

# Can a Simple “Backbone Habit” Re-Align Relationships?

Dave Rahn, PhD

## ABSTRACT

In spring 2021, 24 busy youth ministry thought leaders – including 12 professors – pilot tested the perceived value of sharing very brief weekly times with an explicit Jesus-centered focus. Triplets were arranged to engage four different 30-minute Zoom meetings. Asserting that the focus of biblical faith-as-grit is dynamic companionship with Jesus Christ, this paper explores substantial positive feedback from participants in order to understand and encourage innovative practices that re-norm otherwise formal organizational relationships around faithfulness.

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## ***Jesus is Lord.***

This was the earliest creedal confession among baptized followers of Christ. It combines simplicity with compelling clarity. It defines membership and insists on unity. It is boundless in its reach. Those who embrace this testimony surrender all rights to self-determination. Those who deny this truth today will eventually acknowledge it. Rooted in the historical reality of Jesus’s death and resurrection, confessors are transformed by the indwelling presence of Christ. How could they not be? Creation’s Alpha and Omega lives within them, deploying them on a mission of ultimate reconciliation that cannot fail. Accepting his all-or-nothing terms, they are consumed by Jesus, their Lord. It’s inconceivable that Christ could “slip into someone without causing any noticeable effect.”<sup>1</sup>

Everything changes when people are humbly aligned by King Jesus.

Significantly, but not surprisingly, this confession represents the DNA of a good God who generously seeks the best for creation. Aristotle categorically asserted material substance ranks first among the world’s realities; relationality was fourth. But the pre-existence of our trinitarian, interdependent God – overtly declared in Scripture to be love<sup>2</sup> – challenges this understanding. Arguably, listing the three elements that constitute an atom pales in comparison to explaining how they relate to

one another. Similarly, it's the earth's orbital relationship to the sun that matters most...not its material existence as one of eight other planets. The theological truth is reinforced by empirical observations: ***a world created in love reflects the priority of relationships above all else.*** This assertion guides our reading of all Scripture. Note, for example, Jesus's caution that victims will one day be scammed by Christian faith imposters.<sup>3</sup> He even warned of an eternally consequential self-delusion some will experience; mighty deeds done in Christ's name cannot compensate for the lack of relationship with this King.<sup>4</sup> Confessing "*Jesus is Lord*" may not be the private matter widely preferred among Americans, but it is deeply and thoroughly personal.

So it is that the Great Commission is an extension of the Greatest Commandment. Whatever form of making disciples that does not result in churches branded by love and unity has strayed far from the heart of Jesus. Consider yet another warning, this time from the risen Christ to the once-exemplary church in Ephesus: "*But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first. If you don't repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches.*"<sup>5</sup> Perhaps we should call it what it is. The category may be relationships, but the true target is love.

The incarnation was an extension of God's love. Jesus's mission was to reveal what could not otherwise be known about God and, ultimately, make possible (through his death on the cross) humankind's reconciliation with God. Without such a sacrifice, all of us were lost in space, disconnected from the one orbital relationship that makes life - true life - attainable. At a perfectly timed juncture in history, Jesus was dispatched to a particular nation trapped in eternally consequential misconceptions about the God they had been chosen to accurately represent to the rest of the world. It was not for lack of effort that they misunderstood God. In fact,

their sanctimonious elite practiced dutiful religious observances with fierce dedication. Embedding Israel's life together around Old Testament stories of God's powerful, miraculous rescues, this occupied people – at least those whose faith was still active – looked forward to God's next visitation. They expected a Messiah who would deliver them from Roman oppression.

What they got, and largely failed to recognize, was the very Word of God, dwelling among them in gentle, tender, compassionate, and *corrective* truth. Seeking to become worthy of their fearsome God, Israel's 'deity experts' had led grinding, relentless efforts to be good. The God of Moses who comes through in awesome displays of power deserved such obsessive dedication. But Israel's flailing piety was failing in ways acutely *felt* by the impossibly burdened masses. This was an exasperation made even heavier because leaders failed to acknowledge it.

Into this mix came Jesus, de-constructing the entire system. In the fashion of a teaching rabbi, Jesus called disciples to accompany him. Along the way, he reframed everything in the language of relationship and insisted that his mission was to deepen, not abolish, what could be known about life with God. He promised a re-ordering of burdens that helped life to flow as it was intended. To abide with Jesus in the constant, joyful companionship of the Father and the Holy Spirit was an unheard-of familiarity. This was central to Jesus's final 'lesson' less than 24 hours before his death. No wonder "*ears to hear*" are required! The new covenant Jesus Christ introduced was so scandalous to Israel's first century religious gatekeepers that they sanctioned his crucifixion.

Those of us who try to understand and explain the tsunamic forces of the early church on the Roman world would do well to consider the common *grit* of Jesus's handpicked followers. This is what made belonging with him so different from every

other strenuous pursuit. Called to be with him, commissioned to change the world with the promise of his accompaniment, directed to wait until this pledge was fulfilled by the fresh indwelling of the Holy Spirit, these world-changers represented their rabbi well enough to be labeled as “Christians”. The possibilities are limitless for unschooled, ordinary people whose gritty faith is targeted around ***being with Jesus***, the risen Lord of all creation. Life with God has been the point all along, in spite of the countless ways we’ve skewed this focus.

The rescue King Jesus delivers is aimed at our core. Still a mystery, this transformation works from the inside-out, attacking the ego that drives us daily into ditches of death and despair. We know enough to recognize how we are crushed by sin’s ravenous thievery. Left alone, our descent is accelerated by self-deception. We are, as the old hymn asserts, “prone to wander.” All of us who are ministry thought leaders, whether practitioners or scholars, should be humbly subdued by the constraints of our calling. *While* we steer ministry efforts on behalf of those we serve, we can’t lose sight of the fact that we’re not immune from losing our way.

The intimacy Jesus offers his followers is demanding and invasive.

What is the end-user experience like? Much is being made of how Gen Z young people are evacuating churches and abandoning their faith. Fifty percent of 18-29-year-olds who grew up Christian are now disengaged from churches – only about a quarter of them said they were “loved and valued.” But for one in ten from this population, labeled as *resilient disciples*, there is this sharp contrast: 83% strongly agreed that they were loved and valued.<sup>6</sup> Efforts are taking shape to redirect whatever ministry practices are contributing to the widespread adolescent faith exodus so that discipleship resiliency among young people becomes a revitalizing catalyst for the Bride of Christ. The **TENx10 Collaboration**, for example, is directing

robust formational attention to how young people grow their belonging, identity, and purpose in Christ. It's in this context, motivated to close the gap between the relationships God wants for us and what we experience, that a modest experimental discovery was undertaken in the spring of 2021. May this story of curiosity spark scholarly research and, more importantly, sanction gritty ministry innovations.

### ***The Initial Formulation***

A collaboration's sweet spot is not easy to find. Stated generically, there is uncommon synergy when participants become contributing co-owners, moved to sacrificial efforts by the value of the shared cause. Beyond the mutual self-interest stakeholders need to approve a merger lies the potential of a tsunamic movement carried along by relentless waves of heroic responses. What inspires busy ministry leaders to redirect their activity into transformational investments?

The logic of common benefit that can be scaled for greater accomplishments seems inadequate. *Been there; done that.* Youth ministry's landscape is littered with campaign artifacts and "good-old-days" memories of events gathering huge crowds. As of now, they don't seem to have made as much of a difference as visionaries imagined. The evidence slapping us around in church and culture suggests American Christians possess a less-than-sturdy faith that's becoming less and less appealing to young people.

Perhaps this unnerving storyline will incite major ministry renovations, much like a doctor's diagnosis might provoke the necessary lifestyle adjustments to get healthy. After all, stirring up fear has mobilized citizens to vote. Unfortunately, this tactic has also fractured trust to the point that collaborative government seems a relic of a romanticized history. Persuasion research offers this caution: unless the likelihood of threat and the proposed remedy is believable, using fear will be ineffective as a

positive influence.<sup>7</sup> It's not enough to decry possible trends and forecast the demise of American Christianity unless we act now. The worthy aspiration of uniting over 100,000 local youth ministries and churches for robust discipleship efforts among 10 million young people over ten years needs sustainable positive energy to ascend to the movement status needed for this goal.<sup>8</sup>

Fortunately, Jesus Christ, our risen Lord, inaugurated the greatest movement in history. In early March of 2021, while musing about the excellent framework in the formative stages of the **TENx10 Collaboration** and praying over its formidable practical challenges, I wrote the following notes, ultimately launching this project:

### ***Invitations Extended***

I sought hands-on understanding that was far more personal than clinical. This felt like an extension of a multi-year journey about grit, Sabbath, brain science, and the role my relationships play in the quest to enjoy constant companionship with Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> As a result, I sought the help from my friendship circles to put my ideas to the

#### ***The fruit of our belonging together identifies us with Jesus on mission every day.***

Can 100,000 local churches & ministries recenter how they relate to one another? Some relationships are measured according to pre-calculated strategic benefits. Because their primary filter is a central concern of the workplace – leveraging limited capacity to serve organizational mission – these types of relationships can settle into the status of *professionally transactional*. This way of being gets a lot of important work done but our essential identities as interdependent contributors in the Body of Christ may unintentionally be compromised. Groups organized around purposeful activity often default to this relational short circuitry. As if slow boiled in a socialization cauldron, they become like Revelation's description of the church in Ephesus: ***losing their first love***. But there's good news. Our risen Lord would never call a church to repent if it weren't possible to actually turn things around! So...let's experiment with how to reverse direction...

test. Without trying to shape my project as true research resulting in professionally circulated findings (!), I extended invitations to 41 different people between April 9

and April 24, 2021. A pair of later requests in May met the need for two additional triplet opportunities, such that a dozen different teams were included in this testing.

Of the total 43 invitations issued, 26 were aimed at those with whom my primary connection was in the academic/scholarly domain. The other 17 represented church and parachurch ministry leaders with some national voice. Unsurprisingly, reaching out to persons with personal invitations was considerably more effective (13 of 14) than the response as the result of a BCC general email blast sent on April 23 (11 of 29). The summary of this effort is in the table below.

<b>Invitational Form</b>	Friends in academic enterprises		Friends in ministry enterprises		
	Agreed to participate	Non-participants	Agreed to participate	Non-participants	
Custom request: text	2	--	2	--	4
Custom request: email	1	--	7	1	9
Custom request: phone	--	--	1	--	1
Email blast to BCC list	9	14	2	4	29
	12	14	12	5	43

The custom personal messaging built off the basic invitation that comprised the content of the email blast sent on April 23. The substance of that email is below.

Friends,

I'm running four-week experiments to bless one another in/with Christ. Aimed at ridiculously busy and influential youth ministry thought leaders. Naturally you came to mind.

Tightly focused triplets in 30 min weekly Zoom calls for four weeks in a row. I'm engaged in each one.

Three of these are already scheduled to launch next week, April 26-30, concluding the week of May 17-21.

I'd like to launch up to five more the week of May 24-28, to be finished the week of June 14-18.

I can send you more info if you want, but I'm wondering if you have any interest in this four-week test, strictly limited to a half hour per week?

I'd even scramble to wedge a couple more of these into next week if you feel an enthusiastic **YES!** rising up in your heart. ;-)

If so, shoot me a quick response and I will try to get the logistics lined up. Mixing and matching two others with me and our respective schedules has proved to be a lot of 'discernment fun' so far!

This is not a friendship test, by any means. And it's intentionally aimed at those who have very little margin. That's been my story, and I am determined to take the legs out from under this joy thief. Please say NO if it simply won't work.

I'm chasing this experiment because I think could be a "backbone habit" for me personally. It also has the sort of simplicity that might make it "back pocket do-able" for those who sit atop their org charts as well as 9th graders named on classroom seating charts ;-).

I'm casting this Friday afternoon net pretty wide. Maybe I have too little faith...if half of you want to join me in this little trial I will be really challenged to deliver! But I'll do my best...

Trusting God, grateful for you, eager to dive deeper. Have a great weekend.

As the positive benefits of these various tightly focused meetings over four weeks accrued, I wondered about whether I might add new value to relationships among my inner circle of friends. At the end of May I invited two long term buddies to jump into similarly shaped 30-minute weekly connections, suggesting that these would run for as long as they seemed worthwhile to all of us. We are continuing in this routine to



this day, and the feedback from this duo is included in this summary, representing 26 participants involved in 13 different experiences.

### ***Similar Experiences, Custom-Fit***

The duos who would join me in their 4-week trials were paired as the result of prayerful discernment, often informed by scheduling availability. In a few situations, some strategic matchmaking was present as I imagined what extended benefit might come from connecting folks who had not previously enjoyed a relationship. Four of the 13 triplets were cross matched with one person from the ranks of academia and the other involved in organizational ministry leadership. Four were scholar pairings, four were linked as ministers, and my ongoing triplet enlisted a friend who is a professional comedian to join a youth ministry veteran with a long history of working in both the church and parachurch world. On the eve of our meetings, I sent this note:

***Happy Monday!***  
***Use the ZOOM link pasted below for an easy connection to our call this week.***  
***I look forward to hosting 30 tightly focused minutes together. We will:***  
***Speak about Jesus to one another.***  
***Speak to Jesus about one another.***

Though I had originally imagined an experience where three questions about belonging, identity and purpose in Christ might be explored, I realized that would not be possible if praying together would also be part of our 30-minute experience. As a result, I opted to ask a single question, observing that if we each spent about 5-7 minutes responding we would have about 10-15 minutes to pray for one another. For the four triplets representing the first round of testing, a notecard with the following question gave direction to our initial meeting: ***“How have you most recently***

*experienced Jesus moving in you to shape who you are or guide what you do? (I'm especially eager to learn what you noticed about the way Jesus moved.)"*

As experiences unfolded with different triplets, I realized that some found it fairly natural to call out the way our Lord had been working in them and others slipped quickly into descriptions of what was learned. In such cases I offered a gentle reminder that our intent was to focus on the movements of Jesus's Spirit within us. Sharing how we've encountered Christ intensifies the spotlight on the Lord, yielding grace-filled encouragement similar to the heart-thumping testimony we read about from the Emmaus Road travelers.<sup>10</sup> It also allows us to sidestep the temptation to make ourselves the centerpiece of this story exchange. Further, it primes us for greater attentiveness to Jesus's future activity in and through us. Perhaps it's a helpful way to train ourselves to notice the presence of Jesus, as the gritty faith of Brother Lawrence compelled him to do.<sup>11</sup>

It didn't take long before these many 30-minute experiences helped me identify the posture that worked best for me as a host/facilitator. I was seeking ***fresh*** reports from my friends about the way they were relating to Jesus. Steering them toward that word meant that our sharing need never grow old. Some of my questions, like this one, emerged from my own recent encounters with the Lord and were fairly directive: *"Describe where you were and what were you doing when you were last made aware that you were being 'set-up' (like dominoes) by the Lord - and please, talk about what his reassurance was like in that experience."*

Other questions popped up as near-improvisational responses to the two minutes of small talk I might have experienced with one member while awaiting the other to jump onto our Zoom call. Here's one example: *"Awkward is awesome! How does Jesus move through awkwardness with you?"* Having hosted more than 50 of

these meetings, I've seen that after a couple times of sharing, most participants catch on quickly about the difference between describing Jesus at work in us and simply telling stories about ourselves. Once acclimated to what was expected, a repeat question like this offered rich opportunity for probing follow-up: *"What fresh story can you share about Jesus's moving in/through you since we last met?"*

Perhaps the greatest variety within the 13 different triplets was in the way they engaged prayer together. Ideally, careful listening to one another as we share stories *about* Jesus might lead to acute hearing *from* Jesus about how to pray. This sort of unhurried discernment in prayer was, understandably, more familiar to some than others. Yet it might lead to the most vital discovery about how relationships can leap into dimensional depth. When Jesus is explicitly honored as Lord – as he is when we give him our undivided prayer attention – his presence is a dynamic source of grace and love, binding the three gathered in his name with otherworldly unity. The sheer density of blessing I received by being prayed over multiple times a week was unanticipated. Phrases like *"bullseye anointing"* and *"ringmaster"* and *"limbo bar flexibility"* were all uttered in prayers for me, delivering with pinpoint accuracy the relief, clarity, and grace I needed in the moment. To share God's Spirit leading in prayer is to infuse a relationship with joyful experiences of belonging, identity reinforcement, and missional courage.

### ***Participant Feedback***

Each participant was asked for feedback after their four weeks of Zooming with Jesus. Everyone submitted one-word responses, represented in the word cloud below. This captures a consistently positive vibe from everyone. Is there evidence that professional/organizational relationships were re-normed by obsessing over Jesus Christ as our common Lord? How well do these words represent the transformational *"koinonia"* that's a gift of God's Spirit, a sure sign of his active movement in our midst?



The overall impression from these one-word descriptions flows into the vitality of a relational experience where our common orbit around Jesus Christ is the featured focus. This conclusion seems to be fairly represented in

the reflections from participants about the greatest benefit received from this trial experiment. Answers (redacted slightly, for anonymity) from the 25 of 26 who responded to this question are below:

1. The greatest benefit for me was the mutual pouring into one another. I left every meeting feeling heard, cared for, and even loved. I also left every meeting wanting to cry happy, joyful, enlightened, loved, seen, cared for tears- but (xx) and (xx) have that effect on me!
2. I think the simplicity of the framing of our conversations was the biggest benefit for me. I loved the creative "prompt" you gave us, and the storytelling focus of that. Then, ending by praying for one another was a big benefit for me.
3. More focus on what Jesus was doing in my life than I otherwise would have taken notice of. And it came at a time that I really need it.
4. I felt that there was a deep sense of connectedness yet with unique missions and "good works" ahead. And I'm all about prayer... prayer is the gateway to collaboration because it's sharing hearts and listening to the Lord at the same time.
5. The commitment to pray with intention and regularity with a trusted friend and someone new felt important, timely, and refreshing.
6. The greatest benefit I gained was the framework from our shared experience. I now use it within my group relationships. Asking other men how they have experienced God in the past week has been a jarring question for some and an unexpected opportunity for others.
7. Interaction with you and meeting (xx). Appreciated the platform to share and pray for each other.
8. I really enjoyed the online gatherings.
9. For me, the greatest benefit was the encouragement in creating a spiritual rhythm. Yes, we met for prayer but for me it strengthened my "intentionality" muscle. I was able to choose an activity that encouraged me to be intentional.
10. The greatest benefit was connecting with likeminded/oriented missional people over nothing but conversations about our relationship with the Lord. It was relational, as it ought to be.

11. I experienced good care from both of you and focus on prayer. I think the regularity, focus, and brevity was helpful and important.
12. I found the anticipation of our scheduled reflection time increased my focus on "looking for Jesus" in my experiences before and after our Zoom gatherings.
13. Connecting with peers. Sharing the personal journey (leadership can be lonely).
14. Focused break in my workday to run after God intensely with some friends.
15. Definitely the confirmation of what God was saying and doing, both in our conversations as well as the prayer time. I didn't realize how much I needed those times until they happened.
16. Three things come to mind: 1) The sense that I am prayed for, that I can hear people praying for me, and that it was something consistent made it something I looked forward to. 2) I found myself a little more thoughtful about what Jesus was up to in my life at times throughout the week. 3) I felt closer and more connected with brothers.
17. I loved jumping into a discussion focused on what Jesus has been showing me, teaching me, and how I have noticed his presence in specific ways. There was no agenda but a transparent conversation with men who love the Lord and love students. It was also a pleasure to get to know you and (xx) better. This wasn't about our titles, organizations, or responsibilities. It was three Christ-followers sharing life and encouraging one another in their walk with the Lord. Our time praying for one another was rich.
18. Even though (xx) and I were strangers, we had a common professional background which made it easy to have a baseline. I liked that the three of us shared similar interests and vocational passions. I loved the 30 minutes. It was perfect.
19. Intentional, weekly reflection that I didn't have to be responsible for guiding or creating was a gift. As someone who leads an organization, those things generally are my job. It was really nice to simply be a participant for 30 minutes a week.
20. It was refreshing to just take 30 minutes to pause, be with friends, and to pray. I always value the depth of relational connections when there is not much of an agenda, but I deeply appreciated the "soft" boundaries and guideline you provided for the time. It was the perfect blend. One more significant thing worth noting... the commitment to start and finish on time! HUGE!
21. Two-fold benefit: First, there was a "Kingdom-connectedness" embedded into this because I was doing this with fellow Christian leaders of significance and who have been ministry friends for decades....The second benefit was that it served as a charging station pad, an energy-providing point mid-week (important too!) that gave me fresh material to reflect on.
22. Trusted relational and spiritual interaction with those who have similar background and shared ministry leadership experience at an executive level.
23. For me, just the time to visit and talk was extremely beneficial. Relationship building is critical, not just for the utilitarian purpose of doing my (our) jobs, but to feel affirmed in our calling and purpose in life and ministry. Sharing what was going on in our lives and the issues/challenges we are addressing is good "therapy."
24. Being open and honest with friends about our relationship with Jesus, which galvanized the friendships by taking them to another level.
25. Our transparency.

Participants were also asked to suggest improvements and identify what they hope to take away from the experience. The 25 responses below reflect everyone's diversity of experiences, perspectives, and personal contexts. There was little consensus about what to improve, or how to do so.

<i><b>Improvements?</b></i>	<i><b>Takeaways?</b></i>
My immediate response is to meet for more weeks (like forever, please). But I wonder if we gave something extra of our heart because we knew our time was limited. I wonder if it would have lost the sense that these 4 weeks were especially precious if it had continued for several months or a year. Would we have taken it for granted? Reminds me how in youth ministry we stop games at the height of fun so that don't lose their sparkle and kids want more. I'm still basking in the sparkle of what a great experience that was. So maybe I wouldn't change that. I don't know.	Different models of prayer for sure. Also, there was something about those prompting questions that seem really special. I don't know that I could duplicate them on that level, but I loved how these sort of abstract questions provoked me to think and to look for God where perhaps I hadn't thought to find him before. I'd love to duplicate that.
I can't really think of anything—it was great for me.	A consciousness of my need to pray for and with others.
Well, I didn't want it to end...	I've been thinking a lot about this. What would it look like for me to replicate this experience in (xx) in the coming months? Could I launch a dozen prayer trios?
What would make this time so good for every coupling is a simple model around listening prayer.	I think the best thing we did was just pray for and with one another... and waited on the Lord to speak life into each other. Whenever the Lord moves there's unity and blessing, so prayer is the beginning
Extend it longer than 4 weeks.	The importance of intentionality, simplicity, and focus.
I'm not sure if I have anything to offer on how to improve the value of the experience. I think it's up to each participant to come with anticipation, Spirit-led reflection, and a heart for and commitment to prayer for the other participants. The value I gained was many times what I offered, but it began with the quality of what I offered (it was a wholehearted commitment to the experience).	[As answered in the "benefit" question] ...the framework from our shared experience. I now use it within my group relationships. Asking other men how they have experienced God in the past week has been a jarring question for some and an unexpected opportunity for others
Maybe extend to 45 minutes to allow for a little more time for connection/sharing/prayer. While I loved the opportunity to meet (xx) through this experience, the lack of relationship created a bit of a challenge with knowing how transparent to be during initial sharing.	The value of asking one intentional question in order to go deep and then the simple act of praying for others.
No response.	The biggest take away for me was the value this type of interaction might be for mentoring some of my

	youth ministry students. It's something I hadn't really considered. So, thank you.
So many things added value... designated length (4 weeks), a commitment to half an hour, a question to ponder... the only thing that might be helpful to add is a way for individuals to get to know each other. In our scenario, both people knew you, but we didn't know each other. I go back and forth about this... not knowing the other person allowed me to stay focused on the task at hand... would a group of people who knew each other need to guard against rabbit trails... would knowing each other a bit more have allowed for a different type of sharing?	What I have noticed in my own life, is that I have an increased awareness or sensitivity and looking for how God is showing up. I have also thought about how I could replicate a similar experience with those around me.
I don't know. I think it was great for content, brief in time together (4 weeks, 30 minutes) - which was great-felt doable and nonthreatening from the start. Discussion time worked.	I've already thought about how I could turn this around into something similar. And believe I will this Fall. As for now, it serves as a great reminder on the priority of our relationships with Christ and how they should be prioritized even over our work together. In other words, no matter how busy, this kind of time with another needs to be a priority in effort as much as thought.
It was well organized, no critique here	I realized that a little initiative could make something happen with busy people in a 30-minute span. I love intentionality, this was a great model of that principle. I would love to do it again or begin a similar process with others.
I came into the experience with no expectations so found the particulars worked really well for me including, number of participants, time, flexibility, and content.	I often found some of my deeper reflections happened in the "afterglow" of our times together, so it was rewarding to share those with my family and especially (xx) and seek their responses to the original prompt.
We experienced this for four weeks - longer would be good. My world and (xx) have a difference to it. I am looking for other Faith-Based Non-Profit CEOs to share battles and joys.	A greater connection to you and (xx). Pondering some new thoughts from our discussions.
Not sure I have anything to add to this experience, but if this is a model for others moving forward, I do have a thought. For me, what made our time so special was to be with two other people who walk prophetically in prayer. Our prayer times were exercises of intimacy and discernment which sadly not everyone understands. ... you expect to "hear" from God. I know (xx) operates the same way. For me, that is what made this experience so meaningful. I don't want to just be on a call with people "talking" to Jesus, I want to run with people who long to HEAR from God on behalf of others for the edification of the Body and the Kingdom. So how can this be improved? If we are asking others to use this as a model, I wonder if it	I loved the focused exercise of discerning and praying on each other's behalf

might be helpful to help shape this exercise as a "Talking and Listening" time together. I've needed spiritual fathers and mothers in my life to help be cultivate this time of prayer life and find other need the same.	
Probably a little more notice with the invitation and then maybe what some of the questions would be ahead of time. I think 45 min probably would be better than 30 minutes as well.	I would like to do this with some people in my circles. There is great value in creating space to discern together and pray together.
The 30-minute time window made this do-able for me. The fact that it was in such a small group worked really well. A simple prompt rather than a long devotion about prayer created good dialogue. Can't think of anything I would do differently.	Good reminder to enter into prayer. I am actually praying daily with another friend now over the phone. Keeping it short but lifting each other up in prayer.
Will need to think on this. I like the simplicity and wouldn't want to change that.	Just a reminder of the importance of authenticity and the need we all have for relationships. It has made me aware of the value of spending merely 30 minutes a week with others to share about our lives and how we are seeing God at work.
The key to this is you, Dave. So, I wonder how you scale this. I'm not sure 4 weeks would work with a group of strangers. Your connection with each of us made my connection with (xx) work. Also, your style calls us to go to the spaces you point out. You did more than facilitate so I think it would be good for you to self-reflect on your methods. What would you want to teach others who lead these?	I do think talking about the heart behind our work is so important. I think it reduces competition and erases some of the insecurity we have as academics or ministry leaders. It's nice to be in a conversation with colleagues and not feel like it's a pissing match ;)
I'm not really sure that it could. Perhaps a little more "get to know you" at the beginning would be helpful. But overall, I really like the 4 weeks, the hard stop at 30 minutes, the starting on time, etc.	I think I'll be looking for more places to be intentional about being a participant, where my leadership isn't needed. I like being a leader, but for 30 minutes a week, it was good/refreshing and offered a new perspective that is useful.
I'm not sure I would recommend changing anything. I liked the short 4-weeks of 30-minute spurts, and I loved the way you guided. If you decide to do this on an ongoing basis, then I'm sure you would mix it up with different folks. However, it seemed to be helpful to have had a history of acquaintance/friendship - you may not get the same results with strangers.	I do a significant amount of mentoring so I will probably consider copying the format - it really worked!
I think three felt small. I don't know the ideal number, but 5-6 for round two might be worth the experiment. Content-wise, I think it was fine for its purposes.	I don't think this will impact other relationships I have. It was a good model though for how to discern, listen well, and be prayerful.
Let our assistants handle the scheduling. [NOTE: lots of misconnects, in part due to time zone differences]	I can be more intentional to initiate connections with a simple, flexible, short-term expectation.
If there is a particular agenda or purpose in mind, providing some leading questions/coaching before the meeting might help. Ours was the weirdest	The need to prioritize time to spend talking and visiting with a loosely planned agenda so that the conversation can flow naturally and not necessarily in



probably of all you did because of the scheduling issues ... I felt a little apprehension not knowing what we were to discuss during the time together, but things flowed naturally because we knew each other. And now we know each other even better. Ha-ha!!	any one particular forced direction for relationship building. This may sound contradictory to my answer to the previous question. I'm responding to what happened versus what I may think you intended. I don't know how the other "visits" went. They may have been more directed...
Find a time that won't be interrupted. (Middle of a workday was tough) Early or evening would be great. I valued the time and would try to protect it better.	Ask others the same question as I go along in life. It's been rich.
Not sure? Could we possibly do a face to face gathering? Zoom still feels distant to me.	The urgency to zero into the heart of my friends. Butcher the idle chit chat and ask important questions.

One of the advantages of engaging only three people at a time was that scheduling conflicts could be solved creatively and quickly. Of the 13 different triplets, 8 of them were asked to respond with some degree of flexibility in order to complete the four-week experience. Some of these adjustments are reflected in the feedback offered.

## ***Conclusions***

Our capacity limitations are real and keenly felt. The promise of technology to ease life's burdens has, arguably, only come true in the narrowest of ways. Many tasks can be accomplished more efficiently. But since innumerable advances have made it possible to know and do more than we ever imagined, we strive for more from life. Walter Brueggemann has drawn parallels between the bondage of relentless slave-work from Israel in Egypt and our contemporary American culture of endless productivity and restlessness.<sup>12</sup> Instead of recovering the margins needed to nurture life-giving relationships - including our relationship with God - we churn harder in pursuit of contentment along the way, constructing truths that feed our need for control in lives that we believe are self-determined and self-orbiting. *This* pursuit is a con. It's not possible. It scatter-shots our focus, making us flailing fools, draining our energy without piercing through life in any meaningful way. Into our depletion, Jesus invites all of us weary types to believe that HE, indeed, is the way, the truth, and the

life. This is no tepid agreement that Christ asks of his followers. We can know him and be united with him... but only if we accept his all-or-nothing terms of engagement. When we are united with Jesus, the very limitations that might otherwise banish us to islands of despair become lighted pathways for focused living. In essence, since we can't do everything, what we invest in is of the utmost consequence. Jesus beckons.

The *grit* that social scientist Angela Duckworth identified<sup>13</sup> looks a lot like what the Bible means by faith. The research team making sense of findings from the *National Study of Youth and Religion* added the third quality of "centrality" to the "content and conduct" already imbedded in their understanding of religiosity.<sup>14</sup> Brain-mapping technologies and fascinating discoveries reveal that our identity and character is formed on the faster right side of our brain, before thoughts gather into any expressive form such that logic and strategy become possible on the left side of the brain. We become who we are as we acquire belonging experiences with those who are glad to be with us. The brain races toward facial inquiry, searching out another's status as friend or foe. Mirror neurons are activated. The dynamics of transformation are unleashed by becoming like significant others.<sup>15</sup>

So... could four tightly focused 30-minute weekly meetings make *any* difference?

As has been common throughout history, empirical efforts to make sense of the world shed helpful perspective on what's already been revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. He claims first importance among all others. Seeking the face of God with those who share our passion unlocks the joy that optimizes us. Single-minded devotion draws us into holy wholeness. We become fully integrated persons, delighted to be aligned with God. Amidst countless bewildering choices, we're invited to concentrate on the one thing that can leverage everything else for the flourishing life we were created to enjoy: constant companionship with Jesus Christ,

our Lord. Once that clarity ascends to an all-compelling obsession, gritty faith laser-locks onto its destination. We give our best efforts to overcome obstacles that might prevent our attainment of this goal, following the pattern of focus that Paul wrote about.<sup>16</sup> Our grit is characterized by persistence and innovation as we do “whatever it takes” to abide in an intimate, fruitful relationship with Jesus Christ.

This paper reports on one such adventure in innovation. Some participants asked if longer meeting times might be beneficial, though others cited the 30-minute time limit as a feature that “made it work” for them. There was interest in a longer journey than four weeks; I’ve since made this an ongoing weekly habit with two close friends. Was my own leadership a factor too unique to replicate? Perhaps. All of this input spurs further inquiry. Such is the gift of innovation; it inspires next-level learning trials. Even now, I’m working towards another round of tests among youth workers who are willing to engage some of their young people in the journey. Visions as extensive as that of the **TENx10 Collaboration** require heightened coordination; they will do well if they can simplify the target of relational strength sought for discipleship.<sup>17</sup> Jesus sanctioned small gatherings done in his name.<sup>18</sup> Can countless transformational triplets multiply because they can be implemented simply and refreshed constantly?

Love is God’s priority. It matters most. Being rightly connected to Jesus Christ can rescue any relationship from the snares of organizational and professional life so pervasive in America. Let’s endeavor to prove this truth, over and over again.

### ***Jesus is Lord.***

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Chan, *Until Unity*, (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2021), p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 4:8

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 7:15; 24:11, 24

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 7:21-23

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<sup>5</sup> Revelation 2:4-5, New Living Translation.

<sup>6</sup> David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock, *Faith for Exiles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019), p. 133.

<sup>7</sup> Em Griffin, *The Mindchangers*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1976), p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> This vision is embedded in the **TENx10 Collaboration** (<https://tenx10.org>).

<sup>9</sup> This story is developed and integrated with original research in Dave Rahn and Ebonie Davis, *Disrupting Teens with Joy*, (San Diego: The Youth Cartel, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Luke 24:32-34

<sup>11</sup> Brother Lawrence, *Practicing the Presence of God*.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Angela Duckworth, *Grit*, (New York: Scribner, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Lisa D. Pearce and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *A Faith of Their Own*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 13-14.

<sup>15</sup> Nobel prize winner Daniel Kahneman wrote *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011), exposing me to this way of thinking. "Neurotheologian" Jim Wilder has contributed to multiple practical ministry books; see Jim Wilder, *Renovated*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2020); Jim Wilder and Michel Hendricks, *The Other Half of Church*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2020); Marcus Warner and Jim Wilder, *Rare Leadership*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016); Chris Coursey, *The Joy Switch*, (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Philippians 3:2-16

<sup>17</sup> See discussion of Bronfenbrenner's attention to dyadic relationships in Jack O. Balswick, Pamela Ebstye King, and Kevin S. Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), pp. 115-118.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 18:19-20