

MISSIONAL INITIATIVES

Monthly Newsletter

FEBRUARY 2024

Article, Story, and Resource contributed by Matt Styles, Missional Initiatives Team

BETTER THAN BUTTER

“Is there anything better than butter? Think it over: every time you taste something that’s delicious beyond imagining and you say, ‘What is in this,’ the answer is always going to be “butter.” It’s a line from a 2009 movie about Julia Child, but it is also an important missional question, “Is there anything better than butter? Is there any other simple and easily overlooked ingredient that improves the quality of everything it touches?”

I think there is something better than butter, and it’s a lot healthier for you, too. When we pay attention to the ingredients used throughout the Bible, one key ingredient emerges again and again: presence. God was present to his people in the garden. Sin disrupted presence. God worked to heal and save the world by offering his presence: the tabernacle in the wilderness, the temple in Jerusalem, and most fully in the incarnation of King Jesus, who is Immanuel (God with us). As Jesus announced the incoming kingdom, he practiced presence around tables and in conversations. He poured out the the presence of his Holy Spirit. He formed a community that practiced presence with God, with one another, and with their neighbors. The Bible even ends with God’s presence dwelling with among his people. Presence, presence, presence. The “butter” of the Bible!

Although presence seems to be one of God’s favorite ingredients when cooking up transformation, it also seems to be the ingredient that we are most likely to leave out. Rather than leaning into presence, we settle for substitutes.

For instance, when it comes to our relationship with God, we often substitute activity for presence. Henri Nouwen puts it this way, “The main obstacle to love for God is service for God.” Now service and activity can be wonderfully good ingredients. However, when our activity and service are not rooted in the love and presence of God, it quickly leads to exhaustion and malformation. Nouwen invites us to not leave out the Bible’s key ingredient when he says, “Our task is to help people concentrate on the real but often hidden event of God’s active presence in their lives. Hence, the question that must guide all organizing activity in a parish is not how to keep people busy, but how to keep them from being so busy that they

can no longer hear the voice of God who speaks in silence.”^[1] When it comes to our relationship with God, activity cannot be a substitute for presence.

Likewise, when it comes to our relationships with one another, congregations often substitute proximity for presence. Proximity is a really good ingredient. In fact, it is nearly impossible to practice presence without proximity. However, even though the two ingredients are great together, they are not the same thing. Proximity refers to the sharing of space, while presence refers to the sharing of our lives. This difference shows up when a congregation only shares a building, a room, or a worship service (proximity), but does not open up, pay attention, and share their lives with one another (presence). When we substitute proximity for presence, we end up offering the world a collection of loosely connected individuals bent toward consumerism rather than a renewed family of faith that witnesses to the world by the way we love one another.

Lastly, when it comes to engaging with our neighbors, we often substitute projects for presence. Once again, projects can be a wonderful gift to our neighbors, but it is entirely possible to do a project with little to no presence, and our neighbors notice the difference. When we substitute projects for presence, we often are tempted to ignore our neighbors and impose our own way rather than paying attention to what God is already doing and bearing witness to his way. David Fitch puts it like this, “In organizing a church to be in mission, resist the impulse to organize people into mission projects. Instead, lead people so as to commit to a place, regular (weekly) presence in a place, praying for this place, its people, so as to discern what God is doing by His Spirit, so as, when the time is ripe, to announce Jesus is Lord here, doing great things.”^[2]

Presence is a simple and affordable ingredient that makes a world of difference in all we do as Christians. So why do we settle for substitutes? There may be several factors, but I suspect that a major reason is that “presence” requires patience and trust that God is at work. In the midst of congregational changes and cultural conflict we may not think we have time for a patient, faithful presence. However, if we learn to recover the centrality of presence in our worship, community, and mission, I think we will be able to say, “Is there anything better than presence? Think it over: every time you experience the transformative power of God and ask ‘What is in this,’ the answer is always going to be presence.”

[1] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*.

[2] David Fitch, Facebook post on January 21, 2020.

A STORY OF CENTERING PRESENCE

Presence is important! Got it! But what does it look like? One great example comes from Mike Kurrle and his ministry in Larchwood, Iowa. While serving on the Great Plains Association's Church Multiplication Team, I have had the privilege of hearing several stories from Mike about how he is practicing presence. Our team recorded a conversation with Mike as an example of what missional presence looks like. Click the link below to view that video:

[Mike Kurrle's Story](https://youtu.be/DYPD5peQIKo)

<https://youtu.be/DYPD5peQIKo>

RESOURCES

The Missional Initiatives Team is in the final stages of developing a seven-session Bonfire Group Study. It is our hope that this study will allow you to bring previous Bonfire conversations into your local context so that you can invite others to join with you on the missional journey. Each session of the study will be based on recorded conversations with Roy Searle, David Fitch, and Matt Canlis and will guide participants into:

1. Practicing presence with God
2. Learning about the importance of presence
3. Discussing presence with one another
4. Practicing presence throughout the week

If you are interested in hosting a Bonfire Study Group and would be willing to provide feedback about your experience, please email the Missional Initiatives Team at scardy@nabconf.org.