

A photograph of three men on a golf course. The man in the foreground is wearing a grey polo shirt and white pants, smiling. Behind him are two other men, one in a light blue shirt and white pants, and another in a blue shirt and khaki pants, both also smiling. They are standing on a green golf course with a fairway and trees in the background.

SERIES STRONGER LINKS FELLOWSHIPS

Three keys to a thriving Links Fellowship

PRESENT

EARNEST

INTENTIONAL

An article for leaders and potential leaders by Links Players COO Jeff Hopper

EARLY IN THE LIFE OF LINKS PLAYERS, founders Jim Hiskey and Tom Flory traveled the country, stopping in at golf courses and driving ranges with one thing on their minds: plant fellowships of golfers who would explore the Bible together and see just who Jesus is.

This was in the 1980s, long before the Internet as we now know it made mass communication and social networking widespread and affordable. Jim and Tom often sparked a fire, but it was difficult for them to follow up and help groups gain sustainability over time. The fledging Links Letter, a newsletter sharing stories of what these fellowships were up to (along with offering testimonies from tour players and golf-loving business or political leaders), arrived every quarter or so in the “snail mail” boxes of those Jim and Tom met in their travels. But that was about as sophisticated as communication got in those days, unless you were willing to spend a lot of time and money on the phone.

By the early 2000s, however, the Internet had taken hold, the Links Daily Devotional found an avid readership, and Jeffrey Cranford was willing to meld Jim and Tom’s old vision with his fresh work in the golf-crazed Coachella Valley of California, where he was leading several weekly studies for golfers at places like La Quinta Country Club and Bermuda Dunes Country Club, courses well-known to long-time TV fans of the Bob Hope Desert Classic. Links Fellowships were cropping up in many new places, and they were supported by the free resources supplied by Links Players.

Today, Links Fellowships thrive under the oversight of several region directors, who encourage and assist the Fellowship leaders who meet regularly—usually weekly—with their groups of men, women, or mixed groups. It’s a vital work that allows otherwise hesitant people to access God and explore his Word in places where they are comfortable and conversant.

But what makes these Fellowships healthy and effective? We offer three main ideas that move Links Fellowships—and similar affinity-based Bible studies—toward sustainable work that ministers to people over time and with eternal effect. These ideas challenge groups and their leaders to be **present**, **earnest**, and **intentional**.



A MINISTRY OF PRESENCE

We begin by recognizing that the work of Links Fellowships is a ministry of presence. That is, effective ministry comes from spending regular, elongated time where you want people to know you and the message you carry. In this case, of course, we’re talking about hanging out at the golf course, so you’ve got to be pretty excited about that opportunity! In our culture, you will often hear talk of accomplishing great things during “quality time.” But in truth, quality time is almost always the by-product of quantity time. The more time you spend with your children, the more chances you will have for those powerful personal conversations when you open your minds and hearts to one another. The same is true for your “children in the faith,” those you are leading (and learning from, too!).

When it comes to the details of presence, time and place are important. Even if you do not post

notices about your group every week, word of mouth may bring new participants. You don’t want to keep these visitors guessing about when and where they can find you. And even if at first reluctant visitors won’t step across the threshold of your meeting place, they may notice who’s there as they walk by. This means they can ask personal questions later when they have powerful needs.

One of our California groups became as recognizable in their club as another group on site—“the Patio Peckers.” Pardon the name, perhaps, but many clubs have a crew like this one; they’re the folks who make the Nineteenth Hole their own place of presence. One afternoon a leader from the Links Fellowship was walking by and one of the Peckers called him over to tell him that a guy in the group was missing because he had just been diagnosed with cancer. This fellow asked the Fellowship leader if he would pray for their friend. The leader said, “Sure, let’s do that right now.” It was no high church prayer that would have embarrassed the guys, but quite conversationally he prayed for their friend. Consider how this came about: the Links Fellowship had become known for its *presence* on the property. And because these men had a need that they recognized as outside their own human power to meet, they asked one of the Fellowship leaders to help them go to God.

Of course, this means that the kind of presence you are establishing makes all the difference. Once when one of our regional directors met a member of a club a few towns over, he dropped a name, asking if this member knew so-and-so, who was the leader of the Links Fellowship at the club. “Oh, you mean ‘Grumpy,’” the member replied. Not only was the door instantly shut for effective conversation with this member about the Links Fellowship at his club, but because of this leader’s personal reputation the door had likely been shut at that club for several years to new people who might access the group. In 2 Corinthians 2, we read that we are to be the aroma of Christ, both among believers and unbelievers. The apostle Paul wrote that while

this aroma would smell like death to those who do not believe, it would be unmistakable that it came from one whose life was in Christ.

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2 Corinthians 2:14-16 - But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task?

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When this is done well and the members of a Fellowship become known for their welcoming nature and generous activity, the results are truly excellent. Randy Wolff, the South Central region director for Links Players, tells the story of Ernie, whose father passed away. The funeral was scheduled for 11 AM on the same day Ernie's Links Fellowship met, but there was Ernie, sitting at the table at 7 AM. Randy remarked that it was so good to see Ernie on that day, to which Ernie responded, "Why wouldn't I be here? This is my family." It's hard to argue with a person who has found their place among God's people!

Finally, being present largely means being available. In addition to your regular meeting time and place, if people begin to recognize that you walk with Christ, they may approach you with personal problems or spiritual questions at any time. You'll want to be available and ready to hear them out. If you're married, this means that your spouse should be on board with what you're doing, because sometimes your family plans may need to be adjusted for the sake of kingdom work. If both you and your spouse recognize that you are a missionary where you play golf, you'll both understand the importance of an inconvenience directly connected to ministering to a friend in need. Open the conversation, maintain trust, communicate clearly—these are the hallmarks of

a couple that supports one another in ministering well.



EARNEST WITH THE WORD

It has been suggested that many people want nothing to do with the Bible these days. At Links Players, we have not found this to be true. Instead, we've found that many people want little to do with the Bible when it is tritely taught or when it is regarded as a set of principles for better living. The Bible is the very revelation of God, and when it is taught this way—with little peripheral interference—people are compelled by its message. The ensuing lines of 2 Corinthians passage about being the aroma of Christ go like this: "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God." The Word of God is not to be watered down or made to match the designs of the world; it is meant to stand alone as coming from its one great source, God himself.

In order to present the Bible in this way, you have to be willing to be a student of the Word. For some, this may mean seminary classes or weekend workshops. For others it will mean an increase in their personal reading of the Bible and commentaries that help us understand it. At the very least, being a student of the Word means humbly reading and asking questions about its meaning and purpose in the way it tells us about God and our relationship with him. In fact, no matter how intellectually knowledgeable you become with regard to the Scripture, if you do not maintain a humility as one who is always learning, then you will not be favorably received by those

who choose to study with you.

One of the three key aspects of earnestly presenting the Word (whether you regard yourself as a teacher or a facilitator) is integration of the material. The second tenet of the Links Player's personal mission is: Integrate Christ's reign and authority into every aspect of life. Certainly you've heard it taught that Jesus is not meant to be only a Sunday friend. In truth, Jesus is to be given access to all that we do. When you truly surrender your whole life to Christ, you will find that the Scripture becomes increasingly interesting and applicable. Because of this, others will note that you take the Bible seriously; it's not just a hobby or side interest.

The second key aspect of earnestly presenting the Word is earnestly understanding your audience. As the Bible has become decreasingly read in our time, many people don't actually know what it says. Yet we often greet them with theological discussions that are interesting to ourselves but to few others. In a healthy Links Fellowship, you'll have people who have "done church" for many years but have never really taken the Word to heart; you'll have those whose quiet times of study in Scripture are deeply meaningful to them; you'll have those who are just kicking the tires on the whole question of whether Jesus was real then and is pertinent now. In other words, you'll have a wide range of experience, and the best way to bring them together is around the Scripture itself, not around a lot of peripheral thinking. Read a lot of Scripture and discuss what you read. If you want to make connections to other materials, make connections between one passage and another, particularly between the Old Testament and the New. With so many people saying they really only know or like the New Testament, it can be very helpful for them to be moved to the understanding that the New Testament is so dependent on the types and shadows, as well as the prophecies, of the Old Testament.

And the third key aspect of earnestly presenting the Word is to keep its study free from distractions.

One common problem occurs when believers turn the discussion to their political persuasions. While some of these may be well-argued from Scripture, if your time of study moves toward political conversation, those who are just getting started in the Word will say, "I don't need to come here for this. I can get this same conversation in the bar." By adhering to the Word—and as much as possible to only the Word—you protect its integrity as the heart of your study.

When you stay devoted to the Word, and your Fellowship members understand this, you hear comments like this one from a Texas participant who drives an hour to get to his Fellowship: "I would not miss this. It has become a priority I *need* this time. It helps me stay on the trail!"



INTENTIONAL IN TALKING ABOUT JESUS

One of the more common questions among believers who have built golf friendships with unbelieving friends is this: how can I turn the conversation to Jesus? The question itself is a good start, because it means the inquirer is interested in intentionally bringing up the Good News that changes a life. This motivation lines up with the injunction of the Great Commission to "go." We are also excited when we hear this question at Links Players, because the inquirer understands that Links Fellowships are not meant to be only growth centers for people who already believe but lighthouses for those who are hoping to find their way out of troubled waters.

To begin, you will need to know the core of the message you are bringing. Consider 2 Corinthians

5: “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. . . All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them.” The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus endured the worst of times in order to offer us the very best in life. When we hold this truth closely, we do so not only for ourselves but for others as well. In fact, the next sentence in this passage speaks to this: “He has committed us to this message of reconciliation.” Christ enacted the ministry of reconciliation; we are to carry its story on our lips.

Next, recognize a central line in Paul’s writing here: “Not counting their sins against them.” This does not mean that God ignores our sins or is unconcerned about them. But it helps us remember to take a positive tack in our conversations with unbelievers—not starting with “the bad you are doing” over and above “the good Christ has done.” Those who are living apart from Christ know intuitively that their greatest problems rest in their heart. That is, they understand that while it is no good that they spewed out a string of profanities after their latest double bogey, the real problem is that they are angry much of the time and usually at relatively small things. Start with the heart when you can and you should find people are more honest in their self-assessment.

Don’t be afraid to practice conversations you might have with an unbeliever. One Links Player found that he could affectively turn a conversation on the golf course when a player did show frustration at golf by simply asking, “Do you find yourself getting frustrated like that at other things in life? I sure do.” The addition of that personal admission softens the question and invites the other person in. Here are some other possible points of entry:

- Current golf events (“Just when it looked like everything was going perfectly in that tournament for Phil Mickelson. . .”) can help place the conversation in a general context that invites theological reflection.

- Personal difficulties of your own (“I wish I knew what was going on with my son right now. . .”) can break down walls and encourage an exchange of how you each deal with trouble.

- Testimonies of tour players (“Did you hear Webb Simpson thank Jesus after his win last week? What do you make of that?”). In fact, the reason we continue to publish the Links Players magazine (formerly the Links Letter) every year is to allow golfers to hand an engaging set of testimonies to their friends and follow up with discussion about these players’ stories a few days later.

Never underestimate the power of a round of golf, either. When some members of a Fellowship follows up their morning Bible study with golf, they do well to invite some players who aren’t yet coming to the Fellowship. The conversations that arise between believers and unbelievers often lead to the unbelievers coming early one morning “to see what this is all about.”

Sometimes it is helpful to establish a phrase that reminds us of a set of principles like Present, Earnest and Intentional. Well, those same three letters (PEI) can be remembered this way: Perpetually Engaged for Impact. When we make it a habit to encounter people and ignite their interest for life in Christ, we will see his Spirit have impact through us. Men and women will turn to Jesus and join fellowship with others to grow in their relationship with him. At Links Players, we can’t imagine a more significant endeavor than that! 🏌️

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