal love that exists within the Trinity gives birth to a universe of diversity and beauty. In a similar way, all authentic friendships should give something back to a world that made it possible for those friendships to exist in the first place.

Steinsaltz has wisely pointed out that friendship must have a purpose in order to be meaningful. In Christian terms, we would say that *purpose and meaning are found in the fulfillment of God’s will, and that God’s will is expressed in and through our spiritual journeys lived out under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.* Accordingly, in this book we will explore the dimensions of friendship within the context of the church, the spiritual body of Christ. Christ’s presence in our world is embodied in local congregations in which people called to do God’s will journey

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together and find companionship, encouragement, and needed life resources.

Friendship is a journey of sharing between two or more people. No one can journey through life completely alone. Linking our lives through relationships permits us to share our hearts with others who, in turn, reveal themselves to us. When this is done in a free, healthy, and positive context, it is more satisfying than almost any other human interpersonal experience. To be loved and accepted—and to respond in kind—is at the very heart of what it means to be a human created in the image of God.

Friendship is also a shared journey in which we combine forces with others to fulfill God's will. Sharing events and experiences is an integral aspect of friendship. But deep friendship moves beyond leisure activities, encouraging partners to reach their creative potential, to serve others with resolve and hope, and to make the world a better place. Friendships change history in both small and large ways.

I found myself mulling over the meaning of friendship as I was preparing for a summer 2009 research sabbatical focused on love, friendship, and mission. With the support of my denomination's Board of International Ministries, I explored this theme with American Baptist missionaries on five continents. In preparation for my meetings with these missionaries, I felt it was important to try all the exercises I was planning to put them through. One exercise was straightforward: based on your experience, define *friendship* in two sentences or less. Having spent more than two decades reflecting on the meaning of friendship, I thought I could make short shrift of this exercise. Three hours later, after multiple revisions, I finally settled on the following definition:

A friend is a person I love who also loves me—through our linked journeys, bonds of devotion, affection, loyalty, trust, and caring grow between us, so that we desire to

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share our hopes, dreams, joys, and fears with each other. My friends exert influence over my heart; the deeper our friendship, the more vulnerable and self-revealing I am willing to be, and the more their opinions and feelings about me affect me.

After listening to Thoreau and Steinsaltz, I would like to amend the definition by adding a third sentence: *Together with my friends, I hope to fulfill God's will for the church and change the world for Christ.*

Reaching for the Great Prize of Genuine Friends

Steinsaltz observes that “finding a genuine friend is a great prize.”⁹ Friendship is, indeed, a great prize. This is why, when we seek to describe the intimacy of our relationship with Christ, we often use the language of friendship. We sing and cherish hymns such as “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” Our hearts stir when we hear Jesus’ words, “I do not call you servants any longer . . . but I have called you friends” (John 15:15). We understand that friendship—with Christ and with one another—has the power to transform us and our world.

In this book, we will explore how friendship informs the internal life (discipleship) and outreach ministry (evangelism in a holistic sense) of the church in the twenty-first century. The first three chapters are foundational to our discussion. In chapter one, we will identify loneliness as the primary challenge to human happiness and explore its implications for the church. In chapter two, we will examine how Jesus understood and practiced the art of friendship. In chapter three, we will widen our investigation to develop a theology of friendship based on the totality of biblical teaching.

In chapter four, we will explore how friendship may be defined within the context of the church’s life and mission. How do we move beyond *friendliness* to *deep friendship* as the people of God?

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In chapter five, we will introduce the *Friendship Circles* model for appreciating our friends; and in chapter six, we will probe how our friendship circles may impact all aspects of a congregation's spiritual journey.

Chapters seven through ten explore how we may practice friendship as a personal and corporate spiritual discipline. In chapter seven, we will explore how the ties of friendship circles impact discipleship and evangelism, and we'll discuss two knotty issues—friendships with non-Christians and friendships with persons of the opposite sex. Chapter eight offers a paradigm for a spirituality of friendship, while chapter nine offers advice on how the church can practice friendship as a spiritual discipline. In chapter ten, we acknowledge that friendships do end, and offer practical counsel on how to negotiate this aspect of our journeys.

We'll conclude with an optimistic look forward to the next one hundred years of friendship, considering how churches and individuals can grow toward the cutting edge of healthy and faithful relationships. And since I hope you will want to put into practice the principles and insights conveyed throughout the book, an appendix featuring nine key friendship circles exercises is included for your personal and church group use.

As we embark upon this journey, I hope each chapter will stimulate your thinking and help you grow in your appreciation of friendship. Let's begin by confronting friendship's foe—loneliness.