



Let Love Live

By: Dary Northrop

In 1986, Bonnie and I came to Fort Collins, Colorado. At 28, I was elected senior pastor of a 65-year-old church. We were young and had never been senior pastors. A young pastor and a church with a multigenerational heritage can create a recipe for conflict.

But we did not experience conflict. Why? Because our people loved us the way we were. They accepted our ministry and us. As we started loving each other, it became a good marriage. God saw our hearts and their hearts, and molded us together as a church family.

Nearly two decades later, God has used that foundational principle of love to grow Timberline Church and its members. Our church theme is Let Love Live. Love has shaped my entire approach to ministry.

The more I reflect on the love of Christ, the more I am convinced that it is the single greatest tool for breaking down barriers. Christ's love draws people from every corner of society to Timberline. Christ's love will bring people to your church. Christ's love will guide you in how to relate to those people until they fully discover His love for themselves.

Love Invites

One of the first things you will discover about Christ's love is that it attracts people into your church who may make you uncomfortable unless you are consistently operating in love.

We had not been at Timberline very long before a young woman attended our service and was radically saved. She was a stripper. She found the Lord in spite of our best efforts. Her friends came to her water baptism, and they found the Lord. These were not the girls next door that many churches attract. Soon they were joined by all kinds of people — people with body piercings, people with tattoos — people whose appearance seemed to run counter to what we thought appropriate for a church.

These people did not seem to fit into our Sunday School classes or small groups. None of the curriculum we were using worked for them. At first, we were unable to effectively minister to these new believers. We could not connect with their world, and that opened our eyes. So we determined we would change. Out of that determination our mission and theme, Let Love Live, was born. Those three words gave us the power to tell our visitors that no matter who they are or where they come from, we will let love live.

We discovered that God's love is alive and well. Christians often put God's love in a box and try to define it through prejudicial filters. When you love people the way they are, even before they change, you value them as God's creation. That kind of love changes your perspective. You begin to see their God-given value.

This kind of love is the root of evangelism. People want true, authentic relationships in which they can be vulnerable and transparent.

The most effective way to share the gospel is through friendships. Strangers leading strangers to the Lord is becoming more unlikely in our culture. We teach our people to journey with the lost, love them where they are, become their friends without strings attached or targeting them for evangelism. The lost need to know that a believer's friendship does not hinge on a salvation decision. If they never came to the Lord, the friendship will continue.

We want our lost friends to realize that they do not need to lead a double life or hide the things that bind them. Because I am a pastor, people sometimes hide their cigarette behind them when they see me coming. That is embarrassing for me. I want to tell them, "Please don't hide your addiction from me."

The church is a place where we bring our addictions, not hide them. We have ashtrays outside our church because some people smoke before they come in. Their smoking is the least of our worries. We want to love them as they are and let the Holy Spirit change them. We catch the fish; God cleans the fish.

I live out this principle in my relationships. My prayer is that some of my non-Christian friends can say, "Dary is my best friend."

The church has hidden behind the scriptural command to be separate from the world and has forgotten that the focus of that command is to separate ourselves from sinful lifestyles and separate ourselves to God in service. While we are serving God and living like Jesus, we are to reach out to the lost with the same love and compassion Christ showed. Jesus spent time with sinners. It is an amazing thing to say that Jesus ate with sinners; it is even more amazing to me that sinners wanted to eat with Jesus.

I joined Rotary. I go skiing with pagans. I dine with people who order drinks at dinner. Believers need to go to the Christmas party at their workplaces. They need to be involved in their city's life. They can join the city council or run for office. I want our church to release believers to go where lost people are and love them where they are.

Love Is Not a Sales Pitch

When we connect with unsaved people, they need to see we are genuine. Sometimes our presentation of the gospel is like receiving unsolicited phone calls at dinnertime. Most people are not interested in talking with someone they do not know who has something to sell. At times, Christians are guilty — even when their motivation is their love for God — of viewing the gospel as something to sell, or at least to give away. But pastors need to let their preaching and teaching allow people to journey into their relationship with God.

This is a big shift from some of the old paradigms. Some people need to take time to discover God. In fact, God tends to work with many people over time to draw them to himself. We have seen people take a 3-, 4-, or 6-month journey. They faithfully come to church, and even give in the offering before they accept Christ.

We need to encourage the lost in their journey. When they reach the point where they can say, "I believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God and died for my sins," this needs to be a natural step instead of a leap over some great, dark wall.

Some preachers are good at talking, but not good at listening. The unchurched need a pastor who has good listening skills. What the lost have to say to us will change what we have scripted to say to them. People rarely ask the questions we are prepared to answer.

When we do talk, we need to create an atmosphere in our church where nonbelievers feel comfortable. I do this all the time, and I did not know it was unique until a few pastors mentioned it to me. When I welcome people to a service, I often say: "We welcome those of you who have not made a decision to follow Christ. We want you to ask questions. We want you to journey with us. Think through what we believe in. We hope you can learn to understand the claims of Christ for yourself, and not just accept them from us. Let God reveal himself to you. We are glad you are here. Make yourself at home."

I recommend that kind of approach for pastors, even if they are pastoring a small church where they know everyone and do not see any nonbelievers in the audience. Doing this changes the attitude of the congregation toward nonbelievers and prepares them to love lost visitors unconditionally.

Every weekend people say to me, "I am not a Christian yet, but I am thinking about it." They share where they are in their journey and ask for prayer. They may share a specific prayer request. I am learning how rare that kind of interaction is in many of our churches because the atmosphere does not allow it.

Today is the day of salvation; but, when we press people for a response, we can ruin what the Holy Spirit is doing. I want people to understand for themselves that the Spirit is prompting them to think about spiritual matters. I want to help them on their journey by encouraging and strengthening them. I laugh with people, cry with them, and get involved in their lives.

Does that mean I avoid giving altar calls for salvation in our church? No. I usually offer this salvation invitation: "Today, as I wrap this up, I want to give those who feel God knocking on their hearts opportunity to respond. You know you are separated from God. But today, by faith, you want to accept Christ into your life. I will lead you in a prayer, and I invite you to respond if you believe it is your time. If you seriously mean it, your life will totally change. If you will pray this prayer with me by faith, slip your hand up right now, wherever you are."

Hands go up every service. Sometimes people respond after attending 3 months, but some respond on their first Sunday. I do not ask people to stand or come forward. I lead them in prayer where they are seated. Then we give them a Bible and information to help get them involved in discipleship.

Love Reaches Out

When Christ's love is alive in a church, it focuses on the Great Commission and looks for ways to connect with the community. Some pastors feel that outreach must always be connected with an event. Outreach needs to connect with people's everyday lives.

We try to conduct as many funerals as possible involving families not affiliated with a church. Funeral directors call us, and we gladly help because we know we will minister to families. That allows us as a church to reach people going through grief and sorrow with love. We try to do the same with weddings. We recognize that we cannot marry just anybody. But whenever you can, create an atmosphere in which a young couple starts a lifelong relationship with a church's blessing. You have given that new family a wonderful gift.

We look for nonchurch events we can help sponsor. We are a polling place for our precinct. We allow the city to hold their functions in our building. We have attorneys, a weekly realtors group, and other public activities that hold meetings in our facilities. We do this as a ministry to the community. We only charge for the cost of cleanup, maintenance, and any labor such as running the sound system.

The coffee shop café in our church has a huge impact. People who have never been to a church service meet regularly with their group and eat lunch in our café.

Our building has not caved in or gotten struck by lightning because we use it for these functions. I believe God is pleased. The lost are becoming familiar with our church. They realize, We can come into this church, and people are nice here. Before long, they come to a church service.

We have outdoor patios where people can sit and listen to the service. They can also watch the service on a monitor upstairs if they are not comfortable coming into the sanctuary. It is important, however, for people to have opportunity to engage in the life of the church. I want to give them every opportunity to do so. That is the spirit of our church.

I am not against organized events and outreaches; however, I want those projects to supplement the everyday focus we maintain. We sponsor an Adopt-a-Family project at Christmas. We ask for names of people in our city who have needs. Over the years we have adopted thousands of families. In fact, we are the go-to place for our city. When the Salvation Army partners with the local Santa Cops, they work from our list. Families are not required to visit our church to receive these gifts. The people in our congregation buy gifts for their chosen family and deliver them to their home with no strings attached. They simply tell this hurting family, "We love you, and we want this to be a great Christmas for you."

The week of the Fourth of July we hold a huge event for our community. We honor military and medical personnel, along with our law enforcement agencies. We hold a big rally and thank them for all they do for our community.

One key to loving and reaching your city is to learn what the community sees as its needs. Beyond our own food pantry, we contribute to the city food bank. We tell city officials, "We do not want one homeless person in this town. We will support this shelter if you build it."

We ask, "What do you need? How can we help?" We have volunteered with Habitat for Humanity. We gave money to help build our senior citizens center. It is not a Christian-care facility, but you will see our church's name on the plaque in that facility as well as on plaques throughout Fort Collins because we give to high schools, junior high schools, and other community-building projects to support the vision they have to reform the city.

I believe giving to the community is part of being a good steward. It excites people to see local needs being met. At a recent missions banquet we gave \$50,000 to agencies in our community to say, We love you. We embrace you. We believe in what you are doing. When a church reaches out to its community and helps in tangible ways, people realize that the church is vital to the community. They will believe in you and will listen when you talk.

Love Touches the World

Some people might wonder if Timberline is so focused on Fort Collins that we have forgotten the rest of the world. The Great Commission starts in Jerusalem and Judea, and we honor that in every expression of our ministry. But it also extends to the ends of the earth. We believe we are responsible to reach the world. We take that responsibility seriously.

Missions awareness starts in our sanctuary. We support and feature many missionaries. We present 5-minute spotlights to make our people aware of places in need around the globe. We show a great deal of video footage. Assemblies of God World Missions has some excellent material. We also produce some of our own.

We promote a missions mindset throughout our building. As our missions convention approaches every year, we place pictures, banners, posters, and video screens around our church so people can learn about different places in the world.

Missions involvement extends to the trips we organize. We often schedule a dozen missions trips each year. We take medical teams and worship teams from our church to countries where we partner with Assemblies of God missionaries. We have seen the powerful effects of taking people to a ministry site. But we cannot spend all of our money to take people there. We need to give money to help the missionaries.

Once you develop a missions mindset in your church, you only need to take people to a ministry site one time. When they experience missions firsthand, they automatically become missions givers. They see that our missionaries do a great job with the funds we send.

We never apologize when we take missions offerings. Our people understand that when we give in a missions offering, we excitedly look forward to how God will use it. We challenge people to give in each offering if possible. This is part of being a Christian with a godly worldview.

Love Has Many Faces

We constantly promote — what I call the DNA of Timberline — the diversity of our city that is represented in our church. We have the rich and poor, young and old, traditional and contemporary worshipping together. We want Timberline to be an environment where differences exist without getting in the way.

During the week various interest groups from our church meet. For example, we have cyclists, motorcycle groups, knitting groups, and many more. Small groups are great catalysts to bring people together to journey in their faith with God.

When I look over our auditorium during worship, I see someone in his 80s sitting alongside a 21-year-old, and both are worshipping God. There will be elements of the worship service that will appeal more to the 80-year-old while other elements will appeal more to the 21-year-old. But each element is valuable.

We always sing one hymn on Sunday because there are great hymns that need to be sung. We do not sing hymns to please the older generation. We sing hymns because the younger generation needs to value the power in those hymns. We need this diversity.

We do not have many Hispanics in our town, but we do have a large representation attending our church. Many do not speak English, but they sit through the service because they want what God is doing among us. We now supply headphones with interpreters.

Democrats and Republicans worship together at Timberline. We do not tell people who to vote for. We say, “How many of you agree that we need to vote and pay attention to what is happening in our culture and our city?” That is how I present the issues whenever an election draws near.

I believe in the power of diversity. I often say, “You might not like this style, but it is not about you; it is about God. What does God like? God likes diversity. Look at the world. Look at whom He created. Let’s not be self-centered in our preferences. Let’s release other people and honor other people. Let’s respect diversity.”

Here is the crux of the matter. There must be unity in the body of Christ, but unity is not uniformity. Unity is diversity with cooperation. Unity is the life of the church, and that sets us apart at Timberline. Christ has given us boundless love for one another amidst the incredible diversity He has created.

Let love live.

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