

Friends: Natural Networks for Engaging Evangelism

by Mike Ruhl

This article first appeared in the June 17, 2005, Mission Moments newsletter from the Center for U.S. Missions. Permission is given to copy this article for distribution within your own congregation. Please credit the author and the Center for U.S. Missions in Irvine, California, www.centerforusmissions.org. For more information, contact the Center at 949-854-8002 x1780.

Take a "mission moment" right now to contemplate the gift of friendship.

Without hesitation, many people will lift up *relationships with friends and loved ones* as the most important things in their lives next to the crown of everlasting life purchased and won by Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Dictionary.com offers several definitions of a friend: (1) a person whom one knows, likes, and trusts; (2) a person with whom one is allied in a struggle or cause; and (3) one who supports, sympathizes with or patronizes a group, cause or movement.

Friends tend to be *transparent*; that is, they are willing to give to one another the ability to hurt them, but trust radically that the data flowing from the emotional (visceral) surrender will not be used against them. With friends, one finds no need to wear a mask and disguise the fears and feelings of the heart. It is safe to open up and get personal and to discuss the things that truly matter.

There are few more fertile fishing pools for Christian, life-transforming evangelism than the natural network of friendships with which we interact on a regular basis. Some (many?) of our friends are great people. Most of them would give us the "shirts off their back," even as we would do the same for them. That is because friends are highly vested in the happiness and welfare of each other; a kind of *unconditional love* exists among friends. But numbers of these same friends are without the assurance of the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God made possible by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

That translates into being the *salt of the earth* (Matthew 5:13) by blessing our unchurched friends with the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, by sharing with them fresh stories of the goodness and grace of God in Jesus Christ, and inviting them to the well of God's Word. What excellent counsel for friendship evangelism is provided in the words of 1 Peter 3:15 ... *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect ...*

Christians and congregations which see the dynamic potential of friendship evangelism will be pleased to know that new friendship evangelism resources are being prepared by the Center for US Missions, and will be available *at no cost* in downloadable format from the Center's website (www.centerforusmissions.org) in August of 2005. These excellent resources are called *Friendship Ablaze!* and they include: (1) Friendship Bible studies (2) Service and sermon resources which relate friendship evangelism to the church year (3) PowerPoint presentations for friendship evangelism teaching and preaching (4)

Information on movie clips and video resources which highlight friendship evangelism (5) a link to a free downloadable software package called *Prospect Keeper*, which enables the congregation to track contact with friends who come as guests to the congregation (6) helps for Christian Day School and Preschool friendship evangelism and (7) helps for incorporating friends and guests into the life of the congregation.

Remember that the *Ablaze!* Movement in the LCMS calls for **50,000,000** "critical events" in the United States by 2017, the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. The critical event occurs when one Lutheran Christian gives a witness about Christ to an unchurched /uncommitted person, enabling that person to encounter Christ) These ***Friendship Ablaze!*** resources will be a terrific encouragement toward the attainment of that missional goal.