

MAKING FRIENDS, MAKING DISCIPLES: GROWING YOUR CHURCH THROUGH AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS

By LEE B. SPITZER

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Reviewed by David Penno

Making Friends, Making Disciples: Growing Your Church Through Authentic Relationships is the first in a series of books (Living Church) designed to address eight key areas that affect the growth of Christian churches in the Western world today. The key areas are “biblical illiteracy, financial pressures, overwhelming diversity, shrinking numbers, declining leadership base, brokenness in and around us, narrowing inward focus, and unraveling of spiritual community” (p. v). These issues are addressed from a congregational viewpoint, with the intent of helping local church leaders meet these challenges.

In this book Spitzer asserts that there is no universally accepted definition of friendship, but he draws on the thinking of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz and Thoreau to create his own definition. Basically, he sees friendship as a relationship of sharing a journey designed to help others and to make the world a better place. This journey must take place in the setting of a community, and Spitzer sees the church as the community that can support this kind of friendship in the context of all that the church does, including evangelism and discipleship. The goal of friendship in the church is to fulfill the will of God and to change the world for Christ. So, for Spitzer, “friendliness is not friendship!” (p. 41). Friendship is something much deeper, and it affects our whole being and every aspect of our lives.

Love, friendship, and mission are all aspects of Calvary. The Trinity embodies all of these, and the Cross is the greatest expression of who God is and what He wants His church to be. Thus, “friendship is an essential aspect of the kingdom of God” (p. 17). Spitzer posits four facets of friendship that are vital for the church: “Friendship embodies sacrificial love,” “expresses the covenantal relationship we have with Christ and others in the kingdom,” “involves self-revelation—sharing the secrets of our souls,” and “is a choice” (pp. 17, 18). Christ is the model for the church to follow. Jesus redefined family to include all those who need to be His friend. It was through friendships and calls to friendship that Jesus ministered. The church He left behind was His group of friends.

Spitzer contends that the amazing wealth of the Western world has allowed for a tremendous increase in individualism and freedom. These in turn have opened the doors for self-expression and personal creativity. But the price for all of this is loneliness and alienation. The ability to go when, where, and how we please has isolated us in a way that more collective cultures do not experience.

The author asserts that the church is the ideal community to offer friendship to lonely people. The development of friendships, both with those inside and those outside the church, is the key to both quantitative and qualitative growth for the church today, particularly in Western cultures. Our relationship with God, as Christians, is a friendship that is the foundation for friendship with others. This is the basis for witnessing to the world. The friendship we have with God informs our friendships with others, which in turn becomes a means of drawing them to Jesus. Spitzer sees friendship as “a spiritual discipline” which, when practiced, causes “our personal lives and our public witness” to become one (p. 110).

Spitzer espouses a move from a model of evangelism that attempts to draw seekers to the church to an incarnational model. Friendships are the pathway that Jesus used to reach lost people, and the author exhorts the church to follow His example by incarnationally moving into the community at large through friendships that are designed to connect people with God. He offers three tools for implementing this model. These tools are “the Endless Possibilities spiritual journey paradigm, the Friendship Circles model, and the Health and Faithfulness congregational life and mission assessment tool” (p. 136).

Chapters 4-6 are the heart of Spitzer's approach to friendship as incarnational ministry and mission. In chapter 4, he offers seven steps for developing friendship, steps that help people to change how they think about their role in evangelism and discipleship. The purpose is to help an individual or a congregation to change their paradigm about church growth. In Chapter 5, Spitzer gives practical ways to analyze your own circles of friendship, and how to use them to create kingdom-building friendships. In chapter 6, he describes the Endless Possibilities Health and Faithfulness Survey, an instrument that Spitzer has developed to help churches evaluate the spiritual health of the congregation and their faithfulness to the mission.

For the 21st century, Spitzer sees "four friendship projects" that will "impact how we practice discipleship and evangelism": (1) more authentic and deeper interracial and cross-cultural friendships, (2) interfaith friendships where convictions and acceptance coexist, (3) equality of friendship between women and men, and (4) friendship as a force for peace (pp. 137-142).

When I first read the title of this book, my reaction was bland. There are many books already available about friendship evangelism. But as I read the book, I realized that this work goes beyond simply telling us that we should "make friends for Jesus." Spitzer has thought this out very carefully. He has developed a practical approach that churches can use to go beyond having a friendship evangelism program, to transforming the local community of believers into a church that has as its core essence an incarnational mission to the world. This book is more than theoretical. It offers practical steps for incarnational making friends for discipleship and evangelism. The exercises in the Appendix are extremely valuable to help you analyze and proactively shape your existing friendship patterns for advancing the Kingdom of God. These exercises can be used personally, in small groups, or even for the entire congregation.

I believe that this book is a valuable resource for pastors and congregational leaders. For those who are serious about congregations being truly missional, I would encourage you not only to read this work, but to implement the practical tools in your own life and that of your congregation. Spitzer has helped us move beyond merely talking about being missional to actually becoming so in our personal lives and in our congregations.