

EDITORIAL: Faith & substantive conversations

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Have you heard about the study that reveals people who spend more of their day engaging in deep, meaningful discussions are happier than people who mainly make small talk? Maybe you talked about these findings and the discussion made you, well, happy.

Here's what happened: A team of researchers headed by Matthias Mehl, a psychologist at the University of Arizona, analyzed the conversations of 79 students across a four-day period. The students wore tiny microphones that recorded 30 seconds of sound every 12.5 minutes. Then the researchers analyzed what they heard and categorized all the discussions into "small talk," "substantive conversations" and other talk that fell into neither category. They also asked the participants to rate how happy they are and cross-referenced those self-assessments with the opinions of three friends each.

Editor Marv Knox

Turns out, happy people are ones who talk regularly, and the happiest people are those who engage in a higher percentage of meaningful conversations. "The present findings demonstrate that the happy life is social rather than solitary, and conversationally deep rather than superficial," Mehl reported in the [latest edition of *Psychological Science*](#). As you might guess, he acknowledges a chicken-or-the-egg quandary: "On the one hand, well-being may be causally antecedent to having substantive interactions; happy people may be 'social attractors' who facilitate deep social encounters. On the other hand, deep conversations may actually

make people happier. Just as self-disclosure can instill a sense of intimacy in a relationship, deep conversations may instill a sense of meaning.” Don’t you imagine talking about those possibilities made Mehl and his colleagues happy?

I hope you find research like this fascinating. It counters conventional wisdom that dictates safe, sterile conversations. It blows up the myth that people shouldn’t talk about religion and politics in polite company. From experience, I sense the research is true. For all our adult lives, my wife and I have been blessed by the friendship of a couple who live not too far from us. The husband lived down the hall from me in college. Through the years, we have enjoyed delightful evenings of profound conversations—about faith and family, politics and power, community and culture, and a host of other topics. We don’t always agree, but we’re always agreeable. Our discussions have drawn us closer as friends, and the combination of meaningful conversation and deep friendship has made us not only happy, but joyful.

Mehl’s research on substantive conversations provides fodder for discussion as we talk about how we do church:

- *Our worship services and Bible studies should inspire participants to discuss the big issues of life—salvation and eternity, to be sure, but also how our faith and beliefs shape the way we live in the world, the way we face issues in the community, the way we interact with society. These public gatherings can and should provide the theological, moral and social framework for what we talk about and how we talk about it.*
- *Our church conferences, committee meetings and other interactive gatherings should model how we talk about important issues. Our culture has become combative, fractious and verbally abusive. Church should be showing people how we can talk civilly and graciously, even when we hold profound disagreements. In order to engage in substantive conversations, we need to understand how to do that without shouting*

and ruining relationships.

- *We also need to provide space and opportunity for these conversations in very small groups and one-on-one. We can't do it all in Sunday school or worship. Far from it. We need to establish a culture of togetherness and fellowship—the New Testament word is koinonia—that enables people who care for each other to talk about what really matters.*

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