Relationships: the Tie that Binds

Many people do not experience many strong bonds between themselves and their peers. However, in the Navigators, each person is able to feel the strong relationships that build into everlasting friendships. I was often told that no matter how many friends you have, you will only have two or three life-long friends. As I observed the friendships that individuals have at the Navigators, I began to wonder if this was true. It seemed to me that these people had found more than a couple life-long friends. In order to begin, we must start with a brief history of how the organization began and the principles it stands upon.

Dawson Trotman was a man of God whose focus was on sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ to people throughout the world. Trotman, founder of the Navigators, began his work by humbly teaching high school students and small Sunday school groups about Christ. In these studies, Bible study, scripture memory, and prayer were stressed with the intent to teach others what you had learned. Later, in 1933, he extended his work to the U.S. Navy (Navigators). He thought that spreading this message to those people in the Navy was a great way to reach people worldwide. What Dawson Trotman did not know however, is how great an impact he would have on the world and how much his organization would grow in time.

While working with the sailors, Trotman fashioned the name “The Navigators.” It was to be a Bible club for service men (Skinner 106). However, the more people that heard God’s Word, the more people that began to spread it as well. Students began to travel throughout the country sharing with unbelievers the message of salvation.
In 1943, the Navigators was incorporated in California. Its headquarters later moved to Colorado Springs when the Glen Eyrie property was purchased in 1953. As the number of people working for God and this organization grew, Dawson Trotman though it was best if they began training men and women for ministry within the Navigators. Training began and the Navigators finally had a regular staff.

Dawson Trotman believed that the Navigators had a calling and a purpose to fulfill. That calling was to advance the Gospel of Jesus and His Kingdom into the nations through spiritual generations of laborers living and discipling among the lost. Trotman believed in one sole purpose as Christians: to know Christ and to make Him known. He had a passion for reaching out to people, especially those who did not know Jesus. In reaching out to others, Trotman and the Navigators had a few core beliefs that they took along with them. They believed that Scripture is inspired by God. Also, that we are all sinners and Jesus came to earth to die on the cross for our sins. He rose on the third day and defeated Satan and death and He will come again to judge the living and the dead. This is the message that the Navigators continue to spread worldwide.

The Navigators have many different branches that enable it to successfully complete its goals. These branches include: military, business, international missions, and collegiate, to name a few. The collegiate ministry is what I focused on in my research. During my interviews with Travis Parks, a Navigator staff member, he explained that the Navigators spend a considerable amount of time and energy on college students because the college years are a vital time in a person’s life; it is when they are
deciding what to do with the rest of their life (Parks). College is a very impressionable time a person’s life. It is when they are trying to find themselves. As a person grows, they will most likely stick to the ways that they were taught when they were young. “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it (Holy “Proverbs” 22:6). This is one of the teachings that the Navigators hold dear to their hearts. They want to set a foundation for people to live by. The Navigators want to help guide people into what they believe God wants for their life.

The Navigators at Purdue meet every Friday night at the Stewart center at 7:00pm. In order to learn more about the sub-culture and to observe their behavior, I visited these rallies. When I arrived I saw a large, yellow sign that said “The Navigators.” I picked up a Bible and a pen from the table that was in the hallway. On that table also sat name tags and a sign up sheet for Bible studies. As I was making my way into the room, I was almost immediately greeted by some of the people there. I said hi and quietly made my way into the room. There were tables and chairs lined up against the wall to accommodate the large amount of people. After a little bit of time for mingling, everyone took a seat on the floor and prepared for the rally to begin. The announcer began by welcoming everyone and saying what the Navigators are. There was a testimony expressing how Navigators has affected that person’s life followed by an ice breaker. Then everyone stood up and sang songs. As I observed the crowd of people as they sang, I noticed that many of them had memorized the songs and were singing them with their eyes closed, concentrating on what the words meant. Many people would lift up their hands in praise while others clapped to the beat of the song.
When the songs were finished, the speaker came to the front and began to give his message. The messages that I listened to this semester consisted of various topics including: adoption into God’s family, redemption, our purpose in life, our need to know the Gospel of Christ, obeying God, and God’s grace. As I took out a piece of paper and a pen to take notes, I noticed that others too had gotten these materials out and they were scribbling down key points from the message. Many people were very intent on what the speaker was saying and they would nod their heads in agreement with something that he expressed. The message was about thirty to forty minutes long and was followed by another song. Announcements ended the rally and people were free to talk amongst themselves or they could leave.

I walked around the room and observed the people’s conversations. Some were preparing to go to the after rally, a fellowship event for people to hang out and talk some more. Most people, however, seemed to be focused on what the next week was going to be like and whether a particular group would be able to get together within the next week. I noticed that many people discussed what movie they should watch this week, what time to play video games, or what time to meet for the football game the next day. Many of their conversations ended with, “see you tomorrow.” I realized that the people within this sub-culture have a stronger bond than those people in other campus organizations.

These relationships seemed to be more than superficial and idle talk. They really seemed to care about the other individual. Relationships are very difficult because they take your most precious commodity—your time. The individuals at the Navigators have seemed to master this, however. They have no problem meeting each other outside the
rally and common social gatherings. They meet for dinner, a movie, Bible study, a cup of coffee; almost any excuse they can come up with.

The Navigators not only strengthen their ties with their current friend, but they try to make new friends as well. In an interview I had, Kelsey Detzner stated that some of her favorite things about the Navigators are how welcoming the people are and how easy it is to make friends (Detzner). The people at the Navigators do not attempt to alienate newcomers. Instead, they try to make them feel welcome and a part of the group. They make an effort to get to know others and to spend time with them.

There are numerous reasons that the Navigators are so serious about building relationships with others. Some of the reasons that I will discuss include: the Bible stresses strong familial ties with others, strong relationships deter you from getting involved with the wrong crowd, you can gain encouragement from others to grow stronger in your relationship with God, the more time you spend with a person the stronger your friendship will be or vice versa, and the lifestyles and family background are more similar than those in other organizations. These aspects of the Navigators make it possible for people to strengthen their relationships with others as opposed to other organizations on campus.

In 1 Corinthians 12, the Bible declares, “Now you are one body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it (Holy “1 Corinthians” 12:27). The Bible clearly states that we are to work together like each part of the body works together, in order to spread the Gospel of Christ. To be able to work together, people must know each other and form tight relationships with others. Christians are a group of people set out to accomplish a task. This is analogous to the body. The body is many parts but it accomplishes one
specific goal. The Navigators have connected to such an extent that they can be classified in this way also. This is primarily due to the bonds they have formed amongst themselves.

The Bible also proclaims in Hebrews 13, “Keep on loving each other as brothers (Holy ‘Hebrews’ 13:1). Clearly, the Bible is reinforcing the familial ties and emphasizing the importance of brotherly love and friendship. God says that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God and the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. If you love God, you will also want to show His love to others. The Navigators try very hard to love everyone that they meet, forming close ties between these people. The more someone shows love to you, the more you will want to be around them. Obviously, the Bible stresses the importance of having strong ties with other Christians.

Strong ties with other Christians may also help to keep a person out of trouble. Christians are less likely to participate in drugs, alcohol, and parties that are so prevalent on college campuses. Accompanied with these events come guilt, shame, denial, and bitterness toward others. This may come from what you did or not remembering what you did. However, by having a strong, Christian support group, the Navigators believe that you will find it easier to stay away from these situations. The group of friends that you hang out with will most likely participate in the same activities as you. Those in Christian organizations are more likely to watch movies, go bowling, ice skating, or play games at the Recreational Sports Center.

“In college, it is easy to get involved with bad influences so if you have core Christian friendships, you will be more likely to avoid these influences (Detzner).”
Kelsey believes this is the primary reason the Navigators stress having strong relationships with other Christians. Peer pressure is very strong among people this age group and many times individuals give in to this peer pressure, whether good or bad. When a person has a majority of non-Christian friends, that person is more likely to give in to the bad peer pressure and participate in drunken parties or other illegal or harmful activities. With Christian friends near, a person will be more apt to give in to the positive influences such as going to Bible study, going to church, having a quiet time with God, participating in a fun activity that is not hazardous or in any way harmful to that person or others. The Navigators believe that by adding Christian friends to your social sphere, you are encouraging a more fruitful and happy life, free of guilt or shame.

According to Webster’s Dictionary, to encourage is inspire with courage, spirit, or confidence, to stimulate by guidance or approval, or to promote (263). The Navigators make an effort to lead and support their members. Individuals around Christians will be encouraged daily to live a life pleasing to God. Youth ministry programs offer opportunities for youth to build social capital through participation with their peers to address their social and spiritual needs, such as spiritual growth (Goreham 337). They are urged to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ. As a result, each person will spend more time in daily devotions and prayer. According to the Navigators, Christian friends and encouragement are integral parts in having a firm Christian foundation and it gives a desire to dig deeper into God’s Word.

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another- and all the more as we see the Day approaching (Holy ‘Hebrews’
10:24-25).’’ This is one of the many verses that he Navigators has memorized. It clearly shows that as Christians, they are to encourage others and meet with them daily. This is one of the primary reasons the Navigators stress close personal ties with other Christians. The second coming of Christ draws nearer everyday and to the Navigators, it is important to lift each other up in this hope.

Encouragement is something that everyone needs from time to time and the Navigators are always there to provide it. At the field site, I noticed that many people would ask their friends how their week was. Many would reply and say that it was long, busy, or tiring. They would then respond, ‘‘Well it is over now and its time for the weekend!’’ I often saw people lifting other’s spirits, perhaps even giving the other person a hug. One interesting comment that I overheard was in response to a girl saying that she had a fifteen page paper due Monday and that she had not started. This particular individual was very overwhelmed and frustrated. When she told her friend this, her friend smiled at her and said, ‘‘Remember that God is up all night too so you will not be alone and you will be strengthened.’’ This is encouragement in the name of God! It is no wonder why the Navigators continue to form such strong bonds and keep spending time with each other.

Relationships and friendships tend to grow the more a person is with another or perhaps the stronger relationships a person has, the more they will want to visit with the other person. This is a chicken or the egg scenario. Which one came first? From my observations, it is my opinion that both are true to a degree. I have come to this conclusion, especially regarding the Navigators, because there are numerous individuals who did not know each other prior to their meeting with one another. However, I have
also encountered several close friends and the more they hang out with one another, the stronger their friendship is. Goreham explains, ‘Participation represents the development of relationships, bonding, and in-group loyalties (339). The more active a person is in a particular group, the more relationships they will form. This issue continues to be very difficult and dangerous to assume that one causes the other.

I noticed that the Navigators are especially conscientious about meeting with the group members outside of the weekly rallies. This is one of the many things that make the Navigators a special group. Travis explains, ‘The Navigators are unique because not only do the Navigators help a person grow in faith and equips that person to be used by God to tell others, but this group also provides friendships that college students need (Parks). Many other organizations on campus only meet once a month and that is usually the only time the members see each other. However, with the Navigators, the group meets every Friday for the rally and then they have social activities after each rally, providing another opportunity for the members to mingle. Along with the rallies, the Navigators also host events such as retreats, a yearly Barn Dance, mid-week Bible studies, and summer training programs. This allows ample time for the members to meet new people and to spend time with their friends. The amount of time the Navigators spend together allows for the stronger bonds that people form. It is unclear which event occurs first but it is evident that regardless of which comes first, the Navigators are always promoting the social atmosphere.

Regardless of the great amount of Navigator support for socializing with others, people must feel comfortable doing so. Perhaps those in the Navigators grew up in predominantly Christian homes where this behavior was often encouraged. By having a
similar background, many people are able to relate based on what they have encountered and experienced. This causes a special bond between two people, creating a friendship built on the past. The individual may think that the other person understands them better. They may feel the other person can give better advice for their current situation because their friend has already gone through that. Having a similar background to another person creates more than one common bond. The more common bonds a group has, the more likely they are to be closer to each other and have stronger friendships.

Youth groups, particularly campus religious groups, offer a place for people to socialize with others that may have something in common with them. Larson, a student at Indiana University concludes, “It is an opportunity for students to come to IU to find a community that they will connect with (Tash).” These students in Navigators have found more than one common bond. The people that participate in the Navigators often times have much more in common than the students from different organizations. For example, in other organizations, most of the people only have one common connection and that is what relates to their club. In the Karate club, for instance, most people only have karate as a mutual ground. In the Navigators, however, the members have much more in common. Their childhood and upbringing may be similar, they all love Jesus, they all believe the Bible is the Word of God, and they all enjoy similar activities. This may play a major role in forming relationships.

The Navigators, founded by a man passionate for spreading God’s Word, has been able to do just that at Purdue. They have been able to form a tightly knit community at Purdue, enhancing the effectiveness of their overall mission of making Christ known. By forming these relationships, they are able to work as a team to achieve their goal. The
Purdue Navigators often reiterate the importance of having Christian fellowship. There are many factors affecting the overall outcome of these Christian relationships. I have discussed a few of the more prominent ones that I observed at the field site this semester. The Navigators, unlike many other campus organizations, have definitely found the importance of strong friendships.

Works Cited


