



Lewis Center  
for Church Leadership

# Leading Ideas

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## **Leaders Need Holy Friendships** by Tom Berlin

Many think of a leader as the lone figure who walks in front of the crowd. A far more healthy view would ask how a leader experiences the community of friendship. In friendship, true friendship, we experience true grace. Our true friends are ones we have allowed to know us. We have granted them the honor of transparency and truthfulness. Before our friends we cheerfully lower the facade that we sometimes carefully craft for others. In the presence of our friends we no longer need to appear fully confident, fully competent, fully discerning of God's ways. This is not to say that we live in a duality of a public self that hardly resembles our private self. The leader who is holy in public only to be profane among colleagues has no true friends. For friends would call us to a consistency of character.

The pleasure of friendship is found in our ability to share a full range of experience with another. When things are going well, we are able to share good news without fear that they will think we are expressing pride or arrogance. When all is not well, our friends can hear our doubts and sadness without questioning our competence. Our friends know all too well that we are imperfect, inconsistent, and often conflicted. Despite this, they exhibit love and loyalty in the reliability of their relationship with us. This is a true experience of Christian grace. It is the unmerited favor for which our souls long.

One of the difficulties of leadership is that others judge us regularly. This is the nature of leadership. Paul encountered this in his ministry. Some questioned whether he was a faithful servant of Christ. He writes in 1 Corinthians 4:3-4: "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me" (NIV). Paul suggests that while he is not aware of any wrongdoing on his part, he knows that he is not necessarily free of sin. His trust is that the Lord will judge him with both justice and grace. The power of friends in Christ is that they know this about us. They are aware that we are a mixture of saint and sinner. Along with this insight is the grace of assuming the best about who we are becoming in Christ rather than judging the worst of who we have been.

The reason we need friends is that Paul's passage so easily resonates with many leaders. Most of us have some similar story of having others assume the very worst about our motives or actions. While it is encouraging to know that we will one day receive our commendation from God, we often need smaller doses of it a bit sooner. Friendship is often how God reminds us of the good we have done. When we are reminded of goodness in the past, we can put present criticism in perspective. We must hear what critics think of us. They often deliver some full or partial truth. But it is equally important that we not allow their criticism to define our worth.

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The beauty of friendship is that it can bring to light what is hidden from our view in a way that is transformative. Such revelations, while not enjoyable, are necessary for us to grow in faithfulness to Christ. Years ago my family was enjoying a vacation at the beach with a friend and his family. We were together for a week and enjoyed it greatly. One afternoon my friend invited me to take a walk on the beach. As we strolled along, he asked me: “Are you aware of the way you talk to Karen (my wife)? You are really short with her and your sarcasm is a bit cutting. Is something frustrating you that you would like to talk about?”

Unaware of what he was seeing, I wanted to tell him he was wrong, but I trusted the observation of my friend. We kept talking. I felt surprise that someone who knew me well was willing to call the best out of me, even if it meant risk. The rest of that week I tried to attend to the way I spoke and treated my wife to convey love and honor to her. In the years since that conversation, I have thought back upon it many times. My friend’s words serve as a reminder to show deeper love to Karen. That conversation was also a defining moment in our friendship. He demonstrated a willingness to call me to a deeper level of Christian discipleship in my marriage. It was a strange compliment to realize that his willingness to risk that observation actually meant he felt I was capable of doing better.

Jesus taught us to live a new way: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because a servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, . . . (John 15:13-15 NRSV)

Isn't it amazing to consider that Christ thinks of his disciples as his friends? It is the will of Christ that we so abide in him that we might come to experience life-changing relationships with others who love him as well.

Tom Berlin (tberlin@florisumc.org) is lead pastor of the Floris United Methodist Church (www.florisumc.org) in Herndon, Virginia.

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