

Building relationships: An interview with McCain's pastor

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [May 20, 2008](#) issue

The presumptive Republican nominee for president, Arizona senator John McCain, has for 15 years attended North Phoenix Baptist Church, which is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. The pastor of the church for that same period has been Dan Yeary. A graduate of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Yeary, 69, has spent most of his ministry in large, urban congregations. His ministry includes work in television and radio as well as leading his 7,000-member church.

You call North Phoenix a city-centered church. What does that mean?

City-centered means that we have people from every zip code in the Valley of the Sun. We have people of all kinds from all backgrounds; we are a multicultural and multiracial congregation. People are drawn here by virtue of the ministry opportunities, by the challenge that we represent. Our mission statement is that we desire and challenge people to live a Christ-centered life.

What does that challenge look like at North Phoenix?

We are continually talking about both our values and our strategies—the things we measure our lives by. We have a four-pronged strategy that we introduce to all our members: to celebrate the love that God has given us, to connect with the community in meaningful relationships and ministries, to commit to making a difference in this world by serving God and to engage our world through our life patterns and our life systems. We talk about evangelism as building relationships and giving invitations. In church every Sunday, I ask the people, “Who will be at your side next week that needs to hear the gospel?”

What’s a good day at the church?

We tend to look at the normal human measurements: How many people are there or how many decisions were made for Christ or how many baptisms? But the bottom line is: Did we give it our best shot? Did we prepare well? Did we present the gospel

well? We measure by the spirit of the church. I know that sounds intangible, but ask any preacher: you know if you were engaged with the people and they with you.

We've had surprising success with our participation in Men's Fraternity. It is a program out of Little Rock, Arkansas. We know that it's working because the guys' wives tell us, "Man, this has impacted my husband. He's a different person." And then we have a women's ministry that does special-event outreach, contacting and evangelism. Perhaps the most effective ministry in the church is Upward Basketball. It's a teaching program for kids who want to learn to play basketball, and they just come out of the woodwork. It's wonderful.

Has your approach to ministry changed over the years?

One thing that has been consistent is that people are hungry for relationships. As a pastor, you have to work hard in how you establish relationships. Today, you've got the dual-income family; everyone is just fighting for time. Our weekday ministries have become more difficult through the years. That's why we put a heavy emphasis on the weekend. We know that's when most people are available and open to you.

Probably the most troubling thing for me is the development of a consumer society; a consumerist mentality toward the church is hard to deal with. Someone else does something different or better and you gravitate over there, or you get mad at your minister and say you are going to leave the church.

I tell our new members: you don't join a preacher, you join the church. And you join the church for one reason—because you believe that God told you to plant your life there. If you join because of a style of preaching, that can change. If you join for the facilities or the programs, that can change. You've got to ask, Where does God want me to invest my life? We don't welcome spectators.

How does a television ministry fit into that? How do you build relationships via television?

Television is a wonderful connector. We have both television and radio ministry, and I cannot go anywhere in the community without bumping into someone who says, "I know that voice" or "I watch you on television." We ask our new members, "What was your first connection with North Phoenix?" and their response is "the media." It's an image builder. The style of the communication has to be warm, engaging, down-to-earth. And the theology is important as well. The highest revelation of the

scripture is love and forgiveness, and that's the message of encouragement that we preach.

Who are your theological or ministerial heroes?

In terms of my basic theology, I was shaped by Kenneth Chafin, an evangelistic leader and seminary professor. Carl Bates, who was a president of the Southern Baptist Convention, was a mentor and hero for me. Those guys have moved on to their reward. But I learn from everybody. I learn from the young. I am very grateful for the courage of a Rick Warren. I am equally encouraged by the vision and the pragmatic development of ministry of a Bill Hybels.

What are you reading these days?

I just finished Philip Yancey's book on prayer and found it to be most helpful. I'm reading Max Lucado's book *3:16*, and Tom Brokaw's book *Boom!* because I've got a lot of boomers in my congregation. I read the new Billy Graham book called *The Journey*. I read John Ortberg's *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*. I tend to look for things that are current.

Where do you find peer support?

I have a personal accountability group, some of the godliest men in the church. They are people with whom I have a high trust level. I trust them to ask me hard questions, and I can be vulnerable with them. They are a great source of encouragement.

I've been meeting with a group of pastors for 30 years. We call ourselves the Metro Ministers' Conference. We said, "Let's get guys together who are pastors of urban churches with a certain attendance level and a certain budget." In other words, we were trying to get people together who had common problems. We meet once a year, and it is glorious irreverent reverence. The conference was born out of a crisis in the denomination. We need to be able to talk to each other and share our differences of opinion.

This year we talked about security issues—the first time we ever talked about them. We have to be more careful today because of extremists, so we ask each other what we're doing.