



The Relational Model

Sometimes known as the friendship model or the “warm, fuzzy model” the Relational Model gives priority to relationships. Sanguine types seem to do this naturally, but not necessarily with purpose. Simply being nice doesn’t guarantee a relationship, although it makes a good starting point.

Driven individuals can co-opt the Relational Model as a means to “earn the right to be heard.” By spending some time befriending someone, you can create capital or leverage to get the person to do something you want. For example, if I spend some time playing basketball with you at the park when you want me to, then you should come with me to the youth group when I want you to do so. I would hope that you would soon choose to come to the youth group because you want that yourself, which would free me up to start a relationship with another person to try to get them to the youth group.

Using relationships in this instrumental manner departs from the pure application of the model, although it tends to be the common way individuals and groups have used it. The true Relational Model develops relationships as an end in itself, without any strings attached. From a Christian perspective, being with another person corresponds to God’s practices of being with us. If we want to go deeper than that, we would go deeper into the relationship to understand the person and to experience that person’s life, just as Jesus did in the Incarnation.

Biblical Basis

The first chapter of the Bible shows God’s intention for relationships. “So God created human beings, making them to be like himself. He created them male and female.” (Genesis 1:27 TEV) By the third chapter, God came to the humans and they hid due to their guilt from sin (Genesis 3:8-10). Some see the rest of Scripture recording God seeking to restore the lost relationship, culminating with “Now God’s home is with mankind! He will live with them, and they shall be his people. God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. (Revelation 21:3 TEV)

Between those bookends are examples such as the introduction of the wilderness sanctuary. “Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8 NIV). The incarnation exemplifies God coming to us (Hebrews 1:1-3). As The Message paraphrases it, “The Word [God] became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood (John 1:1, 14 MSG).”

The visit of Jesus to Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) illustrates a point of tension with the Relational Model. Do-gooder Martha

sought Christ's assistance to send Mary to the kitchen to help with the necessary work. The response Jesus gave echoes through the years, "There is really only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it—and I won't take it away from her (Luke 10:42 TLB)!" For centuries, relational people seem to "get it" while others get frustrated, feel guilty, and then kick back into gear to get things done while the relational people just hang out and seem fine with that.

What It Looks Like

Being together is more important than programs. Visiting a person at their home or school or work often makes a greater impact than simply going to church or going through the motions at youth group. When it comes to programs, people take priority over content. In fact, you will probably schedule time for nothing but hanging out, maybe providing snacks and a smoothie bar, plus a setting with comfortable chairs and background music. If you have a program, it will include ice breakers, group building activities, and flexible interaction rather than a monologue or rigid, pre-arranged flow chart. Social networking becomes ministry and connections register more than official meetings.

A ministry of presence happens when a relationally-oriented person comes into the sphere of another person. Sharing means a two-way street, with openness to accept or decline whatever the other person might offer. The goal of understanding supersedes any pre-set agenda. Often Westerners have difficulty comprehending the Eastern element of fellowshiping, usually in the setting of a meal. Instead of quoting Revelation 3:20 (Behold I stand at the door and knock. . .) the relational model simply does it. Food often plays a significant role, as does time, finding rhythms, listening, and savoring.

Keys To Make It Work

When you hear someone say, "God made us as human beings; not human doings," how do you respond? If you agree, then you are the key to make it work. If you disagree, then you need someone else to make it work while you complete all the chores necessary to pull off a program. Dotted the 'i's' and crossing the 't's' might seem essential to some, but they hardly represent an entire word, much less a complete letter! Besides, essence matters more than image.

Another key is to manage or re-direct the type-A people who need organizational charts, job descriptions, schedules, lists, numbers, clip boards, and weekly reports. If you don't, the busy-bodies might unnecessarily distract you or kill the relational spirit. Have them do their thing, but don't make that the main thing.

You also need a strong enough relational presence to make this the culture of your ministry model. This can come from one powerful influencer, or multiple influencers. The larger your group, the greater the relational presence needed, for it tends to become dwarfed by size and sidelined when efficiency demands increase.

Obstacles

The biggest obstacle is time. And it only seems to get worse in capitalistic societies in which time equals money. Monetizing relationships smacks of sacrilege. The numbers game questions the true value of people by using different metrics and persistently taking measurements.

A single leader has limitations when it comes to having personal relationships with everyone in a youth or young adult group. If access to the primary leader is mandatory, then the group and ministry will extend no more than a dozen people. But if the Relational Model spreads beyond one leader,

it can increase the total number by as many key relational leaders as are available. But who's counting?

Another obstacle is how people count ministry, specifically certain ministry times or places. For example, spending four to six hours with young people late at night but missing church the next day registers as a lack of ministry rather than deep or lengthy ministry.

Opportunities

Opportunities abound wherever people exist. The need increases when people are busy running to and fro, when they don't listen well, and whenever you have individuals looking for heroes, role models, and/or mentors. Empathy will always be more potent than sympathy.

