

The unexpected gift of missional friendship

I was a United Methodist pastor. He was a campus minister with Cru.

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [June 1, 2022](#) issue



(Source image by Ben Turnbull on Unsplash)

Eric Heistand was in ministry with Cru (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ), an organization quite a bit more conservative than the Methodist church in Boone, North Carolina, where I was a pastor. But I cared about campus ministry, and he was looking for a new place to worship. So we met at Boone's coolest coffee haunt, staked out the best table, and got to know each other.

Our kids were the same age. His wife knew some of the people I went to elementary school with. We read some of the same theologians. He liked my preaching. I liked

his vibe with the staff and the students we greeted. Turns out his dad was a Methodist minister. Mine was a shrink. We laughed. We'd both tried to avoid their professions and ended up smack dab in the middle of them. We also had differences. I learned Eric was a climber and trail builder. I've had two back surgeries and prefer air conditioning to sweat.

At our second or third coffee date—and make no mistake, these were dates, involving an invitation that braved rejection, the willingness to find a time and choose a place, the determination as to who would pay—Eric turned to me. “You know what some church needs to do here in town?” he said. “Build a trail up Howard’s Knob.”

My jaw fell open. I had just learned the previous night at an otherwise godforsaken trustee meeting that my church owned the land up Howard’s Knob. It had a conservation easement on it so no building could be built on it—but a trail could. Suddenly Eric and I had not only a friendship, but a missional friendship.

The church had the land and the capacity to do the legal due diligence about having volunteers work on it. As a campus minister, Eric had willing volunteers, who were suddenly on our land, getting sweaty together, inviting friends to come and talk about Jesus while they did it.

By this third conversation I wasn’t just being nice to a potential new member and leader at the church. I was on the lookout for coconspirators with whom to bless our town. Eric was too; he’d seen what Boone needed farther than I had. He knew climbers had no sense of anything useful coming from churches; he’d thought that the trail would have to go up the mountain another way and found the land was too expensive that way, the homeowners too unwilling. But when he saw that our way up was possible, he also saw new creative possibilities.

The church’s part of the partnership was not easy. I had to go to another trustees meeting and manage not to fall asleep, no small feat. The legal questions made our trustees nervous: Would kids use the trail to party and make us liable?

The trustee chair finally said, “Look, I drank a lot of beer in college, and one thing I promise you I never did was to haul it up a mountain first.” I had no idea my committee chair’s drinking history would help with the church’s mission. But I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t have risked it had he and I not had more than a few breakfasts together, dreaming out loud together about what the church could be.

Another creative friend in the meeting started tapping the table and, with a grin, chanting, "Build the trail, build the trail." Game, set, match for the trail. The Boone United Trail became one of the ventures I was proudest of, and the man I helped launch it with, Eric Heistand, still with Cru, became one of my closest friends.

There are lots of ways to ruin a creative friendship like this one. Once a friendship turns missional, if one person feels used, even a little, by the other, it's off. But that doesn't mean there isn't need. Indeed, the need that each person has for the other has to be genuine. One afternoon I'd had it with church administration. I'd been through the tumble dryer in one 4 p.m. meeting and had another lined up for 7 p.m., and so I was stuck at the church and feeling miserable. I remembered the trail builders were on the BU Trail doing their thing. I decided to head up there. I wanted to see someone who loved me and come back down the mountain encouraged. I loved the folks at the 7 p.m. meeting (though I had some doubts about the 4 p.m. crew). But at that moment I needed a friend, and Eric had become one. I needed him.

I can think of numerous ways in which what I am saying could be misheard. Not everyone has to be your friend to be led by you. No pastor can be authentic friends with everyone. Further, there is in friendship a certain alchemy, a *je ne sais quoi*, that simply doesn't arise in all cases. You can't pursue folks like I did Eric with a specific desired end from the engagement in mind. That's not friendship; that's manipulation. Perhaps one in a thousand meetings like I had with him that day might yield something fruitful in the way of creative ministry ideas. If we're on the prowl to find someone who'll make our church better, we're dangerous, looking to use people for our desired ends. And people can smell it. They'll stay far away.

What Eric and I did is different. We grew in friendship as we both grew in leadership in the church and in the community. As with all friends, we mostly had fun together. As with professional colleagues, we admired one another's skill, commiserated at defeats, encouraged renewed effort, and celebrated successes. We ate in each other's homes and marveled at how fast each other's children grew up. We grew to love each other.

This friendship also helped us in our ministry together on the trail. Friendship is stronger than mere partnership, and once things get difficult you want a friend with you, not a mere partner. One day the trustees said that if anything bad happened on the trail, we could shut it down. Eric interjected, "I worry about the self-fulfilling

prophecy here.” He was right. Through friendship we pushed through barriers that might otherwise have defeated us.

We were also different from one another, and many of these differences were right at the heart of our vocations. Eric thought the Methodist church was weak on evangelism. I found some of Cru’s evangelism techniques cringeworthy.

But we found unexpected points of contact as well. I really do believe that Methodists could be more assertive with their faith, and Eric, meanwhile, had grown frustrated with the tract-and-a-stranger founding myth of his beloved Cru. He believed in friendship over the course of years, not the evangelistic equivalent of a one-night stand. He was deeply invested in pushing Cru to its own version of social justice (just don’t call it that!), working to end human trafficking and grabbing the nettle: Cru’s dismal history with race.

Creative friendship can look a lot like patronage. Soon Eric’s kids’ private Christian school was meeting at our church. That wouldn’t have happened without my blessing, I’m sure, though of course our trustees had to approve it as well. Yet we gained families at the church we wouldn’t have had otherwise. It was born not of favoritism but of a desire to reach out to our right—not a move most UM congregations instinctually make these days. Eric recently had me speak to his (very small) group of social justice-invested Cru leaders via Zoom. More connections were made. Yet I maintain this is friendship, not mere favor swapping. My reputation was on the line with the Christian school. His was on the line with me speaking to Cru on campus to his hundreds of students or to his handful of leaders online. He has read this article with approval.

These kinds of creative friendships tend to come from a circle one step outside your current circumference. That is, not so far away you can’t overlap, not so close that you already do. Creative friendship is born in both similarity and difference. In evolutionary science, where ecosystems overlap, new species emerge. Among human beings that’s where new life arises.

What Eric and I found was the practice of creative friendship in the way of Jesus. In the Gospel of John, in the place where the other Gospels describe the Last Supper, Jesus gets up, takes off his robe, takes a towel, and washes his disciples’ feet. Just so we don’t miss it, he makes his meaning plain (something he is not known to do all that often): “If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to

wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14-15). This is boundary-breaking, expectation-shattering creative friendship.

Notice how different creative friendship is from the practice of boundary maintenance about which we hear so much in seminary. Pastors should not search for friends, let alone romantic partners, in their church. To do so risks abuse or, worse, embarrassment with one's superiors. They're right, of course. No pastor is free to have their personal or relational needs met at church. Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it this way: she is the only one *not* free to flirt at church, to trawl for friends, to have her needs met. She is bound to preach the gospel, and so she is profoundly unfree in a way that everyone else is not.

Yet the talk of boundaries can act as a sort of cellophane around the soul, permitting no oxygen to pass. I remember hearing some lawyer drone on about how we pastors should never accept a gift from a parishioner, lest we be beholden to them and run the risk of favoritism. I leaned over to my youth pastor and said, "I don't think I would refuse a week at the beach." He responded, "I never have."

Joas Adiprasetya, a pastor and seminary professor in Jakarta, Indonesia, has proposed an alternative to our ubiquitous "servant leadership" paradigm. He calls it philiarchy, the rule of friendship. "I have called you friends," Jesus says, still dripping wet from the foot washing (John 15:15). This friendship is not one-sided. Jesus needs his friends, just as they need him. The rule of philiarchy means we honor others' personhood and don't try to subsume it into our projects, our needs, our selves.

Adiprasetya invited me to speak at his seminary. I invited him to Vancouver to teach our students. This isn't favoritism to a friend. It's creative friendship. We wanted our students to learn from each other. Our friends and our friends' friends were blessed. We trusted what we were going to get precisely because we'd spent time together doing nothing but enjoying one another. He introduced me to durian—a fruit banned on public transit across Asia for its pungency and now banned from the Byassee household as well. I heard him preach in Indonesian with the fervor that I wanted among my students in Vancouver. He studied Jürgen Moltmann's social trinitarianism. I hate social trinitarianism. I knew I was in love.

Creative friendship is worth the risk. Just ask Jesus, Peter, James, and John. When Jesus commands us to love one another, to befriend as God has done in Christ, it is

hard to wriggle off the hook. Creative friendship is a means of salvation, not less promised by Christ than the sacraments or the scriptures or creation itself.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "My missional friendship."