

How to Cultivate Relationships That Sustain Awakening

THE
AWAKENING
LIBRARY



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How to Cultivate Relationships
That Sustain Awakening

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The Awakening Library represents collected learnings from more than a decade of ministry as Seedbed and New Room. These pieces have been contributed by writers, leaders, and practitioners in fellowship with the goal of providing practical insights for individuals and churches desiring awakening—an encounter with God that both results from and leads to deep wholeness in people, renewal of the church, evangelization of a generation, and transformation of society.

With special thanks to Mark Benjamin for his contribution to this resource.

This resource contains excerpts from *Discipleship Bands: A Field Guide*, which is available for free digitally, along with other banding resources, at discipleshipbands.com.

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INTRODUCTION

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:12–13)

Awakening moves at the pace of friendship; relationships are not peripheral to the dynamics of awakening—they are central.

When you read the passages in the Gospels and in the book of Acts—scriptures documenting the greatest awakening the world has ever seen—what do you see? In Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, many Christians see Jesus teaching, performing miracles, telling stories, dying, and rising from the grave. In Acts 1–2, many Christians see the ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the Father, the sound of a rushing

wind, tongues of fire lighting on a room full of disciples, and a first wave of evangelism that sets the good news exploding onto the scene of the first-century world.

But what if we look a bit closer? Zooming in on all the Gospel wonder, all the drama from incarnation to resurrection, all the hillside chats upturning the world, all the love evidencing God's active presence, and all the power encounters people experienced—one might see a backdrop of people growing in close relationship with Jesus and with one another.

Behind all the stories of awakening in the New Testament, and weaving through the stories of revivals and awakenings throughout history, the attentive eye will see *relationships*—tightly-knit bonds between people and small communities bound together by what the Bible calls *koinonia*, or fellowship.

Koinonia is not something that happens *to* a group of believers. It is a bond created by the Holy Spirit which is then reinforced by shared encouragement, mutual service, frequent confession, and dignifying prayer—acts that enable a few people to become the love of God to one another so that together they can become the love of God to the world.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE AT THE HEART OF AWAKENING

The network of house churches and micro-communities of the explosive early church, the vibrant monastic communities and soul-friend models of Celtic Christianity, the banding model of Zinzendorf and the Moravians, the class meetings and banded discipleship groups of the Methodists, and the histories of many other awakening movements testify to this reality: confessional communities that nurture fellowship and mission between small groups of Christians have everything to do with the sustaining of the experience of God's presence in outpourings throughout history.

From the time of primitive Christianity to today, these catalytic, watershed awakening moments have been either preceded or accompanied by the close bonds of

friendship between believers. But when today's revival-minded Christians talk about awakening, relationships are often referred to incidentally, or, at best, secondarily, to the miraculous work the Father is doing among a people. But what if awakening is actually sustained by, and perhaps even transmitted through, vital and profoundly countercultural relationships—Christ-centered relationships that are nurtured through confession, prayer, mutual accountability, shared faith, and deep friendship?

The relationships we maintain as Christians—marked by the biblical values of meeting together, sharing spiritual growth together, praying together, confessing sin to one another, receiving forgiveness, preferring one another, keeping short accounts, mutually encouraging, and submitting to one another, remaining steadfast in fellowship together, and serving together—matter more to the sustaining awakening than we can imagine.

SUSTAINING AWAKENING THROUGH BANDED DISCIPLESHIP

In our learnings over the last decades of praying for, and sowing for a great awakening, we have seen one way of reinforcing deep and sustaining Christian relationships rise above all others. These are called “discipleship bands.” Discipleship bands are a model of foundational Christian community that was adapted by John Wesley, the founder of the Methodists, from the Moravians.

Wesley believed that once a person had an encounter with God in the person of Jesus Christ, it was vital that they have a place in which they could join with others in pursuing Christ and being set free from the “sin that so easily entangles” us (Heb. 12:1). Putting Christians in

same-gender groups, unique and lasting bonds occur that transcended what most of us today may experience in a small group or church setting. Our iteration of Wesley's band model encourages three to five men or women to band together, becoming the love of God to one another so they can become the love of God for the world.

With thousands of bands in our network, all meeting together, praying together, and sowing together for a great awakening, they have created a net of relationships prepared to respond to, host, and further the work of a great awakening in our time.

Essentially, a discipleship band is a group of three to five men or women who meet weekly to engage in transformational questions and to pray for one another.

A discipleship band is neither a traditional small group nor a typical accountability group. The primary curriculum is the lives of its participants, joined together in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

While bands are explored more deeply in our *Discipleship Bands: A Practical Field Guide* and other resources, the following is a summary of what a band is and does.

A band meeting is simple in structure and format. Meeting weekly (live or online), a band gathers for each member to go through a series of questions. Each person would have about twenty minutes to share:

- 1. HOW IS IT WITH YOUR SOUL?**
- 2. WHAT ARE YOUR SUCCESSES AND STRUGGLES?**
- 3. HOW MIGHT THE WORD AND SPIRIT BE SPEAKING IN YOUR LIFE?**
- 4. DO YOU HAVE ANY SIN TO CONFESS?**
- 5. IS THERE ANYTHING YOU DESIRE TO KEEP SECRET?**

When initially joining together in a band we recommend that bandmates answer the first three questions until they feel ready to answer questions 4 and 5.

There are then Seven Commitments that provide foundational rules of engagement for how band members should respect and honor each other.

- 1. *Respect the clock***

You have fifteen to twenty minutes to share. Please do your best to stick to that time frame.

- 2. *Challenge by choice***

You have permission to skip a question at any time if you do not feel ready or able to respond.

- 3. *Limit cross-talk***

When someone is sharing, listen intently and avoid interruption. Offer advice only when a bandmate invites it.

4. *One Counselor (Come, Holy Spirit)*

When someone is sharing, listen deeply and pay attention to how the Holy Spirit might prompt you to pray.

5. *Comfort with empathy*

Hold space for others with open hearts. Rather than offering pity or sympathy, show up and tune in—bless, encourage, and build up.

6. *Community of grace*

When someone confesses sin, affirm their forgiveness through Jesus by saying, “In the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven.” If someone shares a secret, thank them for their courage and never judge.

7. *Strictly confidential*

Never share another person’s story, struggles, successes, sins, or secrets outside the group.

Let’s be clear. Bands are not a version of a new small-group program or Bible study groups. We do not fail at the mission of God in the world for lack of more information or better content or enhanced skills. We fail for a lack of *love*. We do not have a content problem. We have a connection problem. Our foremost challenge is not *learning* more but *loving* more.

The success of the gospel of Jesus Christ rises and falls on the strength of the relationships among his followers. There’s nothing new here. It’s actually quite ancient. From

Jesus's band of disciples to the present day, everywhere the church has flourished some manner of banded discipleship was at the heart of it.

HOW CAN BANDS HELP US SUSTAIN AWAKENING?

The image of a fishing net can help us understand the importance of relationships with banding dynamics to sustaining awakening. A fishing net is simply a constellation of closely tied knots. Jesus's first disciples left their nets behind to follow him.

They would soon become the net themselves. This is how he would teach them to fish for people, not with bait, but with the network formed by their relationships with one another. When he told them to throw their nets on the other side of the boat, into the deep water, it prefigured what he would do with their banded relationships in the larger world. The gospel works most prominently and

powerfully through the kind of extraordinary relationships formed among us by the Holy Spirit.

Most of us aren't lazy in our faith. We are stuck. It is not that we lack commitment. We are simply arrested in our development. The way forward is as close as a few other people who are willing to band together.

To be sure, Jesus dwells in our individual lives, but he multiplies his movement through the bonds between us. It's where two or three are gathered in his name that he makes himself present in powerful ways. As he knits and nurtures divine bonds of holy love among small bands of people who have little in common but their relationship with him, the world awakens to the wonders of heaven touching earth.

Think of a single square of a net as one discipleship band, or perhaps the band as the knot itself. Now imagine the effect of hundreds, thousands, even tens of thousands of knots and squares. This is a picture of the church as it was founded and as it spread across the earth in those early centuries. The church did not spread and grow as a function of its institutional structures or its professional clergy or impressive buildings or its budget surpluses or deficits. The church multiplied in breadth as the relationships among its people grew in depth. The little churches in Philippi and Corinth and Ephesus and Thessalonica and Colossae were like so many fishing nets.

It was the winsome constellation of their distinctive relationships in the deep waters of these bustling irreligious and often uber-religious cities that captured the attention of seekers and persecutors alike.

A CASE STUDY: THE ASBURY OUTPOURING

For sixteen profound days in February of 2023, the Spirit of God was poured out on students and faculty at Asbury University, then on students and faculty on campuses across the United States, then on tens of thousands of visitors, then on millions who were touched online. Known as the “Asbury Outpouring,” these days were marked by lingering worship, altar ministry and confession, humility among the leaders, as well as deep reconciliation and remarkable relational healing.

Those guiding logistics behind the scenes as the Spirit continued to precipitate a profound work of renewal were noted, by those present and by various media outlets, as serving with a radical humility, quietly stewarding a

surprising event while caring for one another—even as they hosted tens of thousands from around the world.

What did not get attention, largely because it occurred behind the scenes, was the quality of the relationships between those leaders. Their ability to work together with sustained relational integrity, to repair relationships on the fly, to defer to one another, to prefer one another, and to be difficult to offend, was unique in today's Christian world. These leaders sought to steward God's profound work and to serve his loving ministry in thousands of students and tens of thousands of lives, and, at the same time, to do so maintain caring and resilient Christian fellowship between themselves.

It is here that banded relationship comes to the fore. Banded relationships and banded discipleship dynamics were in the DNA of Asbury University—from both their Wesleyan tradition and from recent renewals of banding in the years preceding the outpouring. A majority of the leaders behind the scenes were men and women for whom this practice of being open and vulnerable in small groups of three to four is a commonplace practice.

These banding dynamics—now applied between students and leaders in the holy pressure cooker of a surprise hosting of the world—allowed these followers to hold a kind of constitution that was grounded in the character of Christ. They acted with boldness, honesty, discernment, and the ability to quickly confess personal

failures that were necessary to lead together without taking or holding on to offense.

What bears noting for us regarding the Asbury Outpouring, and its resonance with awakening history, is this: it seems as though God goes looking for a people he can trust with the greater things, with his glory. There is something about the desire to nurture a life that is open, honest, and quick to confess that may bear the kind of integrity and the kind of mutual accountability with which God seems pleased to work.

Many of the leaders of the Asbury Outpouring were flexing spiritual muscles strengthened through banded discipleship and in other environments with banding dynamics, that enabled them to navigate a complex season of transformation while maintaining integrity and richness in koinonia fellowship.

The spiritual and relational muscles one works in banded fellowship can reach into other relationships in the home, the church, and the city. Bands in which we become the love of God to three to four others so that we can become the love of God to the world, provide a net for catching those impacted by an outpouring. Bands can see to it that the deep work of God experienced in an outpouring can be furthered and established in individual lives for the decades to come.

To use another analogy, when people have an encounter with Jesus, they need a context where fire can burn. A

band, or band-like relationships, are like a fireplace. In a fireplace, the burning is controlled, and warmth is experienced. When we are encountered by the Spirit in a move of God, repenting and seeking healing for various sin patterns, the band becomes a context in which we can wrestle, week in and week out, as we mature into Christ. Even if we fall into the same sin patterns again, we have a group to confess to, to be ministered to within, and to pray for us, and strengthen us as we overcome through Christ.

CONCLUSION

The vision that has emerged from our learnings is simple: we want to join the awakened together in bands, and to join the bands together in sowing for awakening. Everywhere we see a discipleship band, we see an incubator of awakening, a place where a deeper way of love can take root in a community.

This love will begin as a way of praying. We see bands coming together to travail in prayer for the awakening of local churches. As a consequence, we see local churches banding together to travail in prayer for the awakening of cities and regions. It will take years. It may take decades. We must take the long view. We are sowing for a great awakening for generations yet unborn.

CONCLUSION

In a post-Christian world, the content of the gospel will have little impact on unbelievers if people do not see it actualized in the relationships among its believers. The awakening we long for will not come from gathering larger crowds at bigger conferences. It will not come as more and more people salute the big thing we hope God will do among us. Awakening will come as more and more people do the small thing.

As thousands and then hundreds of thousands begin banding together and doing the big work of awakening at the smallest level of disciple-making relationships, the scales will one day tip and not only will a great awakening be upon us, but the Holy Spirit will have organized us into the kind of fellowship wherein awakening can grow, sustain, and multiply itself.

If your heart is as ours, let's give each other our hands. Might we go this way together?

For more resources on relationships, and particularly on banded discipleship, visit discipleshipbands.com.

Sow righteousness for yourselves,
reap the fruit of unfailing love,
and break up your unplowed ground;
for it is time to seek the LORD,
until he comes and showers his righteousness on you.

Hosea 10:12

The Awakening Library is a series of
print and digital resources that represent
collected learnings of Seedbed and New Room.

This suite of resources shares practical
experience and accessible teaching with
Christians seeking to partner with the Holy
Spirit in sowing for a great awakening.



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