

First Things: Fundamental Themes Guiding Friendship Ministries

The purpose of this paper is to identify biblical principals that both motivate and shape the work of Friendship Ministries. These foundational themes will guide the Board as it makes decisions about the nature and direction of specific ministries. The “core truths” will assist us in communicating our mission and its theological and philosophical roots. The themes, and the core truths distilled from them, are not perfectly discrete. Rather, they are more like strands in a cord, woven through each other, at times indistinguishable.

Theme One: Equality

People who are given disability labels and those who are not labeled share a basic equality. Such equality is not based on gifts, for it is clear that humans have different gifts and in different amounts. Our equality is not based on sameness, then, but in the fact that we each are created in God’s image (Gen. 1), exist for God’s purposes (Gen. 2), and are called by God to live gratefully in response to God’s lavish love (Eph. 3:14-19). God expects all of us to be responsive, creative disciples (John 15:1-17). God expects us to be stewards of the gifts the Creator has given regardless of how they may be measured on a human scale (Luke 21:1-4). The command to love and serve God with our bodies, hearts, and minds comes to everyone (Matt. 22:37). This kind of equality is fundamental. Unlike equality based on ability or performance, it is an essential aspect of being human. It is at the core of what it means to be “one in Christ” (Gal. 3:28) and children of God.

Core Truth: All humans are created in the image of God. They are created uniquely, equally suited for God’s particular purposes, and enabled by grace to enjoy redemption, worship, and a lifetime of service. Barriers that impede this primary equality are unjust.

Theme Two: Interdependence

The world defines people as much by their incapacities as by their capacities. For persons assigned disability labels, that typically means being seen as objects of concern or pity and as recipients of services or care. Being God’s image bearer, however, is not a passive condition. Though people who have been given disability labels may appear to some to be passive and dependent, each person in fact exists to accomplish God’s purposes. Each one of us is God’s agent in the world, in one way or another carrying on God’s work of reconciliation and restoration (I Peter 4).

In reality, all of us are an amalgamation of strength and weakness, gift and need (I Cor. 1, II Cor. 12). Persons called “disabled” and persons called “non-disabled” contribute their gifts to the welfare of the body (Rom. 12). God expects the church, the body of believers, to bring its members’ gifts to life in community (Eph. 4:16). No one of us can do God’s work alone. No one of us is able to reflect all God’s qualities or do all of the tasks God wants to have done. We image God together. God gives us varied qualities and diverse gifts in order that we may serve effectively together (I Cor. 12). The family of God is a web of partnerships between people who are equally broken (I John 1) and who are called together to be servants (Phil. 2). We image and serve God most effectively when we partner with God and each other (Rom. 12).

Core Truth: All persons have qualities that enable them to serve each other. We do that best in community as partners, imaging God corporately, webbed together with God and each other to renew the world.

Theme Three: Compassion

Compassion is a theme that is woven throughout both old and new testaments (Lev. 19:14, Deut. 15:11, Zeph., 3:19, Matt. 9:35-36, I John 3:17). God calls us to be compassionate and loving with each other - not just strong to weak, not just to those whom we pity, but with each other. We are to bear each other's burdens with gladness (com-*passion* means *with enthusiasm*). That includes allowing others to bear our burdens when we have them, opening ourselves to receiving compassion as well as seeking opportunities to offer it. The giving and receiving both are gifts to both giver and receiver. True compassion is always an exercise in mutuality and simultaneously includes receiving and giving for everyone involved.

Core Truth: The church is a worldwide, interdependent community in which we experience mutual compassion in the sharing of joys and burdens, giving in our receiving, and receiving in our giving.

Theme Four: Hospitality

Hospitality is another spiritual virtue proclaimed throughout scripture. It is the practice of welcoming "the other", and is the opposite of exclusion. People with disabilities are often viewed as strange, and they are isolated because of their differences. Welcoming the stranger fulfills the command to love God and one's neighbor as oneself (Matt. 25:31-46, Luke 10:25-28). Practicing hospitality requires us to recognize that we too are aliens, and it becomes an act of thanksgiving for God's embrace of the alien throughout history (Deut. 10:18-19). When we exercise hospitality, we imitate the model Christ gives us of the master inviting unexpected guests to the feast (Luke 14:16-24) and foreshadow the heavenly banquet (Isa.25:6-9). Hospitality creates a space where everyone feels at home, and it makes space within oneself for what is offered by the other.

Core Truth: Instead of trying to make others be like us, assimilating them and eradicating their differences, hospitality welcomes and capitalizes on "different-ness." It overcomes fear of the stranger and instead celebrates communion in the midst of difference.

Implications:

The above themes and core truths have direct implications for Friendship Ministries. Some of those can be seen now; others will become apparent as we consider new initiatives.

For the Body of Believers

We must make the gifts of all people visible so that we may participate mutually in our interdependent family.

We must nurture the spiritual, social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development of all persons so we can be faithful stewards of the gifts given by God and may respond gratefully to his love.

We must remove any barriers - be they in attitude, architecture, or means of communication - that get in the way of the gospel or impede the participation of people with mental impairments in the life of the church. God's family must in its structures (e.g., congregations, household groups, service committees) seek and model justice and inclusiveness.

For Friendship Groups

Participants in Friendship groups will advocate and care for each other, e.g., by attending Individualized Educational Planning Team meetings or Person-Centered Planning meetings, by engaging in mutual problem solving, by supporting each other during times of stress, and by celebrating together.

Friendship groups will not be promoted as an alternative to church and congregational/parish involvement but as an additional approach to faith development that is helpful for some individuals. We seek full participation in the rights and privileges of membership in faith communities for those who attend Friendship groups, e.g., participation in the Lord's Supper, involvement in regular Sunday worship, service within the congregation or parish, and taking part in social activities.

For Friendship Ministries

When we market the *Friendship* curriculum, it will be done in the context of a holistic understanding of persons and community.

When we raise funds to support Friendship Ministries, we will do so in ways that are congruent with our fundamental themes.

In sum, Friendship Ministries has the opportunity to help to enable the church to be what God intends it to be - an interdependent fellowship which fully develops, uses and celebrates all the gifts of all God's children.

Note: This document is the outgrowth of conversation between Jim Heynen, Tom Hoeksema, Nella Uitvlugt, and Ron Vredeveld, was revised based on input from the Friendship Ministries Board, and was approved by the Board in September 2002.