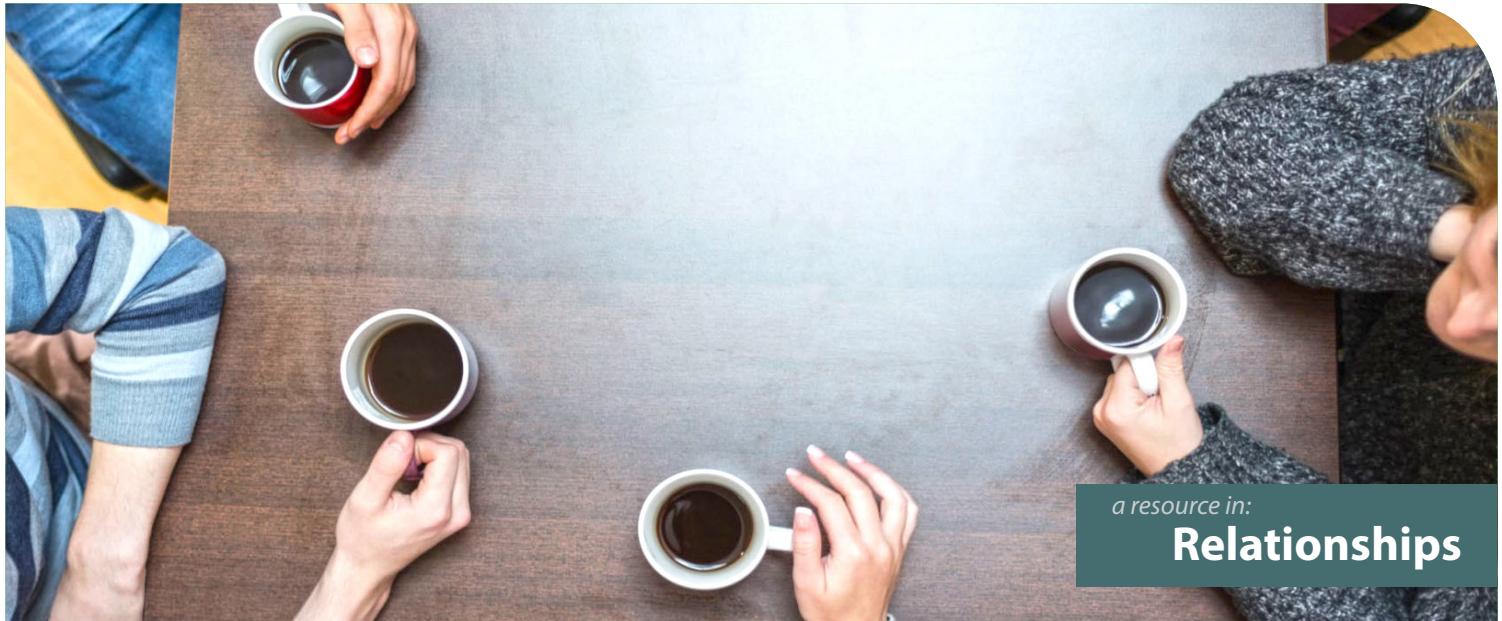


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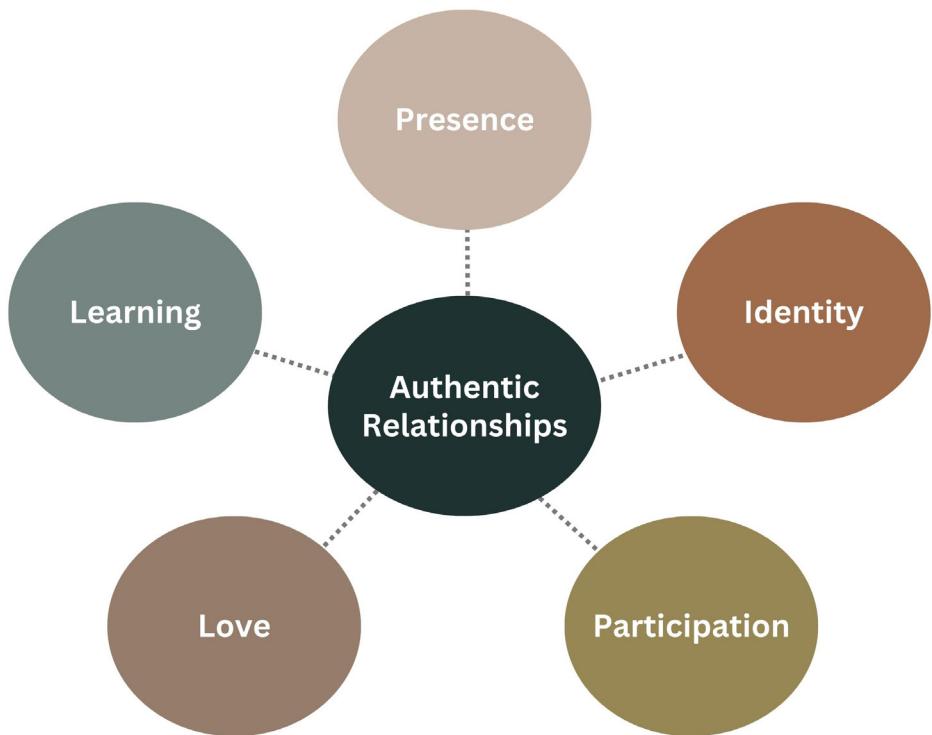
Loving Like Jesus: Building Authentic Relationships in the Church

The body of Christ provides opportunity for us to build and cultivate healthy relationships. God has designed church not just to be a place to come and worship him but also as a place where we learn to walk with him in relationship to other members of his body. This ongoing engagement is both challenging and rewarding. Through these relationships, the Holy Spirit can continue to refine our love to be Christlike, by which love others will know that we are his disciples (*John 13:34-35*).

The early church provides us with some helpful descriptors when it comes to building authentic relationships in the body of Christ. Consider this scripture in *Acts 2:42-47*:

"And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."

This section of Acts outlines several aspects that are important to consider as we seek to cultivate authentic relationships in the Body of Christ: learning, presence, identity, participation, and love.

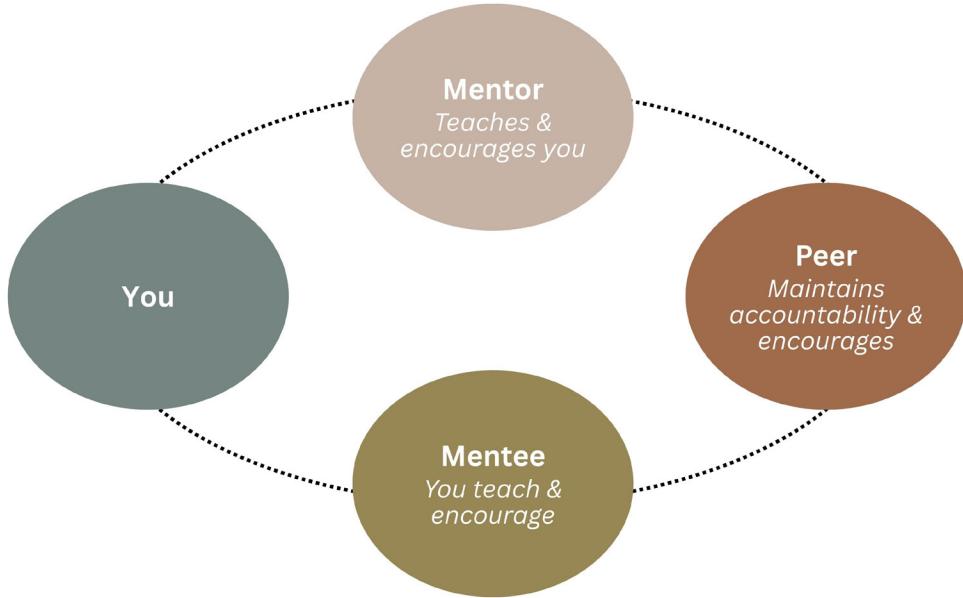


Learning: Continue in Doctrine

We see the early church model learning together, specifically the apostles' doctrine and teachings passed down from Jesus himself. Likewise, we are encouraged to build one another up by following the way of Jesus (*Rom. 14:19*). The body of Christ provides us the rare opportunity of having intergenerational relationships that serve various functions in our learning process. There is the teacher or mentor relationship – someone who teaches, disciples, mentors, and encourages

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you. Peer relationships serve as companions for those in similar life stages, helping to maintain accountability and provide encouragement. Finally, there are those in your life who may be learners or mentees who learn from you as you teach, disciple, mentor, and encourage.



We see this modeled in the account of Acts. For example, it can be easy to forget that Ananias played a crucial role in the life of Paul soon after his conversion. Barnabas is an example of a peer and encourager to his fellow companions in the Lord. Additionally, Paul became a teacher and mentor to Timothy within the body of Christ. These types of relationships provide us with the opportunity to learn and grow as we listen to one another. We are not designed to go through life alone or isolated, but we are to be connected to others. Learning together involves seeking this counsel and support as we walk through life.

Presence: Fellowship

Fellowship within the body of Christ involves offering our presence and receiving the presence of others. We see this power in and between us as a Christian community as we fellowship together. Paul encouraged the church at Rome to “*receive ye one another, as Christ also received us*” (*Romans 15:7*). We do well to consider how God receives us based on our “being” and not on our “doing.” Building authentic relationships in the body of Christ reflects this reception as we relate to others and receive others willingly and unconditionally – even when other’s behavior has been imperfect.

In addition, God has given each of us gifts by his grace and for his design (*Romans 12:4-6*). We are to recognize, acknowledge, and praise the gift(s) another has. Doing so acknowledges the beauty of God in providing for his body. When we esteem one another, we are actively appreciating his design and affirming how the presence of others can shape you into a more sanctified person.

Identity: Breaking Bread

Eating a meal together can be an intimate way of sharing time together. It conveys our vulnerability and our dependence on something outside of ourselves. Breaking bread also can be where we treat each other with honor and importance by listening to and respecting each other’s stories and testimonies. As we assume good intent in each other and ensure confidentiality of another’s story, we build safety, relationship, and deeper connection.

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Sharing a meal together also has a way of forming and uniting us. We are called to share the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16) and be unified around our core identity in him and his teaching. We can agree on biblical absolutes while having differences in certain areas of conscience, but we seek to esteem mutual respect and love in all areas.

Participation: Prayers

The early church was also grounded in active prayer. This prayer reflected a level of ongoing participation among members of the body as they showed up and engaged. This participation was about encouraging others to persevere and grow in love and good deeds (*Hebrews 10:24-25*). It can also involve serving one another.

There is a myriad of ways that you can serve members in the body of Christ. It may be helpful to consider ways you are currently serving your church family as well as areas you are being stretched to serve. Throughout the body, there are differing responsibilities and ministries. We are designed and given grace to fill different needs within the body, and this service might look different in different seasons of your life. We do well to be faithful to the opportunities we are called to and to encourage others to fulfill their responsibilities, though different, in the body of Christ.

Love: Share

Sharing is an act of love and can be manifested in various ways. We are reminded in *1 Corinthians 12:26a*, “*And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it.*” Though not easy, it is a privilege to suffer with others in the Christian community. This involves the gift of actively listening as you seek to understand those suffering. Love practices empathy as you “feel with” others, providing comfort so another member is not carrying a burden alone. It is important to remember this power of presence in moments of suffering. Your active and engaged presence speaks louder than any words can. It is often helpful to keep words to a minimum and allow the suffering member to speak.

Love also involves sharing in the victories and joys of others “*or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it*” (*1 Corinthians 12:26b*). Paul encouraged the church at Philippi to “*Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice*” (*Philippians 4:4*). Sharing joys together both binds us to each other while also pointing us to the very source of unending joy.

Conclusion

Building relationships in the body of Christ is a process that requires intentionality and time. As the Holy Spirit worked through the early church, we can see healthy descriptors that guide us as we seek to deepen relationships and love as Jesus loved. In doing so, we not only grow more connected with others but also perhaps begin to understand in a deeper way the love which our Savior has for us.