

PRINCIPLES & PRACTICES »

- Thriving Communities
- Vibrant Institutions
- Christ-Shaped Leadership
- Traditioned Innovation
- Transformative Leadership
- Generative Organization
- Sustainable Design

ARCHIVES »

- Recently Published
- Browse by Topic
- Browse by Feature Type

STAFF & SERVICES »

- About Leadership Education
- Staff Directory
- Program Offerings
- Custom Services

BROWSE FEATURES

- Articles »
- Multimedia »
- Profiles »
- Q&A »
- Reflections »
- Sermons »

Call &
Response
blog 
READ. DISCUSS. IMAGINE. »

-  EMAIL
-  PRINT
-  SHARE

Reflection: [Christian Leadership](#)



L. Gregory Jones: Discovering hope through holy friendships

Holy friends challenge the sins we have come to love, affirm the gifts we are afraid to claim and help us dream dreams we otherwise would not dream.

by [L. Gregory Jones](#)



iStock/PixDeluxe

As we spend time together and trust deepens, we are able to move from “acquaintance” or “colleague” to “holy friend.”

June 19, 2012

Her death triggered an unusual outpouring of emotions from her close friends. They felt that they had lost more than a good friend; they had lost a part of themselves. They grieved for her and her family, but more deeply, they also grieved that they had lost a crucial part of their own lives.

What had they lost? She was that special kind of person who had known them so well that she had offered them invaluable perspectives on their lives, had helped them see problems and opportunities in fresh ways, had helped them imagine new possibilities -- she had helped them love more profoundly, think more clearly, feel more deeply. She had helped them become better people.

And they too, her. They had helped her recover a sense of

Related Features

Reflection



[L. Gregory Jones and Kelly Gilmer: Cultivating institutions that nurture holy friendship »](#)

Shared practices that enable us to recognize the interconnected character of our stories and to re-narrate our lives in more life-giving ways must be at the center of our institutional DNA.

More On This Topic

Article

[Series: Mainline Protestants and disruptive innovation »](#)

Q&A

[Tony Campolo: It was time to stop »](#)

Article

[Disruption and leadership development in mainline Protestantism »](#)

Q&A

[Emilie M. Townes: The church is being transformed »](#)

Sermon

SUBSCRIBE

Enjoy our content?
Follow our content on
your choice of a variety of
formats, including [e-newsletters](#),
[RSS](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#)
and [iTunes](#).



GO

[Luke Powery: Unless the Lord »](#)

hope when she was down, and they had helped her flourish as the person she had struggled to become. Together, they had come to treasure each other, for they knew that life was much fuller, that their lives were much more faithful, because their relationships had been woven together so beautifully.

They had become holy friends for each other.

This story probably reminds you of your college roommate, a beloved neighbor, a group of childhood friends or a close colleague -- that person or those people who have helped us discover what 1 Timothy 6:19 calls "the life that really is life" (NRSV).

What constitutes holy friendships? Holy friends challenge the sins we have come to love, affirm the gifts we are afraid to claim and help us dream dreams we otherwise would not dream.

It is nice to have friends and acquaintances who challenge sins we already hate; it is like piling on in football. Great fun, but it doesn't make a difference. What we really need are people around us who know us well enough to challenge the sins we have come to love. This is especially important because we often describe those sins we love in ways that make them sound understandable, even virtuous. "I am doing the Lord's work" might be discerned by a holy friend as "I am a workaholic." A holy friend can challenge such a description by noting that, in Exodus, even when the Israelites were building the tabernacle, they were commanded to observe the Sabbath.

We need people who can help challenge the sins we have come to love, but if that is all they do, we most likely won't enjoy having them around. Who needs a killjoy?

Holy friends also affirm the gifts we are afraid to claim. It is nice to have people affirm gifts we already recognize; such affirmation is flattering -- but it is not news. "You are a fabulous host" is not news to someone who devotes significant time to practicing the art of hospitality. Something transformative happens when someone helps us see potential in ourselves we cannot yet see: "I see your gift for young children. Rather than serving yet again on the finance committee, what if you are being called to develop a new initiative to help pre-K children get off to a good start in underresourced neighborhoods?"

This can be as unnerving as having sins we love pointed out to us. Who wants to lean into gifts we are afraid to claim? After all, isn't there a reason we are afraid to claim them? Change is hard, but when others illumine hidden potential in our lives, and offer ongoing support as we lean into that potential, we discover hope, and are empowered to embody it.

These friends also help us dream dreams we otherwise would not dream. Sin and brokenness cause our lives and our imaginations to constrict. We don't aim for much because we are haunted by the past or stuck in the comfortable mediocrity of the present. Holy friends serve as vehicles of God's reign to help us set our imaginations free for the future. Who knows what God might have in store for us -- as individuals, for our communities, and for initiatives we may not yet have even conceived, much less embodied?

Holy friends help us envision and articulate the significance of Ephesians 3:20: "Now to [God] who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine" How often do we believe that God's power is at work within us, not only to accomplish all we can ask or imagine -- which itself would be beyond what most of us dream of -- but to accomplish "abundantly far more" than all we can ask or imagine?

Yet whether we are thinking of personal dreams -- where youth in crisis discover that gangs and prison don't have to define their lives, that they can become part of a flourishing community and have meaningful education, jobs and families -- or institutional dreams -- where networks of new institutions re-imagine life together for a city -- holy friends help us dream dreams we otherwise would never dream.

In "Change or Die," [Alan Deutschman](#) notes that people rarely change on the basis of the "three F's": facts, fear or force. He says it is the "three R's" that enable people to change: relate, repeat and reframe.

Holy friends offer us ways to reframe our lives through challenging sins, affirming gifts and dreaming dreams. They help us repeat new activities as we lean into a new way of living our daily life, because it takes time to unlearn sin, to learn to claim gifts and to cultivate big dreams. And they offer paradigmatic new forms of relating that enable us to discover the hope to which we have been called.

Cultivating holy friendships involves quality time together -- and quantity. There is no substitute for regularly scheduled blocks of time to discuss ideas, share hopes and fears, and engage films or novels together.

There must be safe spaces for sharing and meaningful contexts to explore issues honestly and fruitfully. Trust is cultivated only through shared experiences over time; as trust deepens, we are able to move from “acquaintance” or “colleague” to “holy friend.”

Holy friendships are crucial to sustaining leaders personally, offering perspective and support in a role that is otherwise often isolated and isolating. Indeed, such friendships need to be cultivated intentionally, because close associations within an organization, even between people who consider themselves friends, may be constrained in various ways that those with people more tangential to the organization are not.

[Maggie Barankitse](#) is an extraordinary woman whose vision of the institutional interconnectedness of Maison Shalom has created a new world for children in rural Burundi in the wake of a civil war and the profound suffering she and her villagers endured. Her signature line is “Love made me an inventor”; by “love,” she means the heart of who God is, in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, poured out in abundance for our sake that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

Holy friends enable us to experience the love that will make us inventors and help us discover and rediscover hope for the future. When we experience the gifts of such holy friends, is it any wonder that we will do whatever it takes to nurture those relationships?

Most of us can identify several people who have been, and continue to be, holy friends in our lives. But the reverse is important to ponder as well: Who might put us on their list -- to whom have we been a holy friend? So also is the deeper question about the ecologies in which we live: How can we cultivate communities and institutions in which more people can discover the significance of holy friendships for their own lives, and offer such friendship to others?