

# *Relationships*



## *Where Love is in Place*

Karen & Ron Flowers

Bryan Craig

*with*

Bernie & Karen Holford • Edyta Jankiewicz

Simon Luke • Rick McEdward • Myrtle Penniecook

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A Department of Family Ministries publication

Prepared by Karen & Ron Flowers and Bryan Craig  
Software formatting by Kathleen Sowards

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# Preface

As time passes and we grow older, as our Christian walk lengthens, we find ourselves wanting to draw ever closer to Christ, to imbibe the distilled essence of what it means to be His disciples. The more we contemplate the Christian faith, the more we realize it is vast, unfathomable in one lifetime. Prophecy, history, archaeology, eschatology—all are worthy topics, good information. We have spent years endeavoring to wrap our minds about these themes. And around good advice, for the Scripture is filled from cover to cover with counsel on health, morality, on managing life in all its aspects, the best advice—ethical guidelines and principles of the tallest order.

Lately though, we have been pondering verses like Hebrews 1:1, 2: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by his Son . . .” And attuning ourselves to the voice from the cloud on the mountain where Jesus was transfigured, “This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!” (Matthew 17:5). “In these last days He has spoken to us by His Son.” “Listen to Him!” We ask ourselves, Have we really *listened*? Have we really listened to *Him*? Those who were on the ground at the time said of Jesus, “No one ever spoke the way this man does” (John 7:46).

What is breaking over us is that the essence of Christianity is a Person, a God-person who has connected Himself to humanity through His incarnation. He is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15) who is love (1 John 4:8, 16). Jesus is Love in human flesh and, as Eugene Peterson puts it, He has “moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14 TM). More generous, more gregarious, more welcoming than the nicest neighbor you know, He throws wide the door to His place, inviting in all passers-by. There is Love where He is! There is warmth and caring in His eyes for us, just as He had for the young ruler, though the man declined to follow Him (Mark 10:21, 22). There is limitless love in His heart for us—love that does not go away, even as He had for Peter who betrayed Him. Note those reassuring words the angel messengers at the open tomb were instructed to pass on: “He has risen. . . . Go, tell his disciples and Peter” (Mark 16:6, 7). *And Peter!* Search the Bible narratives of His interaction with people of all walks. . . . There is healing love, forgiving love, restoring love, no condemnation love, empowering love. In His words, in His actions, in His very being in life and death He defines love. “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16).

*Love* is the one-word summation of His Person and His Message. *God loves! He loves us!* That is the good news! Jesus refocused our attention on love—for God and for people—as the core of the commandments (Matthew 22:37-40). Love is the great centerpiece of His teaching—His new commandment: “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34; 15:12). Love is the hallmark that distinguishes Jesus’ followers (John 13:35).

This love does not spring naturally from us, but it will flood our hearts as Jesus abides there through His Spirit. He prayed that it might be so—“that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them” (John 17:26). A braided cord of believers stands with Paul to

testify to God's lavish response: "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:5). Ellen White speaks for Christians of all times when she wrote, "When you appreciate His wondrous love, love and gratitude will be in your heart as a wellspring of joy" (*Youth's Instructor*, 1894).

As we reflected on this theme at the Family Ministries World Advisory in March, 2006, it was the wish of our world Family Ministries leaders that very soon we might spend a whole year in contemplation of this theme of love. So to this end this 2008 planbook *Relationships where Love is in Place* is dedicated.

We thank Bryan Craig, our South Pacific Division Family Ministries colleague, for joining us in the preparation of the manuscript. Contributions from several in his division and from the Southern Asia-Pacific Division have helped to make this resource truly international!

Let Christ be glorified! Let there be love shown among us!

Karen and Ron Flowers, Co-directors  
Department of Family Ministries  
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

# *Loving the Person Next to You*

by Karen and Ron Flowers

The Pharisees once tested Jesus with a question from one of their best and brightest members: “Which is the great commandment in the law?” (Context: Matthew 22:37-40). It was not a casual inquiry, nor one from a sincere seeker after truth, but a clever trap designed to ensnare Jesus. In Judaic tradition there had developed a large number of *mitzvot* “laws” which listed all the positive and negative commands in the Torah.<sup>1</sup> A favorite pastime among rabbinical students was to discuss which one was most important. So the Pharisee’s question to Jesus was seemingly impossible to answer and designed to expose, embarrass and humiliate the youthful rabbi. Any attempt to answer the question would surely bring controversy and shame upon Jesus.

## **A Compact Definition of Spiritual Life**

What this brash young expert in the law didn’t realize was that in front of Him was the Lawgiver. Here was the Mastermind behind the law, the Architect of the law. Here, in fact, was the Lord of the law. Praise God, the Pharisee’s question *did* expose Jesus; it gave Him opportunity to unfold the essence of God’s plan for us!

**Love in two directions.** Just as architects do renderings—showing us the framework behind the externals—so this Divine Architect gave His audience for all time a look at the underlying framework, the inner rubric of God’s law, a perspective designed to change forever how Christians see the law and respond to it. Jesus’ response shows a two-dimensional love at the core of spirituality. In His response in Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus referred to two Old Testament imperatives: *love for God* (Deuteronomy 6:5) and *love for neighbor* (Leviticus 19:18). Here then, is a compact definition of spiritual life: Love God and love your neighbor.

Spiritual life involves our relationship to both God and our fellow human beings. The two parts are inseparable, like two sides of the same coin. It is as though the body of Christ stretched on the shafts of the cross—one perpendicular, one horizontal—portrays how He redeemed both relationships. In His body, He re-connected humanity with God and humankind with one another. In our sinful human nature, it is impossible for us to love God and our neighbor perfectly. But Jesus loved God perfectly and loved people perfectly. When we receive Jesus into our hearts, we are empowered to love.

## **Neighbors at Home**

**The person next to you.** Let us look more closely at the word “neighbor.” In contemporary usage, “neighbor” typically refers to the person or persons who occupy the house next door. But the original word had a much more intimate, family connotation. Your neighbor in the biblical sense is literally “the one next to you.” The people listening to Jesus understood “neighbor” to mean their own families. To make His point unmistakably clear, Jesus quoted from Leviticus where the synonyms for “neighbor” are “your people” and “your brother” (cf. Leviticus 19:16-18). Family ties matter, Jesus thus declared. While we should certainly care for the individuals next door and in the community

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<sup>1</sup> By the third century A.D. Rabbi Simlai had catalogued 613 of these *mitzvot*. (*Judaism 101*, 1996-2007).

around us, the bonds within our families are deserving of special attention.

**Neighbors in marriage.** The closest neighbor we have is the person who is immediately next to us. In marriage, your nearest “neighbor” is the wife or the husband who is right beside you. So when we as married couples read “love your neighbor,” the first application of this command is to the relationship with your spouse.

### **Love at the Center**

Each of the two commandments that Jesus emphasized has the word *love* in it: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37; cf. Deuteronomy 6:5); “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39; cf. Leviticus 19:18). Jesus often repeated what He referred to as His “new” commandment:

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34)

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:9-12).

The emphasis Jesus put on love is at the heart of His message. The message about love and loving is an essential message for God’s commandment-keeping people. We cannot really understand commandment-keeping apart from understanding love.

**“As I have loved you.”** Jesus’ statement “as I have loved you” must be first in our focus. John was one of Jesus’ disciples who learned about love from His Master. As we have just read, in his gospel he writes much about Jesus’ teaching on love, echoing again and again the call of Jesus for His disciples to love one another. It is John in his letters who makes it clear that love is central to the Christian message because God’s very nature is love. “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). When we love one another we are passing on to them this essence of godliness. The consciousness that we are loved by God motivates us to love others. “We love,” he writes, “because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Paul has a similar idea: “Christ’s love compels us . . .” (2 Corinthians 5:14).

Christian author Philip Yancey tells of a holiday visit with his mother when she pulled out old photographs of the family. Yancey’s father had died of polio at the age of 24. He had spent the last three months of his life in 1950 completely paralyzed inside a large steel cylinder, his muscles so weakened that he could not breathe without the help of what they called in those days an “iron lung.” Phobia about polio was so great that children were banned from the hospital and when the wife went to visit her husband she had to sit where he could see her with the help of a mirror.

Yancey was about a year old when his father died, so he had no memories of his father except for photos. In the box of old photographs was a crumpled, mangled one of Philip as a 10-month old baby. Why had she hung onto such an abused photo when she had so many other undamaged ones? She explained to Yancey that she had kept the photo as a memento, because during her husband’s illness it



had been fastened to his iron lung. He had asked for pictures of her and of his two sons, and the only way she could show them to him had been to jam them between some metal knobs on the iron lung. That is how they got so crumpled. During the last months of his life, his dad had spent his waking hours staring at those three images of his family. There was nothing else in his field of view. Yancey explains how significant that photo has become to him:

I have often thought of that crumpled photo, for it is one of the few links connecting me to the stranger who was my father, a stranger who died a decade younger than I am now. Someone I have no memory of, no sensory knowledge of, spent all day every day thinking of me, devoting himself to me, loving me—as well as he could. . . .

I mention this story because the emotions I felt when my mother showed me the crumpled photo were the very same emotions I felt that February night in a college dorm room when I first believed in a God of love. *Someone is there*, I realized. Someone is watching life as it unfolds on this planet. More, Someone is there who loves me. It was a startling feeling of wild hope, a feeling so new and overwhelming that it seemed worth risking my life on. (Quoted in Holmes, 2006, p. 26-28)

God's love for us in Christ is the good news of the gospel. We are called to love, but the human ethical imperative is always preceded by the divine theological declarative. "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). The call to humankind to be and to do is always based on who God is and what He has done! God is love! He loves us!! And Paul puts it this way: "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). We must let the good news of God's lavish love cascade over us, so that our dry, sour soul-sponges soak up its sweet moistness.

In commenting on Matthew 22:37-40, William Barclay carefully describes the connection between our love for God and our love for one another:

"Our love for God must issue in love for men. But it is to be noted in which order the commandments come; it is love of God first, and love of man second. It is only when we love God that man becomes lovable. . . . *The love of man is firmly grounded in love of God*" (Barclay, 1975, p. 278 *emphasis supplied*).

Barclay's comment reminds us of one by Ellen White:

"We are to be courteous toward all men, tenderhearted and sympathetic; for this was the character Christ manifested when on earth. The more closely we are united with Jesus Christ, the more tender and affectionate will be our conduct toward one another" (*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 377).

## **Loving the Neighbors under Your Roof**

**Love with commitment.** Let us look more closely at loving, particularly in the context of loving the neighbors who are "under our roof" we might say—our family members and our marriage partners. The word Jesus used for "love" is *agape*. It is the comprehensive word for "love" in the original language of the New Testament. First of all, this love is the *unconditional, unchangeable*,

*self-giving* love of God shown to us in Christ. *Agape* is the love of *commitment*.

How well we recall the day our sons bore the sad news home from our church school that the mom of one of their little classmates had left town—leaving him and their daddy behind. The only reason she offered was that she didn't want to be a mommy or a wife any more. She never came back. This tragedy erupted so suddenly, so unexpectedly, in what had appeared to be a sturdy family that the jolt reverberated all along the backbone of church and community relations. No satisfying reason could be found, except that love had evidently grown cold (cf. Matthew 24:12).

Christ's followers are called to love one another with commitment. When we think of loving the people nearest us—our married partners and other family members with commitment, that means we keep our promises, we keep the marriage covenants we make (cf. Malachi 2:14) to love and cherish our spouse as long as life shall last. Someone has said that the best thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother. Nothing is more foundational to the emotional, relational and spiritual well-being of children than living in families where promises are taken seriously.

A sublime crescendo appears at the end of the one Bible book that is all about love in marriage: “Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned” (Song of Solomon 8:7). The love that Shulamith longs for takes in the human sentiment and pleasurable emotions familiar in the Song of Solomon, but it also aspires to the loftier dimensions of strength, permanence, and boundlessness that transcend emotion and arise from the will. She longs for the love of commitment.

Committed love equips couples to endure the challenges that they face in managing their differences, in rearing children, in coping with the rapid change and transitions so prevalent in society, and in handling losses of every kind that often befall households.

Not far from Ron's boyhood home in Canada, the highest tides in the world rise and fall in Fundy National Park, New Brunswick. The grandeur is awesome when the tides peak and the mud flats are dismal when they ebb. Life is like that—love crests and we are sure nothing can wrench us apart; love wanes at times, the mud flats appear, and we wonder if anything can hold us together. But tides are actually a phenomenon at the edges of the ocean. The great waters from which they surge are deep and wide, constant in their mighty presence—like God's love. It is from the unchangeable ocean of God's love that we may draw when the tide ebbs in our relationships. His love “is patient, . . . is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. [His] love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. [His] love never fails” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). Jesus prayed that such love would be in us (John 17:26). Through the presence of His Spirit in us His prayer is fulfilled (Romans 5:5).

**Love with feelings.** Yet Jesus taught that love is not only committed, it is warm and affectionate as well. Sometimes the commitment of *agape* love is presented as an act of the will that is disconnected from feelings. But true love, though firmly rooted in the will, has expressive feelings.

A husband and wife who were professed Christians once sought counseling for difficulties they faced in their marriage. The wife worried aloud in the counseling session that perhaps their troubled relationship would lead the husband to divorce her. The husband assured the counselor: “The Bible tells

me to love my wife. So I will not divorce her. I will remain committed to her. But no one will be happier than I when the last trumpet sounds and I'll be free."

We do not understand agape love if we think of it only in terms of a grit-your-teeth-and-stick-with-it commitment. Jesus' love was *committed*, but it was also *caring*. The Bible also uses another word in connection with Jesus' love—the word *philos*, which is used of the fondness and affection that friends have one another. John 11:36 uses this word of the relationship Jesus had with Lazarus. When Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus, those who observed His depth of feeling said, "See how he loved him." Several times John speaks of himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (with *agape*) (John 13:23; 21:7, 20). In John 20:2 the apostle refers to himself as "the one Jesus loved" (with *philos*).

Love that is demonstrated in kindness, affirmation and affection is the life-blood of close relationships. Jesus felt and displayed fondness and tender affection for people, through tears and touch, through eye-contact, focused attention, and through His taking time to be with them. As a result, people were attached to Him and followed Him.

Those who study healthy marriages point to the crucial role of emotional connection in marriage. When we offer sincere compliments, when we are generous in showing affection, when we give gifts—especially the gift of time, when we demonstrate caring and respect for each other's feelings, when we put effort into listening—not only for the words, but for the heart of another, these are the things that help strengthen our emotional connections and keep this important life-blood of relationships flowing.

**Drawing each other closer to God.** As human beings experience the warmth of love at home, they more fully comprehend God's love (cf. 1 John 4:11, 12). In God's design, family is the first place where a child experiences love and begins to conceptualize God as love. Sometimes it is true that in the love of a marriage partner a spouse first experiences real love. Thus they are better able to think of God as loving. This may help us to understand Paul's counsel that spouses who became believers should continue to live in marriage with their unbelieving partners. "For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband" (1 Corinthians 7:14).

But even for those spouses who grew up as children in intact, loving homes, marriage as an experience of love is an essential ingredient. Partners in a loving marriage draw each other upward spiritually to intimacy with God. This helps explain why spousal abuse is so spiritually devastating—that which was intended to be a portrayal of divine love has been tragically twisted and destroyed.

Our experience with human love in marriage either sets us up to understand and respond to Scripture's family metaphors of God as loving marriage partner or our human experience makes it virtually impossible, but for a miracle of grace, for us to understand God as Love.

### **God's Gift**

Rainer Maria Rilke, a German poet thought to be one of the greatest lyric poets of modern Germany once wrote,

“For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation.”

Human beings by nature do not have the love of God in them (cf. John 5:42), yet inwardly we hunger for love. In Jesus we see Love embodied. In Jesus we behold Love walking among us. As He died—not in an iron lung, but on a Roman cross—Jesus had a crumpled picture of each of us before His eyes. By the awareness that Jesus loves us, our hearts are subdued, softened and made receptive to love.

Into hearts thus made receptive, the Spirit of Jesus comes. And with Him comes love.

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# *Conspiracy of Love*

by Harley J Stanton, DrPH, MPH  
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The prodigal son. A familiar story of a father and two sons. A story that tugs at the deepest emotions of one's life. There are some parallels and some contrasts between this story of our Lord recorded in Luke 15:11-32 and our own stories that we can explore to help us understand the meaning of life.

There are really three sections to the story: *a wayward life, an awakening, and a homecoming.*

## **A Wayward Life**

Jesus' parable begins with the audacious request of the younger son:

*“Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me” (Luke 15:12 NRSV).*

To say, “Let me have my share of the estate” was, in the Eastern tradition, tantamount to asking the father to die. “Don't give me what is mine when you die, I want it now!” That sentiment speaks to the age of impatience in which we now live. This son doesn't plan to invest it wisely, but rather to squander it on reckless living. And when he gets his money, he leaves for a distant country. He wants to change the tradition of his inheritance. He wants to “cut loose” from the ways of the father's business and head for the far country.

*“A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living” (Luke 15:13 NRSV).*

Our family story was a little different from that of the prodigal. In our case there were six sons. In my case, I traveled to foreign lands, but unlike the prodigal, I undertook this travel to fulfill a divine calling rather than to live a dissolute life. The prodigal, however, had no such ideals. He disregarded the culture and values of the family and “squandered his property in dissolute living.”

In any out-of-home-country travel such as we have experienced, a person is distanced from one's roots. The perspective of the local community becomes blurred. The changes that take place in the home location, the place of your origin, are not integrated into your life. You are often ignorant of what is happening back home. I became so familiar with the “distant country” that I no longer longed for home. I felt estranged when I did come back. In its own way, this story speaks to me and to us all.

*“When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he*

said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ” So he set off and went to his father” (Luke 15:14-20 NRSV).

## **Awakening**

Some years ago I became fascinated with a painting by the artist Rembrandt, the “Return of the Prodigal” which is located in The Hermitage, a famous museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. In this, the last of the paintings crafted with his brush, Rembrandt displays with some license the younger son coming home from a long and distant journey to be welcomed and to rest in the arms of a loving father.

Henri Nouwen was also captivated by Rembrandt’s painting and has written about his personal parallel experience with that of the prodigal (Nouwen, 1992). Of this longing for a place of rest, he says it “lies far beyond the ups and downs of a busy life, something that represents the ongoing yearning of the human spirit, the *yearning for a final return, an unambiguous sense of safety, a lasting home*” (p. 5, Italics mine). It’s what the heart yearns for—a place to feel at home.

My journey away from home has been over 40-years long, and I’ve finally come back with my beloved wife of all those years to her home town and birthplace here in Tasmania. At this point I’m looking for a place to feel safe and secure in a community where I’m no longer exposed at the forefront—advocating, developing, strategizing, creating a pathway for people. At least not all the time! I really want to feel a sense of belonging. So this passage of Scripture and the story attracted me as a starting point.

But the return of any wanderer is not easy. One’s waywardness is its own path of separation. The Scripture says, “He came to himself!” What a power in those words! We are only ourselves when we are homeward bound to our Father. God has committed us to a “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18)—a ministry which aims at reconciliation between man and God, between man and his fellow man, between man and the world around him, and not the least important of all, between man and himself!

“When he came to himself!” Our prodigality distances us from the more familiar and we then have to reconnect. After 40 years it’s not simple. Few will know the story, and it’s not easy to retell it, but for the sake of my children and as a reflection on the goodness of God it is important that I take the opportunity to express thanks.

## **Another Prodigal’s Journey**

I well remember the start of my own journey as a prodigal. In 1965, when MasterCard and ATM’s were unknown, we left Tasmania en route to Avondale College as married students. We trundled up the Hume Highway with our ironing board on the top, a rug given to us by our home church, and a Sunbeam automatic toaster (all of which we still use!). The ironing board was on the roof rack of our Volkswagen “beetle” and the remainder of our worldly goods stowed in the back seat. It was an era of enthusiasm! And we had “a vision of a world in need.” The world needed us! Or so we thought.

I recall a time before this—a year earlier in mid-1964, when my parents were overseas—I was sitting on a grey TE series Ferguson tractor outside the top shed at our farm in Tasmania. There, I heard a voice as clear to me as I now speak to you, “Harley Stanton, I want you to train for ministry.” So convincing was this message that I sat and wrote a letter to my Father, which he received while in Moscow: “Dear Dad. I’m leaving the farm and plan to go to Avondale.”

Few would understand how difficult it was to write that letter or the sense of kingdom control that was experienced around the farm where all my family lived and worked. So there was a sense of prodigality as well as a sense of commission in what we were doing. Thus my personal prodigal journey began.

In writing about the painting that Rembrandt crafted, Nouwen says that, when he first viewed this painting in The Hermitage in St. Petersburg, he was touched by the “mysterious event of reconciliation, forgiveness and inner healing.” That encounter took place for him as it has for many others in viewing this grand work that is not only art, but life.

I know a little of what that separation, reconciliation and forgiveness can be like. After some seven years in New Zealand and three years at Warburton, we went to America in 1978 to study at Loma Linda University. I left my father in great tears. He was 75 years old. He was also at that time a patient in the Royal Hobart Hospital, receiving care after being bitten by a deadly snake with which he had been playing.

At the time I sought to encourage my Dad to give a little more of the reins of management of the family property and business to my brothers. As might be expected, he resented any attempt to usurp his dominant role in the farm and the family. And as I walked from that hospital down to the car, I remember the tears of a grown man flowing as I left to go. These are the tears that men are conditioned not to share. I was so emotionally overwhelmed that I felt as though it was almost unsafe for me to be driving the car. We traveled to the United States with my father’s health so uncertain that I was not sure that I would see him again. It weighed heavily on my heart.

I felt a great sense of thankfulness when I was able to return in 1980 and visit my father. He was in St. John’s Hospital in Hobart. His years of labour were catching up to him. Little did I know that he was in the last year of his life. As I entered his room, he greeted me warmly. While there I was able to say, “Dad, forgive me for what I did when I left.” There was no reticence in his warm and loving voice: “It’s okay son!” That reconciliation brought a reign of peace and contentment in my heart as I sensed the acceptance after estrangement. There was, as Nouwen called it, “the mysterious embrace of father and son that had become a part of my spiritual journey” (Nouwen, 1992, p. 12). I visited him twice more before he fell asleep in the Lord. Resolution of that distance was a part of the prodigal experience.

### **We’re All in the Parable**

As I reflected on Jesus’ parable, I came to see that we are all represented by the prodigal. We are all on some part of his journey. We’re all alienated and at a distance from the father’s house. As I’ve thought of the many years I’ve worked and traveled, I realize I’ve sometimes been trying to prove myself worthy, to be someone whose life has value. I’ve listened to the voice, the seductive

voice as Nouwen calls it, which says, “You are not going to be loved unless you have earned it through determined effort and hard work.” Parents, teachers and others have their expectations of us and often convey messages like “I hope that you are doing well at school!” “Show me you are a good boy!” “Who are your connections?” Such messages run counter to the good news of our Father’s home—that love and acceptance are free gifts. The faulty messages re-enforce our sense of alienation and distance from the home of the Father. The mental games we play with ourselves re-enforce the fragility of our experience and reveal that we are not home; we have moved from the home of our Father to a “distant country.”

We are also like the prodigal when we look for love in all the wrong places instead of home. Nouwen writes:

As long as I keep running about asking: “Do you love me? Do you really love me?” I give all power to the voices of the world and put myself in bondage because the world is filled with “ifs.” The world says: “Yes, I love you *if* you are good-looking, intelligent, and wealthy. I love you *if* you have a good education, a good job, and good connections. I love you *if* you produce much, sell much, and buy much.” There are endless “ifs” hidden in the world’s love. These “ifs” enslave me, since it is impossible to respond adequately to all of them. The world’s love is and always will be conditional. As long as I keep looking for my true self in the world of conditional love, I will remain “hooked” to the world—trying, failing, and trying again. It is a world that fosters addictions because what it offers cannot satisfy the deepest craving of my heart.

“Addiction” might be the best word to explain the lostness that so deeply permeates contemporary society. . . .”

I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found. (Nouwen, 1992, pp. 42, 43).

This final sentence is really more inclusive: I (we) am (are) the prodigal son every time I (we) search for unconditional love where it cannot be found.

In another sense too, my life and your life are bound up with this story because there are aspects of the wayward son, the loving father, and the resentful brother in each of us. What Henri Nouwen says of the painting is surely true of the parable behind it; it is a “mysterious window through which I can step into the Kingdom of God” (Nouwen, 1992, p. 15).

I don’t know where you are in your journey. I don’t know with which of the characters you identify. Are you the younger son, longing to get on the road to start the journey of exploration and discovery, to spend and be spent? Are you the older brother, secure in the traditions of the past, comfortable with the rituals of your life and a little leery of anything that would disturb your complacency? Or are you the loving father, offering support and strength to those who journey at your side? It matters not, for we are all in the story. We are all prodigals; we all need help from someone outside ourselves, from beyond us.

But home is the place where all the dearest and closest memories of life are often found. Home in the spiritual sense is where we find “peace and acceptance” in the palm of God, the one who fashioned and made us as the potter with clay. When we leave home we leave the comfort of our



“acceptance” and head for the distant country. So often we are deaf to the voice of the Beloved, but He continues to call us home.

## Homecoming

Come with me for a moment to that scene. I feel the pounding of his heart as the younger son nears home. . . .

*“But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate” (Luke 15:20-24 NRSV).*

In Jesus’ story, the Father’s dimming eyes see the trudging dust rising as his son returns down the road. The son does not return in a nice car. Rather he is a dejected, depressed, wandering waif trudging down the road with heavy feet, hurting and bruised from the distance of the journey. He wears sandals worn with many steps on that circuitous journey. He arrives and both he and the father are overwhelmed with an array of emotions—relief, joy and happiness.

What power in Jesus’ words and story! Forgiveness. Compassion—to be moved to the very depths of one’s being. Acceptance. Grace. I remember reading years ago this stirring quotation by Ellen White:

Arise and go to your Father. He will meet you a great way off. If you take even one step toward Him in repentance, He will hasten to enfold you in His arms of infinite love. His ear is open to the cry of the contrite soul. The very first reaching out of the heart after God is known to Him. Never a prayer is offered, however faltering, never a tear is shed, however secret, never a sincere desire after God is cherished, however feeble, but the Spirit of God goes forth to meet it. Even before the prayer is uttered or the yearning of the heart made known, grace from Christ goes forth to meet the grace that is working upon the human soul. (*Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 206)

Think of it, “before the yearning of the heart, grace from Christ goes forth to meet the grace that is working on the human soul.” What a power in those words! Before you and I even take a step, God is on the move toward us.

And in the picture by Rembrandt we see the hands, the aged hands of a loving father stretched over his son. They have continued to toil. They toiled beyond their years in order to revive the business when the son took his share of the property. Now the skin of the hands shows the ravage of years of manual labour. The face too, records the strain of longing, yet shows contentment and completion, the fulfillment of his dream that one day his son might return.

**The response of the older brother.** The older brother, returning from the field having taken care of the crops and the stock, senses great commotion at the homestead.

*Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (Luke 15:25-32 NRSV).*

He hears music and dancing and wonders about the reason for such elation. The Greek word is "symphonia"—that of a number of musical instruments playing together. He calls one of his servants and asks the question: "What's happening here?" And then we have the response, "Your brother has come." These four words drew a response of anger that would kill the joy of the brother's return.

How often in life have you experienced something like this or seen it happen? I know that I have been both recipient and perpetrator of such responses. How often in life do we find ourselves caught in a cycle of self-pity, jealousy and sensing we are the victim? We follow the older brother in his morbid obsession with self, "I'm hurt." When we feel misunderstood, rejected or despised we are on the path of the older brother. Self-pity leads us nowhere and we have to return by the way that we have come, swallow our self-pity and find the beauty that exists in an unselfish approach to the situation.

What an irony there is in this story, that as the one wayward son returns, the other homebound son leaves the house. Does the Father's entreaty to the older brother fall on deaf ears? We don't know what happens. The Scripture is silent. Is there reconciliation between the two brothers? Was the older brother ever reconciled with his father, his brother and most importantly of all with himself? We will never know because, you see, the story is ours to finish. We are all in each of these characters: The father—longing for the return of a wayward son; the mother, whose heart has ached every day that her son has been gone—in her nurturing way wondering of his welfare and longing for the day when he might return and inwardly holding so many of those emotions to her heart; the older brother—glad to have the younger out of the way, avoiding having to deal with the feelings of rivalry, jealousy and resentment at the younger brother's cheekiness and audacity. We are all there and we are writing the conclusion to the story with our lives.

I cannot tell how much the issue of sibling rivalry absorbed my energies as a young boy. It has probably driven me to accomplish things I never dreamed of. There is a penetrating passage in Nouwen's book under the heading "Letting Go of Rivalry":

The joy at the dramatic return of the younger son in no way means that the elder son was less loved, less appreciated, less favored. The father does not compare the two sons. He loves them both with a complete love and expresses that love according to their individual journeys. He knows them both intimately. He understands their highly unique gifts and shortcomings. He sees with love the passion of his younger son, even when it is not regulated

by obedience. With the same love, he sees the obedience of the elder son, even when it is not vitalized by passion. With the younger son there are no thoughts of better or worse, more or less, just as there are no measuring sticks with the older son. The father responds to both according to their uniqueness” (Nouwen, 1992, pp. 80, 81).

I don’t know the resentments, the hurts, the years of alienation, the sense of bitterness that there may be in your heart or life. This is true, whether it is the hurt of the older brother, the waywardness of the younger son, or the yearning of the Father. I only know that there is a loving Father, whose hands of love today are outstretched to you. He says, “Come home, my son, my daughter.” He says, “You are welcome.” There are loving arms there for you. They don’t hold the chastising rod of earlier years, nor does the heart hold any bitterness and resentment for your journeying. It is only the heart of a loving Father, saying “Come home!”

### **Called to be the Father**

The story of the prodigal is not so much that of a son returning, but of the overflowing love of the Father. The call is to participate in that love. I hear the story of the prodigal saying to us each that whether we are the younger son or the older brother, the one journeying away and the other secure and settled in complacency, we are being challenged to become the loving father. Writes Nouwen, “The closer I come to home the clearer becomes the realization that there is a call beyond the call to return. It is the call to become the Father who welcomes home and calls for a celebration” (Nouwen, 1992, p. 119).

As I think back to my childhood, I have fond memories—of our old homestead with its lounge room, large fireplace and dining table. Mum’s Sabbath meals—enough for the large family and more, the minister often sharing the family table. But nothing holds such a place in my memory as my father’s knee. When there on the knee of my father, the chastisement for my disobedience was gone, the squabbles of the large family forgotten. I felt his strong arms of security and contentment around me.

Jesus’ parable beckons us to become the loving father—sharing the joy, hope and love of a Christian life in a meaningful way with those on the journey. We’re called to share compassion for others, to offer a loving knee even to those who appear estranged and distant. In the parable there were no questions asked; there was only the welcome of a loving embrace. This is the most telling story in the Gospels concerning the boundless love of God, this conspiracy of love through which God has become part of our lives.

Until we each come to be the dispenser of the Father’s love, we are still on the journey of the prodigal. This is a love that does not seek the rivalry of sons, but the participation in the same selfless outgoing love which the Father demonstrates. This is the radical love to which Christians are called. G.K. Chesterton once said, “It’s not that Christianity has been tried and failed, but that it has not so often been tried.”

So, today, at this time of so much outward focus on Christianity, may your life be an overflowing of radical, Father-like love. In a world of revenge, resentment, turmoil and mistrust, may we all truly be inwardly participants in this conspiracy of love.

## **A Prayer**

Forgive me, yes, forgive us, Lord for the years of rejection. Welcome us all home into Your loving arms. Thank You for those hands with the toil and sweat of years that never gave up on us, Lord. Help us to live above the rivalry and confusion of competition to experience the true acceptance and joy of peace in Christian family and communion.

Teach us the radical acceptance of others, forgiveness for our past and a ready willingness to meet with “sinners” in order that they too might join in the festive occasion where grace and forgiveness meet sin and separation, where joy and peace come alive on earth. Amen.

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# *The Goodness of God*

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We live in a violent world. Humankind surely seems intent upon destroying itself. Television and other media routinely carry photos of war, of soldiers and civilians killed and of innocent men, women and children murdered. Humanitarian crises abound in our world. It is hard to believe that humans can do such things to each other.

It is interesting to note that the Bible represents the forces in the end times by beasts. Does this have any connection to what we are seeing now? Is humanity becoming more beastly and dragon-like in its nature and attitude? I believe so, because Satan is behind all this. The human heart can be very, very evil when it does not recognize the goodness of God. When human beings fail to realise how good God has been to them, they are left to relate in a very beastly way toward other people.

Jesus once told a parable of a man like this. He was a servant who owed a huge sum of money. He begged for leniency until the king wiped off his debt. As he was walking out, he met a fellow servant who owed him some money. The man begged for mercy, but the forgiven servant got angry with him and eventually imprisoned him when he could not pay. He acted in an evil way because somehow he forgot or did not recognize or appreciate the goodness of the king to him. He was unthankful; he was not appreciative. The king showed him mercy and grace, but he failed to extend it. He did not make the connection between what the king had done for him and how he ought to behave.

This morning I am going to tell you some stories—stories of people elsewhere, people you do not know. However, since human nature is the same everywhere, their stories are our stories. They are reflections of us and they can teach us many things.

## **David and Mephibosheth**

The first story is from the Bible, of David—my hero. Despite some gruesome things David did, I still admire him. One of my favourite stories about him is found in 2 Samuel 9:1-13. The first time I read this, I confess I had mixed feelings and reactions. One part of me liked what I read; another part did not like it. I was glad David treated the invalid Mephibosheth as he did. However, I also thought he should have punished this cripple. I will tell you why I felt that way later on, but first let me tell another story.

**Revenge in my village.** I grew up in a small village where there were six families. Today, just three of the original families remain. Three concrete slabs mark the places where the other homes once stood. I still hold a lot of emotional attachment to these families who are gone. What happened that led them to leave should not have happened. Let me tell you the sad story.

June was a married woman in my village. Her brother Jack was a business man. One day June asked her brother for some money. Jack refused to give her what she wanted. When June became angry and started to argue and fight with him, we villagers had to step in and separate

them. June told her husband about the encounter and Jack told his and June's mother. At that point, the mother became angry and started fighting with June. Then June's husband got involved. He beat up both his wife and his mother-in-law.

I remember quite vividly how the village chief got everyone together and tried unsuccessfully to settle what seemed to be a very small incident. The next day, June and her husband pulled down their house and shifted [moved]. June's two sons, who had witnessed everything, vowed that one day they would fix their uncle Jack. Sometime later when he was not at home, they came back. They climbed through a window and went madly through his house, smashing everything he owned including his cooking pots and dishes.

Then Jack and his wife retaliated. She collected all her brothers and cousins from another village and they marched down to the village where June and her husband now lived. They came as a village—all of them armed with clubs, bows and arrows. They were going to fight, not just June and her family, but the whole of June's new village. The chief of this village now had to intervene.

I want you to see the picture. Jack and June were blood brother and sister, but a crack developed in their relationship. It spread to the relationships among June, her mother and her husband. Finally, it appeared between the sons and their uncle. Then it extended to another village. What was once a brother-sister issue had now become a village-village issue. We think a family is supposed to love and care for one another, but that was not the case in this story. There were cracks—a kind of spiritual defect that gets passed on from one member of the family to another. It was bad blood that made for a really bad smelling story.

**The sound and scent of revenge.** When the chief tried to resolve the problem, there were many hurtful things said. I can still hear them: "It is his/her fault . . .," "He is to be blamed . . .," "That's good, she deserves it . . .," "Let her feel the pain and feel how I feel . . .," "It's my right to hit back . . .," "It is not fair . . ." The whole event smelled of *revenge*. The sister was hurt. She got angry and hit back at her brother. Her brother felt that he was within his rights and that he must defend himself. The sons felt hurt, so they wanted their uncle to feel the hurt also. Uncle Jack's wife was hurt; she wanted the two boys to experience that hurt also. The next village wanted to teach the two boys a lesson. Our village wanted to teach that village a lesson, and so on.

While the meeting with the chief was taking place, two men from the other tribe in June's former village sneaked in, torched and burned down June's house. June's sons could only watch as the fire licked deeper and deeper into the house. To this day, everyone seems to be licking their wounds and hoping for the chance to give back.

Revenge! It is what Jesus referred to as "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" (Matt. 5:38). It is a mental and emotional state that is thirsty to hit back. It springs apparently from the human tendency to do everything possible to protect one's rights, to demand and cry out for fairness, to argue that one is personally right and another person is wrong. Revenge seeks to shove the blame on someone other than oneself. It goes on licking its wounds and will not give up until it strikes back. Bad blood. Revenge. We see it between Israel and Hezbollah, between factions within Iraq; we see it in families, between brothers and sisters, between church members and throughout the whole world. The evil of broken relationships, so openly demonstrated at all levels of our society today, stem from this human makeup—this compulsion, this urge to protect one's rights, to hit back and make things square and fair.

## Intercepting the Revenge Cycle

Does God do this? Does He spend His time every day licking his wounds? No. God is good, all the time; with God there is no revenge. Here is where the story of David with Mephibosheth helps us grasp the goodness of God. When he found Mephibosheth, David had an opportunity to strike back at the household of Saul, who had sworn himself an enemy of David. Humanly speaking, it was David's right to seek justice and fairness, to make right the past, to make it square—eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth.

Imagine if you were David. What would you do if someone gave you his daughter for a wife and then later gave her to someone else after you had married her? What about fleeing in fear, sleeping in caves and always being hungry? What an opportunity to take revenge, to strike back, to hurt back! Take Mephibosheth to a cave and let him spend some days and nights there without food and water. Then imprison him and give him leftovers to eat with the pigs. Can you feel this bad blood in you right now?

Perhaps some of you will not agree, but humanly speaking that is the fair thing to do. It is just and natural. We all fall into the trap many times. It is within the make-up of our natural fallen humanity to hit back or take revenge. Humanly speaking, David would be doing what is perfectly natural. It would be within his rights to take revenge because it is only fair and just.

David, however, did not give in to this. He chose to give up this right, to suffer the hurt and to forgive. In 2 Sam. 9:1: "David asked, 'Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?'" Is there anyone left from the house of Saul [my enemy] to whom I may show kindness? Notice also "For Jonathan's sake." His love for Jonathan and his God was so strong that he had no choice but to extend loving kindness to his enemy.

**GRACE!** That's grace you are looking at! Grace—the quality of being perfect in love. It is an attitude that is kind to one's enemy. It is an action or ability to give up one's own right to take revenge, to hit back, to hurt back. It is the active pursuit of giving up our own rights and thirst for fairness in order to show kindness *for the sake of someone!* Forgiveness is the term we use for this activity.

It is not easy to love and show kindness to someone you hate, who has done you wrong. It could be your boss, your cousin, your brother, your husband, your wife, your son or daughter, your father, your teacher, or whomever. People who have treated you unfairly and in ugly ways are not loved easily.

But David said: "For Jonathan's sake." For the sake of Jonathan David was able to show grace to Mephibosheth. In the same way, for the sake of Christ, God showed us grace. Yes, Saul did terrible things to David and did not deserve David's favour. Are we any better in our actions toward God? We are unloveable. We hurt Him everyday, but He keeps showing kindness. Every morning we wake to a breakfast table full of goodies—rain, sunshine, air, laughter, beauty, food, water, friends, life and you name it. Every day, like Mephibosheth, we eat at God's table. What a privilege!! God holds no grudges; He does not lick his wounds and cry for revenge. He simply acts graciously.

## **The Chief Took the Punishment**

Once there was a village that wanted to stop the increase in stealing. At a meeting to determine what was to be done, there were many proposals. One of these the chief approved. Anyone who stole would be whipped. Everyone in the village would be given opportunity to help administer the whipping.

One day news reached the chief that someone had been caught stealing. A woman had gone into a garden and stolen some yams, not realizing that she was being watched. The chief convened a meeting; everyone was asked to bring along their stick. Then the thief was brought out. To the horror of the village, it was the 70-year-old mother of the chief. Everyone wondered, what would the chief do? Some began to protest the whipping, since she would not be able to take it. The chief brought her to the front and then ordered the first person to whip. Bang, bang, bang, 50, 60, 100 times, by big men, small ones, women, everyone until the last person came and went. The chief fell to the floor, half dead, bleeding and crying. The mother stood unharmed. You see, as soon as the chief gave the command to whip, he threw his arms and body around his mother and allowed himself to be whipped. He took the whipping and allowed the mother to go free!!!

That is what God did. God took our sins upon Himself. Then He forgives us and sets us free. That's how good God is. Human beings cry out for justice, for punishment upon the wrongdoer, but God takes the punishment upon Himself. Then, He forgives the wrongdoer. We forgive others as Christ forgives us. To *forgive* means to "let go." If someone throws anger at you, you refuse to hold the end of it and return it. You decide not to hold on to it, to be affected by it. In other words, you do not allow it to affect your inner spiritual being.

Ghandi once said to his followers while they were resisting the British in India: "If the whole world lived on the principle of an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth, the whole world would be blind and toothless." In the same way, if God lives on the principle of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, we would all be blind and toothless this morning. In Christ, God found a way to meet the demands of justice and to be merciful.

## **Calling God Our Father**

As Christians we are compelled by God's goodness to extend His grace. We have no choice but to offer to our fellow men and women what has been freely offered to us. How can we hate and be unkind to someone for whom Jesus died and for whom He lives to bless every day? Is not our action of taking revenge a way of saying that the one we hate is not worthy of God's love? Who are we to say that that person is not worthy of love when in reality we both are sinners and God has been good to both of us everyday? How can we call God our Father when we hate each other?

After World War II, some German church leaders wanted to repair their relationship with the people in the churches of Poland. A delegation was sent to meet with the Polish church leaders, but the Poles refused to forgive the Germans. They said, "Every single stone in Poland has been made red by the blood of the Polish people. There is no way you could be forgiven. How could we do that?" Most of the Germans turned to leave, but one asked if they could all repeat the Lord's prayer together. So they prayed: "Our Father which art in heaven . . . And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." One of the delegates from Poland stopped the prayer. Then he reluctantly admitted: "We cannot go on. If we do not forgive you, we cannot call God our Father."



Church, if we are not willing to forgive, we cannot call God our Father. How can we? We simply cannot. First, He is good to us and has forgiven us. Second, He blesses and is good to all, both us and our enemy. Making an enemy of our fellow human is to say that they are not worthy in God's eyes and not worthy of His goodness. Who are we to pass that judgment? Third, it is clear that we cannot claim God's forgiveness if we are not willing to forgive or be good to our enemies. Our action of not forgiving is a judgment on ourselves. We automatically shut ourselves from God's healing process.

An unforgiving spirit is a wall, a barrier that shuts us out from God's goodness and grace. God's blessings and goodness are all around us every moment. Our refusal to be godly, that is to forgive, propels us along the path of revenge and we become blinded by its trappings—my "rights," my desires for fairness, my want for the one who has wronged me to feel pain also.

For the sake of God, let us show kindness. Let us forgive. Forgiveness cuts away revenge and allows the floodgate to open and we become exposed to and bathe in God's goodness and grace. We experience His grace in a big way. Let us dish it out in a big way. The less we forgive, the less our heart's door is open, the less God's grace flows in and so the less we dish it out.

What about my rights for revenge? God said, "Revenge is mine." You see, being able to show forgiveness and kindness everyday, even when you feel like taking revenge, is an act of faith. It is trusting God that He will do the balancing act. Our problem is *we* want to do the measuring, the scaling and balancing, so we can hit back.

God says to us this morning, "I am always good to you. For my sake be good to your fellow human. Leave the revenge part to me. Revenge is mine. Let me do the scaling and weighing, the balancing act. Let me decide who is wrong and who is right when I return." "Give up your rights to hit back. Recognize that I am gracious to you. I died for all of you and give you all the same sunshine, rain and so on. You are all brothers and sisters in me. And when you are gracious to one another, you acknowledge that you all are citizens of my kingdom."

Oh Church, for God's sake go and build long chains of love and grace with your brothers and sister, your family, your tribe, in your villages and in your country.

# *Communication: Key to Intimacy*

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## Session One

### Getting Started

Invite the group to enjoy a half-hour of fellowship. This is a time to get to know others in the group and to put aside other thoughts and concerns in preparation for a special focus on your marriage.

Introduce yourself as the leading couple and briefly share an overview of the theme of the seminar, i.e., communication in marriage.

### Exercise

Ask couples to sit back to back on the floor. Using building blocks, one partner leads by building something while verbally communicating directions to the other partner, who builds a model according to instructions. The one following the instructions must be silent (Sell, 1995, p. 250).

### Presentation: “Communication – The Essential Ingredient”

As the exercise we just did together demonstrates, the three most important words for a successful relationship are *communication*, *communication*, and *communication*. Marriage without communication is like lemonade without lemons; it is impossible. Couples, especially unhappy ones, often complain that they don’t communicate. But it is impossible not to communicate. In fact, the absence of conversation, physical contact, smiles or self-disclosure “communicate” a lot about the feelings people have toward each other.

Communication has the power to bring couples together, to build intimacy, as well as the ability to push couples apart. Unfortunately, most couples have not learned how to communicate effectively, especially when they have conflict. For many couples, the main problem is not finances, sex, or in-laws, but rather, their inability to communicate effectively. The good news is that good communication skills can be learned (Olson & Olson, 2000).

**Five levels of communication.** Communication occurs at five levels (Powell, 1969). This can be likened to “a person coming out of a forest into a clearing. In the deep recesses of the forest, little about a person is open to full view. But as a person moves toward the edge of the forest, more and more light penetrates through the trees, and more and more can be seen. Out of the open spaces of a clearing, the person steps into full view” (Flowers, 2003).

Let us demonstrate how this works with communication. [On a white or black board, draw several trees on both sides of the board, with a clearing in the center.]

*Trivial talk.* The first level of communication consists of trivial talk. At this level, the person is still, figuratively speaking, deep in the forest. [Draw a male stick figure among the trees on one side of the board, and a female stick figure on the other side.] Couples use trivial talk to move into and out of one another's presence, and to determine whether or not to proceed to a deeper level of communication.

Conversation at this level might include comments like [Leading couple demonstrate dialogue at this level.]: "How was your day?" "Well, I sure am glad it's Friday!" "Aren't those flowers beautiful?" "The lawn is so dry; we need some rain." At this level, nothing personally significant is revealed; however, it is a useful way of moving in and out of one another's lives.

*Reporting news and events.* Moving only slightly out of the recesses of the forest of personal privacy [Leader couple draw male and female stick figures moving slightly closer to the clearing], a couple communicating at the next level report news and events of their daily lives. [Leading couple demonstrate dialogue at this level.] "I have a dental appointment after work today, so I'll be late getting home." "The school bus driver is sick today, so I will need to pick the children up from school today." "I will need the car to go grocery shopping this morning." Communication at this level is necessary to coordinate the needs of individuals and to care for the details of life together as a family.

*Sharing ideas.* At the next level [Leader couple draw male and female stick figures moving slightly closer to the clearing.], the couple figuratively takes further steps toward the sunlight of the clearing. Here disclosure cautiously moves beyond mere facts to the sharing of ideas. [Leading couple demonstrate dialogue at this level.] "I like the pink better than the blue." "I think we should check if the library has those magazines you like. That would save us buying them." "It would be a good idea to have friends over each Sabbath. It makes the day really special for the kids."

*Sharing feelings.* The first three levels of communication are necessary for the smooth running of a household; however, when communication is limited to these levels, full emotional intimacy cannot develop. It is only at the feeling level that couples take significant strides toward the light, moving toward intimacy with every step. [Draw male and female stick figures moving almost into the clearing.] When couples disclose their feelings, they become "increasingly more vulnerable in their relationship, risking personal safety for intimacy" (Flowers, 2003, p. 1) [Leading couple demonstrate dialogue at this level.] "I'm glad you decided against taking that job." "Yes, I'm glad too. I was worried it would take me away from home too often." "I'm happy that you want to be home more." "Yes. I'm pleased there will be more time for just the two of us." "I get excited to know that." Learning to share feelings, both positive and negative, is an important step toward intimacy.

*Self-disclosure.* It is at the level of self-disclosure that intimacy is built. [Draw male and female stick figures side-by-side in the clearing.] "Self-disclosure is the revelation of deeply personal information about yourself" (Olson & Olson, 2000, p. 34). By sharing your innermost thoughts and feelings, your most private experiences, you "risk being fully known so that you might stretch toward fully loving" (Flowers, 2003, p. 2). [Leading couple demonstrate dialogue at this level.] "I feel so fortunate to have the chance to study, and yet I sometimes feel overwhelmed with everything I have to do." "I want to encourage you to succeed, to follow your dreams, but I don't want you to feel that I am pushing you." "I know. I appreciate your encouragement, and you really are a source of strength for me. It would be easier if I didn't have this need to always do my best; if I could just get the work done, without putting so much of myself into it." "And it's hard to balance the needs of your study,

with the needs of your children and your husband, isn't it?" "Yes it is. I sometimes feel that I am not doing any of those tasks as well as I should be." "Well, just remember, I will support you in whatever you decide."

It is only as we risk being fully known that we can be fully loved and accepted; it is only as we reveal our true selves that we can experience true intimacy in our relationships.

### **Couple Exercise**

Encourage participants to complete the exercise "Communication in Our Marriage" (Handout 1). Allow approximately 10-15 minutes for individual work on the exercise. Next, encourage couples to explore their responses to this exercise together. Allow another 10-15 minutes. Close with prayer.

### **References**

- Flowers, R. & K. (2000). *New Beginnings*. Silver Spring, MD: Department of Family Ministries, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
- Flowers, R. & K. (2003). *Family communication and ministry*. Cooranbong, NSW: Avondale College - Supplementary Resources.
- Olson, D. H., & Olson, A. K. (2000). *Empowering couples: Building on your strengths*. Minneapolis, MN: Life Innovations.
- Powell, J. (1969). *Why am I afraid to tell you who I am?* Niles, IL: Argus Communications.
- Sell, C. (1995). *Family ministry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

## **Communication in Our Marriage**

Things about our marriage which are very good . . .

Three things about our communication which are pretty good but could be improved . . .

Things we find difficult to communicate about but which I wish we could talk about more freely . . .

Three things I can do to open and improve communication in our marriage . . .

Source: Flowers, R. & K. (2000). *New Beginnings*. Silver Spring, MD: Department of Family Ministries, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, p. 63.

Handout 1 *Communication in Our Marriage*

## Session Two

### Getting Started

Take time for fellowship and any necessary housekeeping tasks. The theme of this session is “Communication through Listening.” The last time we met together, we talked about the levels of communication, and the importance of sharing our innermost thoughts and feelings within our marriages. In order for this to happen, our partners need to be listening. Read James 1:19 together: “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.” Ponder these words together for a few moments.

### Exercise

Ask each couple to sit facing one another holding hands. Encourage each partner to take turns listening to their spouse for two minutes. Instruct the listener to maintain positive, accepting eye contact while listening, but not to interrupt for any reason. Instruct the speaker to talk about anything he or she chooses. Switch at the end of two minutes, so that each partner has a turn as listener and speaker.

Invite couples to talk about how it felt to be able to talk and be listened to without interruptions. How did it feel to listen for two minutes, maintaining eye contact and not interrupting?

### Presentation: “Roadblocks to Communication”

As we have just experienced, listening is a precious gift that we can give to our partners. Unfortunately, most of us are “quick to speak, and slow to listen,” rather than the other way around. We’re now going to present several skits which highlight some of the ways in which we fail to listen. I’m sure all of you will identify along the way.

[The leading couple acts out the skits.]

#### **Skit 1: Inattention**

Edyta: [Sitting and reading; Darius enters and sits down beside her.]

Darius: Hi honey. What a day! The freeway was chock-a-block, and I was late to work. The stacks on my desk just piled up all day and I just couldn’t get on top of it.

Edyta: Hi! [She continues to read after looking up briefly.]

Darius: You should have seen the mess we had at the office today. I just can’t believe the inefficiency of some people.

Edyta: [Still reading.] H’mmm? Oh . . . really?

Darius: The manager from head office showed up unexpectedly. He asked for some reports I couldn't find.

Edyta: [Still reading.] Uh-huh.

Darius: After he left, the boss was really upset. He said that with the way things are going, some of us may need to be laid off. He seemed to look at me as he said that . . . .

Edyta: [Still holding her book open, but looking up.] What was that you said?

Darius: Never mind. I think I'll go and take a shower.

This could have been Edyta coming home from work, while Darius was watching the news. Unintentionally, the inattentive spouse is communicating that the activity he or she is engaged in is more important than what his or her partner is saying. If this pattern is regularly repeated, the partner who is attempting to communicate may eventually quit trying.

### **Skit 2: Criticizing**

Edyta: [Seated; Darius enters and sits down next to her.] Well, did you get your money back?

Darius: No, I didn't. And I wish I had never listened to you and gone back to that shop.

Edyta: Why? What happened?

Darius: The sales assistant was really rude. She said that shirt was not even from that shop. And if it was, then it had been on sale, and I couldn't return it.

Edyta: Are you sure you were listening to what she was saying? Or were you day-dreaming as usual?

Darius: Of course I was listening!

Edyta: Well, did you ask for the manager?

Darius: No, I didn't. And I don't plan to. You take it back if you want to.

Edyta: You let people walk all over you. Like that restaurant last week when they brought you the wrong order. Most people would have complained, but not you! You just went ahead and ate something you didn't like, rather than ask.

Darius: The pasta was not so bad without sauce.

Edyta: I'm beginning to wonder if you'll ever get some backbone.

You can imagine how Darius feels after this exchange. Criticizing is another example of how we fail to listen and communicate in a way that builds intimacy. Like inattention, criticism will bring communication to a halt.

**Skit 3: Preaching**

Darius: Remember to set the alarm, hon. Last week we were late for Sabbath School.

Edyta: Look, why don't you take the kids tomorrow and let me stay home.

Darius: Why, what's the matter?

Edyta: Nothing, really. I'm just a bit tired.

Darius: You'll get a good night's sleep and feel better in the morning.

Edyta: Well, actually, I just feel like I need a day to myself.

Darius: Don't you think it's important for you to be at church. I mean, I think it's important for your spiritual growth.

Edyta: Oh, don't get carried away. I mean, it's not like I miss church each week.

Darius: Well, I've noticed other things that have concerned me and I'm concerned about your spiritual direction.

Edyta: Well, seeing as you've brought it up, I'm in the middle of re-evaluating this whole religion thing, but I really don't want to talk about it right now.

Darius: Honey, you know what the Bible says about being lukewarm . . . and you really need to set a good example for the kids.

Edyta: Look, I just want to stay home from church this one time. Do you really have to make such a big deal out of it?

Darius: Well, you know it's important to "get at the little foxes before they spoil the vines."

Preaching at our partners is another way in which we fail to listen. Neither does it bring about the changes we hope for, or encourage the kind of communication that builds intimacy in our marriages.

**Presentation: "Communication through Listening"**

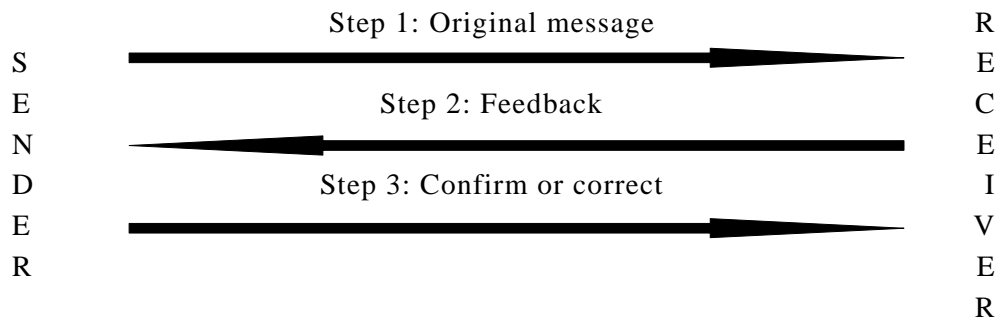
The good news is that, even though most of us have made the mistakes that we presented in the skits, good listening skills can be learned. We're going to spend the rest of our time together talking about and practicing what is called "active listening."



Active listening involves three steps:

1. The sender sends a message to the receiver.
2. The receiver gives feedback to verify whether the message was correctly understood.
3. The sender confirms or corrects the feedback.

The communication cycle has been diagrammed this way (Mace, 1982, p. 77): [Draw on white/black board]:



When I speak to Darius, I send an original message. It is often at this point that communication breaks down. If Darius is reading the paper, or thinking about something that happened earlier in the day, then he isn't really listening. He doesn't want to admit this, however, so he puts the bits and pieces that he has heard together into a message that he thinks is what I said. Alternately, he might be feeling defensive about what I am saying, and rather than listening, he is preparing just the right response, in his mind, while I am still talking. Ultimately, the outcome is the same; he doesn't really hear my original message. The only way to prevent communication breakdown is to continue with step 2.

Step 2 involves Darius checking back with me to make sure he has heard correctly. To hear correctly requires not just the ears to listen carefully to the words that are spoken; it also requires the eyes to detect the non-verbal message, as well as the heart to perceive the feelings of the speaker. In step 2, Darius feeds back to me both what he heard me say, as well as how he thinks I am feeling about it. Let me illustrate:

Edyta: I'm really fed up with my job. It's the only thing I ever do, day after day.

Darius: You really feel tired of doing the same thing over and over.

Identifying the feelings behind the words can be difficult, but unless we understand the feelings, the message cannot be fully understood.

In step 3, I need to either confirm or correct Darius' understanding of what I have said. If I realize that he has not really understood what I have said, I need to send the message again, in order to give Darius another chance to understand. Steps 2 and 3 must be repeated until it is clear to me that Darius understands what I am trying to communicate.

### **Exercise**

Encourage couples to work together to choose the best active listening response in the exercise “What Did You Say Again?”(Handout 2 *What Did You Say Again?*). Allow couples to work a few minutes, and then review the exercise as a group. The responses which best reflect content and feeling are: b,a,a,b,b.

Further discussion: How can active listening improve communication in a marriage? What are the barriers to using active listening in our everyday lives?

### **Couple Dialogue**

The rest of today’s session will be spent on practicing active listening with your partner. Choose a topic that you can talk about quite easily, rather than an issue over which you have serious conflict. Refer to steps 1-2-3 on the board if you need to. Allow ten to fifteen minutes.

### **Prayer**

### **References**

Flowers, R. & K. (2000). *New Beginnings*. Silver Spring, MD: Department of Family Ministries, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Mace, D. (1982). *Close companions*. Winston-Salem, NC: The Association of Couples in Marriage Enrichment.

## What Did You Say Again?

- Bride: I don't know if January 15 is going to be a good date for the wedding.
- Groom: a. I don't know why you can't just set a date and stay with it.  
b. You're worried about setting the wedding date for January 15.  
c. I never wanted a winter wedding anyway. Let's set the date for Easter.
- Bride: Yes, but it's not the wedding plans I am worried about. I just don't know if I am ready for this.
- Groom: a. You're concerned that you may not be ready for marriage.  
b. Does that mean you don't want to marry me?  
c. Well, if you can't be ready by January 15, when will you be ready?
- Bride: No, I'm not worried about getting married. I just don't know how to tell Elizabeth.
- Groom: a. You are feeling anxious about Elizabeth's part in the wedding.  
b. I thought Elizabeth was your best friend. You should be able to tell her anything.  
c. I find Elizabeth difficult to communicate with too.
- Bride: Yes. My mother found out that she expects me to ask her to sing for the wedding, but you know we have decided to ask my sister.
- Groom: a. Why don't we ask both of them to sing?  
b. You're feeling awkward about not asking Elizabeth to sing.  
c. This wedding is turning out to be too much of a problem. Why don't we just elope?
- Bride: Yes. But I want to ask her to help in some way. I'll just talk to her about it. I just needed to know that I have your support.
- Groom: a. Women! I'll never understand them.  
b. You feel relieved to know that I will support whatever decision you make about Elizabeth's involvement in our wedding.  
c. I think you're worrying too much about this wedding. If Elizabeth is a true friend she won't get her feelings hurt.

Source: Flowers, R. & K. (2000). *New Beginnings*. Silver Spring, MD: Department of Family Ministries, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, pp. 64, 65.

Handout 2 *What Did You Say Again?*

## Session Three

### Getting Started

Take time for fellowship and any necessary housekeeping tasks. The last time we met together, we talked about Communication through Listening. I think that each one of us here experienced what a precious gift listening is, and how important it is in building intimacy in our marriages. The theme of today's session is "Communication through Effective Sharing."

### Presentation: "Communication through Effective Sharing"

**Sharing negative feelings.** As human beings, we experience both negative and positive emotions. This is the way God created us. Within our relationships, it is important that we acknowledge and express our emotions, for a backlog of undiscussed conflicts and negative emotions, "the proverbial sleeping dogs," destroy intimacy. Because many of us do not know how to share our negative feelings, we often communicate either passively or aggressively (Olson & Olson, 2000). As we talk about these, think about how you and your partner communicate and whether or not you recognize either of these styles of communicating in your own marriage.

**Passive, aggressive, and assertive communication.** "Passive communication is characterized by an unwillingness to honestly share thoughts, feelings and desires." Although this form of communication may be used with good intentions, such as avoiding hurting others' feelings, it ultimately leaves "the other person in the relationship feeling angry, confused, and mistrustful." "Aggressive communication is characterized by blaming and accusatory actions and is often accompanied by language like 'You always' or 'You never.'" When we communicate aggressively, we focus on the "negative characteristics of the person rather than the situation," which typically leaves our partners feeling hurt. Both passive and aggressive communication destroy intimacy between partners. The alternative is assertive communication, which allows us to express negative emotions in a "healthy, non-defensive, and non-insistent way" (Olson & Olson, 2000, pp. 29, 30). When you communicate assertively, you share how you feel by speaking for yourself.

### Using "I-messages."

An "I-message" is a form of assertive communication that incorporates the following aspects:

1. A non-judgmental description of a behavior or a situation that is problematic.
2. Your feelings.
3. The tangible effect on you. (Flowers, 2003)

When (without naming or blaming anyone, identify the problematic behavior which happens), I feel (upset, angry, frustrated, concerned, or whatever the feeling may be) because (state the effect it has on you). For example, "When the kitchen is left messy after a snack, I get annoyed because it means extra work for me."

## Exercise

Encourage couples to work together to choose the best response in *I-message Exercise* (Handout 3). Allow a few minutes for couples to work together, and then review the exercise as a group. The responses which best offer (1) a non-judgmental description of the problem behavior, (2) your feelings, and (3) the tangible effect on you are: Message # 1 a, a, a; Message # 2 c, c, c; Message # 3 b, a, c.

## Putting It All Together

The skills we have learned in the last two sessions, i.e., active listening and sharing with I-messages, may seem awkward at first, but as you practice, you will find that you can use them more easily.

The transcribed communication below demonstrates how both active listening and I-messages can be used to discuss a potentially heated issue:

- Edyta: Honey, I'm concerned that for the last few weeks you have come home after 9:00 every evening. I know that you are busy at work, but when you come home so late, I feel sad, because I really miss having dinner with you, as well as the time that we spend together in the evening.
- Darius: You are concerned that I have been coming home late and not spending much time with you.
- Edyta: Yes. I am also concerned about your health. It's pretty stressful to be putting in so many hours without any down-time.
- Darius: I know it's not good for me, but I've just been so busy lately. I can't seem to get on top of things. At the end of every day I feel like I haven't accomplished as much as is expected of me.
- Edyta: It sounds like you are not feeling very successful right now.
- Darius: Absolutely. So I need you to understand that it's not that I don't want to spend time with you. I just need some extra time to catch up. At the same time, I don't want to jeopardize my health; neither do I want to take you for granted. I will make whatever changes I can, in order to affirm you and let you know that I love you and care for you. Would it help if I only stayed late two nights a week? That way I could get caught up on my work, but we would still have time together the other nights.
- Edyta: That'd be great. I really appreciate your understanding in this. I'll try to be sensitive to your needs as you go through this busy time at work. If you're tired after work, I'll try to give you the space you need to unwind, and know that if you need some quiet time, it's not because you don't want to spend time with me.  
(Adapted from Oliver, 2001, p. 31).

**Exercise**

Now it's your turn. One of the best ways in which you can learn to change your style of communicating negative emotions is to practice. For this exercise, choose a topic that is not a sensitive issue for the two of you. Talk about anything of interest to you: your next vacation, concerns at work, the weather, etc. Spend ten to fifteen minutes practicing the techniques of active listening and sharing with I-messages.

Practice these communication skills every day in your conversations. When you feel more comfortable, move up to more difficult issues. As you resolve difficult issues in your relationship, you will experience the real intimacy that can only be achieved through being real with each other.

**Prayer****References**

- Flowers, R. & K. (2003). *Family communication and ministry*. Cooranbong, NSW: Avondale College - Supplementary Resources.
- Oliver, E. & W. (2001). The power of oneness. In K. & R. Flowers (Eds.), *Understanding families*. (p. 31). Silver Spring, MD: Department of Family Ministries, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.
- Olson, D. H., & Olson, A. K. (2000). *Empowering couples: Building on your strengths*. Minneapolis, MN: Life Innovations.

## I - Message Exercise

Create three good I-Messages by choosing the best from the components below:

### I - Message # 1

- a. When no one picks me up to go to the youth meeting at church
  - b. You are the most forgetful man I know
  - c. You're so inconsiderate when you don't tell me you can't pick me up for the youth meeting
- 
- a. I feel disappointed
  - b. I made up my mind to arrange for my own transportation next time
  - c. I'm not sure you and I should be planning to get married
- 
- a. Because I enjoy the youth meeting and it's too late for me to arrange to get there another way.
  - b. Because obviously I can't count on you.
  - c. Because I don't want to marry someone who's not dependable.

### I - Message # 2

- a. You deliberately sat by Grace at the party because you know it will bother me
  - b. When you hang around your old girlfriends just to get me jealous
  - c. When I see you talking to Grace
- 
- a. Well, you better think twice because you may end up with no wife at all
  - b. I just want you to know I'm not jealous; I know enough boys to keep me busy
  - c. I feel hurt
- 
- a. And I don't need you to have a good time.
  - b. Because no girl is going to marry someone who isn't loyal.
  - c. Because I would like to have more time with you.

### I - Message # 3

- a. You're the best trumpet player in the whole world
  - b. When you played your trumpet so beautifully for church
  - c. Our church couldn't get along without your musical talent
- 
- a. I felt so happy
  - b. You never make a mistake
  - c. Though I know it makes you feel embarrassed
- 
- a. When I tell you how great you are.
  - b. And you are always right on pitch.
  - c. Because good trumpet music helps me to stay in good spirits.

Source: Flowers, R. & K. (2003). *Family communication and ministry*. Cooranbong, NSW: Avondale College - Supplementary Resources.

# *Rearing Disciples Who Love*

by Karen & Ron Flowers

## **Seminar Summary**

This seminar considers several key Bible principles related to parenting. The overarching theme is that parents are disciples of Jesus who are seeking to serve Him in the rearing of their children—to fulfill His commission to “make disciples” in the most important mission field there is and to respond to His new commandment to “love one another.”

The seminar is best suited for times when parents can meet together while their children are cared for elsewhere (with the possible exception of nursing infants) so that the likelihood of parents’ growth and spiritual enrichment is enhanced. Consider a series of evenings over several weeks—a “Parents’ Evening Retreat” or, for parents of older children, a “Parents’ Weekend Retreat.”

## **Seminar Preparation**

Within the materials for each session are found core summaries of material for presentations by the leader(s), in-class exercise materials, and handouts for takeaway from the session. Books cited in the references will provide additional material for background study for leaders and follow-up study for participants. Consider acquiring, where possible, copies of these and other appropriate books and resources to build a parents’ lending library at church.

Leaders are encouraged to develop presentations that expand and contextualize the core summaries given in each session. Use local illustrations and personal anecdotes to make the material come to life in your place. Make sufficient copies of the handouts. Consider providing a loose-leaf notebook in which each parent or parent-couple can collect and store their notes and handouts for later reference.

Most importantly, prepare yourself as a leader to be a gracious facilitator—one who does not come with “all the answers,” but one who seeks to listen and to support parents in their task. Let the seminar be more than lecture-only; give parents adequate time to discuss the exercises and share together. Encourage parents to bring Bibles and to study the passages given (Bible verses cited are from the New International Version.). Pray for the presence of the Spirit of Jesus and that God will help you to offer a grace-based, hope-filled time together with the parents who attend.

## **A Call to Parent Education**

As a general introduction to the series *Rearing Disciples Who Love* read to the group or tell about the commission given to Arthur Spalding by Ellen White in “A Call to Parent Education” by A. W. Spalding (see Handout 1 *A Call to Parent Education*).



## Session One

### Delight Yourself in the Lord

*Our primary call isn't to be good parents. Our primary call is to model a vibrant and vital love relationship with the living God. – Gary J. Oliver*

#### Key Bible Text

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts” (Deuteronomy 6:5, 6).

#### Bible Principle

Love for God must first be in parents' hearts before they can spiritually nurture their children.

#### Session Preview

The session addresses the preparation of parents for the responsibility of spiritual parenting. This involves (1) clarifying parents' sense of the mission of parenting in God's design, (2) understanding the concept of teaching by modeling, and (3) parents' reflection on their own spirituality and relationship to God.

#### The Mission of Parenting

**Agree – Disagree.** Designate opposite sides of your meeting room as “Agree” and “Disagree.” Read the following statements and ask participants to respond to them by standing either on the “Agree” side or “Disagree” side. (An alternative in a crowded room could be to have individuals remain seated for “Agree” and to stand for “Disagree.”) Note: Agree-disagree statements are intended to get participants thinking. They are not necessarily true or false.

1. Children are primarily disciplined for Jesus through Sabbath School and Youth activities.
2. Nothing affects our relationship with God more profoundly than our experience in the family.
3. Mothers have a greater influence on the lives of their children than fathers.
4. If we are faithful in working for the church God will take care of our children.
5. Parents condone sin when they maintain a relationship with a child who is not living up to Adventist standards.
6. A parent's personal life is the most powerful means of passing on Christian values to children.

**Disciples making disciples.** What is parenting? One way to think about it is that parenting cares for a child's needs. Parenting helps a child to develop life skills and to learn what behaviors are proper or improper. These are important aspects of parenting, but consider this: “Parents are disciples making disciples.” As Christian parents we view our parenting task from the perspective of our life as

Christ's followers. We are seeking to carry out, right in our homes, His directive, "Go and make disciples" (Matthew 28:19).

**Class exercise.** Look up Matthew 28:19; John 8:31; 13:35. Discuss with your spouse or the person next to you what Jesus meant by "disciple." In what way does His teaching about making disciples and being disciples help define the mission of the Christian home?

A disciple is one who follows his master's teaching (John 8:31). This kind of disciple is formed by sharing the truths of Christ so another person absorbs them. Elsewhere, Jesus defined disciples as individuals who know how to love others (John 13:35). Making disciples by this definition means helping people become the kind of individuals who love God and love people.

The family is a natural place to carry out Jesus' marching orders. Parents have a mission to attract children to Jesus and invite them to be His disciples. Both definitions for making and being disciples apply to the Christian home. Family is the primary place where children absorb truths and values. It is also in their families that children get their first messages about love and loving. A loving relationship with parents who dearly love Jesus and bring that love into their relationships with others increases the likelihood that a child will grow up loving Jesus and others too. Such children are apt to be more successful with their own children and likely will be able to form friendships that most naturally lead to fruitful witnessing. (Flowers, 2006a, p. 39)

Ellen White viewed the family as the most significant field of missionary toil and the introduction of children and youth to Jesus as the highest mission.

As workers for God, our work is to begin with those nearest. It is to begin in our own home. There is no more important missionary field than this. (*Child Guidance*, p. 476)

You may be evangelists in the home, ministers of grace to your children. (*Child Guidance*, p. 479)

Every family is a church, over which the parents preside. The first consideration of the parents should be to work for the salvation of their children. (*Child Guidance*, p. 549)

To think of ourselves as rearing disciples for Christ places this privilege of parenting squarely within the mission He has given the church.

## **Called to Imitate**

Children—babies through teenagers—watch the people around them. They study their actions, their words, and their overall demeanor. They observe how they treat others and are keenly aware of their feelings and attitudes toward them personally. Over time, they decide who they like, and who they don't like, and after whom they will pattern their lives. Children do not "learn" values abstractly, they imitate people around them. They do not make lists of values they wish to accept, but they identify with people near them and are frequently found mimicking their habits and lifestyle.

**Class exercise.** Invite participants to study the following Bible passages on the topic of “imitation” and discuss the related questions found on Handout 2 *Called to Imitate*.

- 1 Corinthians 4:16, 17 – “I urge you to imitate me.”
- 1 Thessalonians 1:6 – “You became imitators of us and of the Lord . . . .”
- Philippians 3:17 – “Join with others in following my example . . . and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.”
- Hebrews 6:12 – “We . . . want you . . . to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.”
- Hebrews 13:7 – “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.”

As you summarize the discussion, you may wish to refer to some Bible examples of this process of example and imitation: Jesus with the disciple John, Elizabeth with Mary, Barnabas with John Mark, Paul with Timothy (Flowers, 2002, pp. 9-12).

Many parents have used the line with their children: “Don’t do as I do; do as I say.” Yet the reality is that children tend to do as their parents do. It can be frightening to realize the extent to which our children emulate our behavior. We know we are far from perfect. But there is hope. For setting an example—or *modeling* as it is sometimes called—as the primary means of making disciples at home does not require perfection. This can help us to be realistic in our expectations of ourselves and our children, since neither we as adults nor our children are perfect. We have our tasks to do, but it is not our task to rear perfect, sinless children who have no need of a Savior. Rather, we who have found the perfect Savior are given the privilege of bringing our children to Him. He is their Savior too and He will shepherd their hearts as they grow.

Modeling means showing our young people what Christians do when they have made mistakes, how followers of Jesus seek and offer forgiveness and find the courage to begin again. Modeling also means demonstrating how Christians handle their disappointments—that it’s okay to experience discouragement and doubt—and how Jesus can bring comfort and peace and reassurance. Modeling means being real, authentic, allowing our children to see God at work in our lives, making new people for His kingdom out of the brokenness of our lives.

## **A Prerequisite for Parents**

In *Raising Kids to Love Jesus*, Gary Oliver tells the story of a man who once came to a diamond store owned by Henry Winston in New York City. This potential customer was interested in a particular diamond, so the top salesperson in the establishment showed it to him, pointing out its scarcity, its cut and clarity. After the presentation the man simply said, “No thanks,” and turned to leave the store. At that point, the owner stepped forward and asked if he might be allowed to tell him a bit more about the diamond.

“No, I don’t mind. I’ve come a long way. I’d be willing to look at it one more time.” It was not long before the shopper had become a customer and had his check book out. As he paid in full for the matchless gem, he said to Mr. Winston: “That same diamond was shown to me only a few minutes ago. I didn’t want it. You showed that diamond to me and something changed. Why am I buying the diamond from you?”

Henry Winston said, “The man who showed you the diamond is my most knowledgeable salesperson. He understands the color, cut and clarity of diamonds. He knows more about diamonds than anyone in the store, myself included. But I would double his salary if I could just give him something I possess. You see he knows diamonds, but I am in the business because I love diamonds. (Wright & Oliver, 1999, p. 173)

This story illustrates the truth behind the appeal of Moses to parents, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5). Moses’ presentation to parents is a call to the highest devotion to God, a devotion that includes reverence, loyalty and commitment as well as the warmth and feeling of intimate attachment. Before fathers and mothers can expect their children to love God, they themselves must love Him—totally, exclusively, intimately, passionately, and reverently. Oliver draws out the lesson of the diamond:

Our children are the buyers. Our Lord is the diamond, and we are salespersons. When they look at our lives, do they merely see someone who knows about God, who believes the right things and who avoids the wrong things, or do they see someone who is in an intimate and growing relationship with Jesus Christ. Our primary call isn’t to be good parents. Our primary call is to model a vibrant and vital love relationship with the living God. (Wright & Oliver, 1999, p. 173)

**Letting God re-parent us.** Another way to think of our parenting is that we are parents introducing our children to our Heavenly Parent. God wants to be a Father for each of us personally. Jesus introduced God to us as “Father” in the most winsome ways (see Matthew 5:16; 6:9, 14, 15, 18). Jesus’ “picture of God complements the view of those who grew up in loving homes, while those who had difficulty relating to a parent may have trouble trusting Him. All who come to God, however, are treated with the care that only this Parent, the most attached and nurturing of all fathers, can give. Before we parent our children, we must be *parented* by Him” (Flowers, 2006a, p. 33).

The Psalmist writes, “Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4). To all who would be spiritual parents of their children, Ellen White advises, “Let your heart be drawn out in contemplation of heavenly things” (*Child Guidance*, p. 68). Surely the desire of our hearts as we take up our parenting responsibilities is that our children would be “taught by the Lord” so that “great will be [our] children’s peace” (cf. Isaiah 54:13).

**Assignment.** Before the next class, reflect on your personal spirituality and your relationship to God. Write down all the ways you can think of that you take delight in the Lord. What is the nature of your relationship with God that you have to share with your children? In what ways will you need for God to re-parent you in order for you to enthusiastically introduce your children to Him as Your Father?

Evaluate yourself as a parent-discipler using the characteristics described on Handout 4 *Being a Parent-Discipler*. In what areas are you most effective? In what areas would you like to grow?

## Closing Prayer

Have the class read together *A Parent’s Prayer* (Handout 3).

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## A Call to Parent Education

Arthur W. Spalding

In the year 1913 Mrs. White, at her home, Elmshaven, Saint Helena, California, one day after dinner called into conference a young man who was temporarily a member of her household, engaged in a literary work for her. She was then in her eighty-sixth year.

“I want to talk with you,” she said, “about the importance of the work to be done for the parents in the church. You are a teacher. You are also a father. Your work as a father is the most important educational work you have ever done or ever can do. The work of parents underlies every other. Let the ministers do all they can, let the teachers do all they can, let the physicians and nurses do all they can to enlighten and teach the people of God; but underneath all their efforts, the first work done by the parents is the work that tells most decidedly for the upbuilding of the church.”

“Oh, how I wish,” she continued, with an expressive lifting of her hands, “that I could go out as I used to do, and stand before the people. I would teach them of the great importance of training their children for God.”

“But, Sister White,” said he, “you have taught them. You have counseled them, and they can read it in your books.”

“Yes, I know,” she answered, “it is written there. But I am afraid our people don’t read it. I am afraid they don’t understand. And it is so important that they understand and do, more important than anything else.”

“Do you mean that the training of parents to train their children is the most important work we have?”

“Oh, yes,” she answered emphatically, “it is the very most important work before us as a people, and we have not begun to touch it with the tips of our fingers.”

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From Spalding, A. W. (1962). *Origin and history of Seventh-day Adventists*, vol. 3. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association. pp. 200-202.

## Called to Imitate

In small groups, study the following Bible passages. Discuss the questions below.

- 1 Corinthians 4:16, 17
  
- 1 Thessalonians 1:6
  
- Philippians 3:17
  
- Hebrews 6:12
  
- Hebrews 13:7
  
- What is the recurring theme in these Bible verses?
  
- Discuss the kind of learning that is described.
  
- If “imitation” is God’s call to the one who is a disciple, what do you think is God’s call to leaders and mentors?
  
- How is this type of learning well-suited to the formation of disciples?
  
- What does this call to imitation mean for our home environment and for our parent-child relationships?

## A Parent's Prayer

Oh, God, make me a better parent. Help me to understand my children, to listen patiently to what they have to say and to understand all their questions kindly. Keep me from interrupting them, talking back to them and contradicting them. Make me as courteous to them as I would have them be to me, give me the courage to confess my sins against my children and ask their forgiveness, when I know I have done wrong.

May I not vainly hurt the feelings of my children. Forbid that I should laugh at their mistakes, or resort to shame and ridicule as punishment. Let me not tempt a child to lie and steal. So guide me hour by hour that I may demonstrate by all I say and do that honesty produces happiness.

Reduce, I pray, the meanness in me. May I cease to nag; and when I am out of sorts, help me, O Lord, to hold my tongue. Blind me to the little errors of my children and help me to see the good things that they do. Give me a ready word for honest praise.

Help me to treat my children as those of their own age, but let me not exact of them the judgments and conventions of adults. Allow me not to rob them of the opportunity to wait upon themselves, to think, to choose, and to make their own decisions.

Forbid that I should ever punish them for my selfish satisfaction. May I grant them all their wishes that are reasonable and have the courage always to withhold a privilege which I know will do them harm.

Make me so fair and just, so considerate and companionable to my children that they will have genuine esteem for me. Fit me to be loved and imitated by my children. Oh, God, do give me calm and poise and self-control. Amen.

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Adapted from *A Parent's Prayer* by Garry C. Myers. Courtesy of Prevent Child Abuse America.  
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## Being a Parent-Discipler

Writing from the standpoint of a Christian educator, James Slaughter offers five significant elements of the teacher-discipler's ministry which comprise an environment conducive to disciple making. They are equally applicable to parent-disciplers.

Using a scale of 1 (low effectiveness) to 5 (high effectiveness) rate yourself as a parent-discipler. In what areas do you think of yourself as most effective? In what areas would you like to grow?

**Consecration.** The discipler is consecrated and bears on his or her heart the consecration to Christ of his disciples. 1 2 3 4 5

**Affection.** Effective discipling is more likely to take place when the relational gap between discipler and disciples is closed through caring for and accepting them. 1 2 3 4 5

**Demonstration.** As the Christian life is modeled by the discipler, the disciple himself begins to catch on and exhibit Christian behavior. 1 2 3 4 5

**Ministration.** The discipler serves his disciples and helps them to become servants. 1 2 3 4 5

**Integration.** The discipler helps his disciples formulate a Christian world view, synthesizing the diverse and fragmented collage of their lives into a unified whole with Jesus Christ as its center. 1 2 3 4 5

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Adapted from Slaughter, J. R. (1988a). The teacher as discipler. In K. O. Gangel & H. G. Hendricks (Eds.), *The Christian educator's handbook on teaching* (pp. 257-268). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

## Session Two

### What a Difference a Relationship Makes!

*Relationship brings us out of our natural tendency to be disconnected and self-sufficient.  
– Henry Cloud & John Townsend*

#### Key Bible Text

“These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 6:6, 7).

#### Bible Principle

Godly parents encourage their children to become Jesus’ disciples through their relationship with them.

### Session Preview

The session addresses the importance of the relationship connections between parents and their children. Scripture elevates the importance of human relationships to a moral plane comparable to our relationship with God. Social science research reveals that the relationship connections young people have, particularly with their parents and other adults in their lives, serve a crucial purpose in providing stability in their lives. Spiritual values also are transmitted across the relational connections that parents have with their children.

### Created for Relationships

In the beginning God said, “Let us make humankind in our image” (Genesis 1:26). “Our” signifies the unique essence of God—a plurality of persons, elsewhere described as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (cf. Matthew 3:16, 17). Each Person in the Trinity has distinctive characteristics, yet each is connected to all the others, bonded into such perfect oneness that the Bible insists, “The Lord our God, the Lord is one (Deuteronomy 6:4). The apostle John points to the essence of the bond within the Godhead when he writes, “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16).

It is in the image of a relational God, this eternal “Us,” that human beings were created (Genesis 1:26). Humanity is thus fashioned with the capacity and yearning for intimate, loving relationships integral to their very being.

**Class exercise.** In small groups, study the following passages of Scripture: Gen. 2:18; Ps. 133:1; Malachi 2:15, 16; 4:5, 6; Matthew 22:37-40; John 13:34, 35; 17:11, 20-23; Ephesians 2:14-18; 4:3; 5:21—6:9; 1 John 4:11, 20, 21. What evidence is there in these texts or in others you may find of the significance God places on human relationships generally, as well as in family life? In what ways do the truths of these texts apply to the relationships parents have with younger children and with teenagers?

One text we did not list was this one: “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 6:6, 7). Perhaps some in the groups may have remembered this passage. This text has sometimes been used as the biblical support for morning and evening worship. We will have more to say on that a little later, but for now it is important to note that the Bible is referring to the constant and repetitive contact that parents have with their children. Implied is a relationship that involves time spent with offspring and communication with them. That time spent will likely be during meal-times, while working together, traveling together, playing together and relaxing together. This text indicates that God is counting on this constant and repetitive contact—this parent-child relationship—to accomplish some important things in the young person’s life.

### **Connections Make a Difference in the Lives of Youth**

The relationships young children and teenagers have with their parents and other adults have profound significance. Henry Cloud and John Townsend call connectedness “the foundation of life.”

When we connect deeply and lovingly with God and significant people, we can weather many of the storms of life. . . . Relationship brings us out of our natural tendency to be disconnected and self-sufficient. We are by nature isolated, distrustful, and afraid to reach out. When we are disconnected, we create our own distorted realities and opinions about life and ourselves. There is no source of reality that grounds us into the truth. . . . Kids who are emotionally connected in healthy ways are more secure. They delay gratification. They respond to discipline. They deal with failure. They make good moral decisions. The list goes on and on. You cannot lose by developing your child’s ability to relate. (Cloud & Townsend, 1999, pp. 68, 69)

A massive study in 1997 called the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Blum and Rinehard, n. d.) studied 90,000 teenagers and 18,000 parents across the United States. It showed the importance of youth having at least one person in their lives who accepts them unconditionally, regardless of temperament, physical attractiveness, or intelligence. It revealed the factors which predispose children and youth to involvement in high risk behaviors and those factors which are most likely to protect them from harm: “When teens feel connected to their families and when parents are involved in their children’s lives, teens are protected” (p. 15).

Here are the significant “risk-proofing” family factors identified by the study which were associated with decreased involvement of youth in behaviors which put their health, safety and overall well-being at risk:

- Feelings of closeness to their parents.
- Satisfaction with family relationships.
- A sense of being loved and cared for.
- Participation in activities with their parents.
- Parents’ physical presence in the home at key times during the day, i.e., in the morning, after school, at dinner, and at bedtime (though access to a parent and parental supervision may be more significant than finding the magical time of day).

- No easy home access to guns, cigarettes, alcohol, drugs.
- High parental expectations for the child's educational advancement and school performance.
- Clear parental disapproval of behaviors which put youth at risk.

**Class exercise.** Discuss with your small group the most valuable relationships with adults you experienced as a child/teen, relationships perhaps with a parent, teacher, grandparent, or some other adult in your church or community. How did these relationships affect your feelings about yourself and your choices about your behavior?

In their book *It Takes a Church: Every Member's Guide to Keeping Young People Safe and Saved* (2002) Doctors Gary Hopkins and Joyce Hopp report on several studies of resilience in youth including their own research. They write: "Social support, relationships with others, a network of people who care, or *love* is very powerful. And it doesn't take much effort or cost any money" (p. 32). [You may wish to refer to Handout 5 *Youth and Social Support* for additional material.]

**What it means to stay connected with youth.** Gary Hopkins and Dr. Bruce Heischober, both physicians at Loma Linda University with expertise in youth at-risk behavior, teamed together to prepare a seminar for parents on building connections that make a difference in the lives of children and youth (Hopkins & Heischober, 2002, pp. 45-62). Here is what they concluded about connectedness:

Connectedness takes time and requires genuine interest in young people and their issues. It means going where the kids are. It involves dialogue—listening as well as talking. Connectedness is about warmth and caring and love and friendship. It is also about supervision and setting limits. It's about building trust and holding on during the hard times.

Connectedness is about mentoring and making wholesome values attractive. It requires a willingness to negotiate and to release responsibility to young people in keeping with their growing maturity. Connectedness is about getting involved and giving of oneself. It is about looking out for kids who are discouraged or troubled. Connectedness is about helping someone who has made a mistake to begin again. Connectedness is about supporting parents and families. It means opening one's family to include others in the circle of caring and fun. Connectedness is about becoming community. (Flowers, 2004, pp. 77, 78).

**Distribute** *40 Ways to CONNECT with Your Teen* (Handout 6). Share with parents that these are activities that can be meaningful in maintaining or perhaps re-starting their relationship with their children. However, it is not necessarily an extraordinary activity or extravagant outing that children and young people need. They need quantity time with the adults in their lives. It is not so much our *presents* as our *presence*. Hopkins and Hopp conclude their book with these thoughts:

It is time for love. It is time to get to know every young person, every person by their names. Let the power of love be demonstrated through relationships that begin very simply. Test the power of the Lord, and use His love in helping to prevent the dangerous behaviors that face our young people. Don't expect special programs to achieve prevention goals. Don't expect excellent preachers, video presentations, or rock bands to keep our kids in church. Expect

love to solve these problems. Love never fails (1 Corinthians 13:8). (Hopkins & Hopp, 2002, p. 86).

## **Helping Children to a Place of Faith**

In the first session of this series we saw that the mission of the home is to make disciples, beginning with the children and other members in the home. While parenting involves the fulfilling of many responsibilities toward children, as Philip Osborne says, “The larger concern is the gradual induction of the child into a lifestyle—a lifestyle of Christian discipleship” (Osborne, 1989, p. 49). Because of the natural processes of attachment and interaction that occur between parent and child, no one is more ideally positioned to accomplish this discipling function than a parent.

Children in the home can often be overlooked as fitting recipients of gospel sharing efforts. Parents mistakenly assume sometimes that children will simply absorb family spirituality. This must not be taken for granted; while children and young people learn from the modeling they observe, it is also true that these younger members of the Lord’s family need individual attention and opportunity to be personally introduced to Him. Deuteronomy 6 is insistent on this point: attention is to be given to the most effective kind of religious education. Regular spiritual habits of personal and family worship are to be encouraged in the home. Time and earnest efforts must be put forth on behalf of children and youth that the next generation may also become people of faith.

Once again, the relationships parents have with their children have profound significance. Cameron Lee affirms the discipleship motif as being particularly appropriate for Christian parents: “Parenthood, like discipleship, is a teaching relationship, but the teaching is more than cognitive. Children orient their lives according to deep personal relationships with their parents” (1991, p. 270). Such close relationships are what Moses encouraged the Israelite parents to have with their children as explained in Deuteronomy 6:6, 7. He detected what research is telling us today—that children and teenagers tend to be interested in the beliefs and ideas of others with whom they share a warm relationship.

There is a common saying, “families who pray together stay together.” The members of such families, drawn close by their common faith and the intimacy of communion with God together, gain strength from each other in fighting the battles of life. They experience a peace that is unknown in families that have not made Christ the center of their lives. Surveys of youth indicate that regular worship at home with their family does enhance the quality of their spiritual development and increase the likelihood that they will accept their parents’ values and continue their family’s heritage of faith.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Valuegenesis studies done in several parts of the Adventist world have looked at spirituality in youth and the factors that contribute to the maturation of faith. Consideration was given to effectiveness factors stemming from three major institutions responsible for values transmission within the Adventist church: family, congregation, and church school. The North American Division study, for example, surveyed some 12,000 youths between the ages of 12-18. The study found family worship to be the strongest family effectiveness factor—when it is experienced by the child as “interesting and meaningful.” In addition to the quality of religious experience in the home, however, the study highlights the importance of the combination of this positive religious experience with a loving, caring, supportive atmosphere (Flowers & Sahlin, 1991, p. 10).

**Class exercise/Assignment.** As time permits, invite members of the class to share times of prayer connection they have had with their children and memorable worship experiences. Distribute Handout 7 *Fun and Easy Worship Memories for Your Family*.

## Closing Prayer

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## Youth and Social Support

Social support is an emotion-based attachment between two or more people. It is simply a meaningful relationship. When you get to know individuals, when you call them by name and ask how they are doing, you become a friend, and good things begin to happen. They will actually benefit emotionally and become healthier physically. If they are already healthy, maybe you will be helping them to stay healthy. Your willingness to form a relationship will not make them perfect, but it will give them strength. (Hopkins & Hopp, 2002, p. 29)

### Some Research Findings on Social Support

High social support is associated with:

- Reduced drug use
- Fewer teen pregnancies
- Lower levels of stress
- Fewer hospitalizations
- A buffer to the experience of childhood physical abuse
- Less college dropouts
- Increased longevity of patients with breast cancer and life-threatening skin-cancer
- Less depression in chronically ill women
- Improved performance on academic examinations
- Teenage mothers with support from family members, friends, and the father of the child pursue educational and career goals more often
- Teenage mothers who have social support are only slightly less likely to graduate from high school than those who do not become mothers as teens

Low social support is associated with:

- Drug and alcohol use
- Delinquent acts
- School failure
- Lower school attendance
- Less time spent studying
- Fewer prosocial (positive) behaviors
- Less disclosure of feelings with the adults with whom they live
- Greater chance of death during the recovery phase following a heart attack (Hopkins & Hopp, 2002, pp. 33, 34)

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Hopkins, G. L., & Hopp, J. W. (2002). *It takes a church: Every member's guide to keeping young people safe and saved*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association.

## 40 Ways to C♥NNECT with Your Teen

- ♥ Go shopping together.
- ♥ Compliment your teen's appearance or performance.
- ♥ Go to your teen's school sporting events.
- ♥ Attend a professional sporting event.
- ♥ Play board games together.
- ♥ Create your family tree; contact relatives and see how far back you can go.
- ♥ Put a puzzle together.
- ♥ Write a note of appreciation in your teen's birthday card or in a friendship card.
- ♥ Plan a mother/daughter day and/or mother/son day.
- ♥ Plan a father/daughter day and/or father/son day.
- ♥ Take your teen out to dinner.
- ♥ Research your family's coat-of-arms or design one of your own.
- ♥ Make a home video tape to send to grandparents.
- ♥ Shop for and cook a meal together.
- ♥ Listen without giving advice.
- ♥ Put loose family photos in a photo album.
- ♥ Serve a surprise breakfast in bed with your teen's favorite foods.
- ♥ Organize a bookshelf.
- ♥ Have your teen's friends over for pizza.
- ♥ Rearrange family room furniture.
- ♥ Help your teen plan a "back to school" party.
- ♥ Take a one-day hike on a difficult nature trail.
- ♥ Build a doghouse, birdhouse, or birdfeeder.
- ♥ Open a checking account for your teen or help your teen balance her checkbook.
- ♥ Help with a church work bee.
- ♥ Prepare authentic ethnic recipes—Chinese, Indian, Cajun, Mexican, etc.
- ♥ Shop for and purchase a new modern language version of the Bible.
- ♥ Take turns reading Bible paragraphs or chapters aloud for family worship.
- ♥ Help your teen with a school project.
- ♥ Volunteer for a highway clean-up or adopt-a-highway program.
- ♥ Wash your teen's car and/or the family car.
- ♥ Get involved in your teen's hobby or decide to start a new one together.
- ♥ Rake leaves for an elderly neighbor.
- ♥ Give a quick "hug" or pat on the back.
- ♥ Paint or wallpaper a room together.
- ♥ Plan the next family vacation.
- ♥ Build a family website.
- ♥ Make and distribute sandwiches to the homeless.
- ♥ Take a white-water rafting trip.
- ♥ Rent a tandem bike for a parent-teen afternoon bike ride.



## Fun and Easy Worship Memories for Your Family

- Make up a tune for a favorite Bible passage and sing it around the dinner table every day for a week. Think about choosing 52 passages from a modern version to commit to memory this year, adding a new song to your family repertoire each week.
- Read Isaiah 40:28-31. What makes you feel just great, like you could conquer Mt. Everest? Share with your family a time when God renewed your strength. Tell your family practical ways they could be the “wind beneath your wings” this week.
- Read Genesis 1. Talk about the world fresh from the Creator’s hand. What do you see? Feel? Smell? Taste? Hear? What do you think God was asking human beings to do when He gave them dominion over the earth? How well do you think we are doing with this responsibility today? You may want to look on the Internet for the amazing story about the ivory-billed woodpecker’s comeback from extinction. What can your family do to protect and revitalize God’s creation?
- Read Psalm 136 with parents on one side of the room reading the first half of each verse and the children on the other side responding with the refrain, “His love endures forever.” Write at least six more verses, presenting your own testimony from your family experience that His love really does endure forever.
- Create a promise book of God’s promises to you in the Scripture. Illustrate it with experiences in the life of your family that show how God has kept His promises.
- Go on a God hunt. Ask each family member in the morning to be on the look out for evidence that God is alive and at work in the world as they go about their daily activities. Share where you have found God today for family worship.
- Look for all the names for Christ you can find in the Scripture. See if you can find at least one for every letter in the alphabet. Put your list up where you can see it. Pick a favorite at the end of each day this week. You may want to share the name you chose and why it is especially meaningful to you today around the dinner table.
- Invite each family member to nominate one person for a Heavenly Hall of Fame. Tell why you would induct them.
- Make a family coat-of-arms that illustrates who you are as a family circle. Include symbols that convey your shared family heritage, interests, values, faith, spiritual gifts, goals, mission etc. Hang it over your front door.
- Read Matthew 28:19-20. How do you see yourselves fitting into this picture? Write a mission statement for your family.

- Make an illustrated book of Bible stories. Think of how you can make it a book your family and friends will want to look at again and again. Think colorful, three dimensional, interactive, and personalized.
- At the close of the Sabbath, take turns as parents blessing your children one by one, asking God to bestow on them the good things you perceive they especially need for the coming week.
- Discover the meaning of the names of as many Bible characters as you can. Find a book in the library or go on the Internet to learn the meaning of the names of each of your family members. Why are names so important? What is so special about the fact that God knows your name? Think about learning the names of the children, the teens, the old people, the people nobody else seems to notice in your church. What difference might it make in their lives to be called by name?
- Keep a book of prayer requests. Open it on the floor in the middle of your family circle as you pray. Pray conversationally for each one, with different family members taking turns contributing to one family-sized prayer. Keep a record of ways you know God’s listening.
- Read Isaiah 43 together, replacing “Israel” with your family name and changing the pronouns to personalize the passage just for your family. Talk about the verses that have special meaning for you.
- Make an Encouragement Jar for your kitchen table. Find as many Bible passages as you can where God offers words of hope and encouragement. Write them on strips of colored paper and fold them and put them in a jar for the taking whenever family members and friends feel worried, frightened or discouraged.
- Plan a worship experience for a neighbor who is shut-in or someone in a retirement home. Share your smiles, the Good News, your music, and your life lessons.
- Get together with other families and plan a Walk through the Bible Trail, where different family groups act out Bible stories along the way. Invite neighbors and friends to walk along your trail, enjoying the dramas along the way.
- Make a set of Count Your Blessings placemats for your table. Think of things you are thankful for and find something that reminds you of them. Arrange your pictures, pressed leaves and flowers and other flattened nature objects, letters cut out of brightly colored or designed paper, etc. on a piece of waxed paper, leaving space between and a margin of at least two inches around the edge. Then cover your work with another piece of waxed paper the same size. Carefully press the two sheets of waxed paper together with a warm iron, moving the iron gently over the entire placemat to seal everything in place.
- Ask each family member to bring to family worship something that comforts them when they are tired, sick, or worried. Perhaps it’s a favorite blanket, a hot drink, a soft toy, a warm bath with bubbles, aromatic lotion etc. Read Isaiah 40:1-2. Talk together about the comfort that comes from

knowing that God has reconciled the whole world to Himself in Jesus Christ, and that you are part of that world brought back into the family of God. Celebrate your decision to accept this gift from God by standing in a circle and holding out your tightly closed fists, then deliberately unclasping them to receive the salvation that is yours in Jesus.

- Identify at least two spiritual gifts you think God has given to each of your children. Find something to symbolize these gifts and wrap each individually with beautiful gift wrap and ribbon. Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 and give each child their gifts, affirming evidence you have seen that God has bestowed these gifts upon them. Give each one a chance to think about how they will enjoy these gifts and use them to share the Good News about Jesus and in service to others.
- Read Philippians 2:4. Make coupons for each family member to redeem as needed, offering loving services you are willing to provide in the coming week.
- Read the story of the prodigal son in a modern Bible version (Luke 15:11-31). Focus in on the hug in vs. 20. What made that hug feel so good? Create your own family hug by standing together in a circle with hips tight together—no space between. On the count of three, everyone take one giant step toward the middle. Think about God being in your circle, part of your family hug.
- Write your child a love note on a colorful piece of paper and decorate it with stickers, etc. Cut the paper into 8-10 odd-shaped puzzle pieces and put them in a sandwich bag. Tuck it in their lunch box as a surprise. Remind them often that you love them and that God loves them even more!
- Read Luke 7:36-47. What other stories of forgiveness can you think of in the Bible? Why do you think Jesus said that much forgiveness produces much love and little forgiveness produces little love? Help the younger children understand God’s forgiveness by blowing some soap bubbles and watching them pop and disappear. God’s forgiveness is just like that. Take time for a prayer of love and thanks to God for forgiveness!
- Play a game of hide and seek in the house after dark with the lights out. Pair up little children with an adult. What does it feel like to be lost? To be found? To be the “finder”? Read Luke 15:1-10. Celebrate with God that you were lost, but God found you. You may want to plan a party! Pray for people who don’t know yet that God has found them and wants them to join the party.

## Session Three

### Doing What is Good for Children

*A fitful government—at one time holding the lines firmly, and at another allowing that which has been condemned—is ruination to a child. – Ellen G. White*

#### Key Bible Text

“He has showed you . . . what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8 RSV).

#### Bible Principle

Parents’ style of family management incorporates both kindness and firmness.

### Session Preview

This session looks at parents’ style of family management. Parenting research has shown the significance of two factors, *control* and *support*, to the development of emotionally healthy, well-functioning children. These two factors compare with the *firmness* and *kindness* used by Ellen White and bear resemblance to the concepts of *justice* (Hebrew “*misphat*”) and *kindness* (Hebrew “*chesed*”) of Micah. In homes where firmness and kindness are found together, the likelihood that children will adopt their parents’ values is increased. They also will develop morally in keeping with their ages and be socially responsible and caring in relationships with others.

### Doing Justice and Loving Kindness

“He has showed you . . . what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8 RSV). Holding “justice” (*mishpat*) and “kindness” (*chesed*) together is especially important in parenting. The term for “justice” responds to a basic human need for fairness and equitable treatment. “Kindness” comes from a Hebrew term sometimes translated “love,” or “steadfast love” that answers the need for warmth, mercy and compassion.

**Class exercise.** Discuss as a group how these qualities of justice and kindness complement each other. What difficulties are encountered as parents endeavor to incorporate them into their relationships with their children? Why is there sometimes a difficulty in holding the two concepts together?

**Kindness and firmness.** The words Ellen White used for the two qualities so necessary in dealing with children were *kindness* and *firmness*. Here are three examples of her use of these terms:

The combined influence of authority and love will make it possible to hold *firmly* and *kindly* the reins of family government. (*Adventist Home*, p. 308 Emphasis supplied).

Children should not be left to wander away from the safe path marked out in God's Word. . . . *Kindly*, but *firmly*, with persevering, prayerful effort, their wrong desires should be restrained, their inclinations denied. (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 391 Emphasis supplied)

In order to maintain . . . authority, it is not necessary to resort to harsh measures; a *firm*, steady hand and a *kindness* which convinces the child of your love will accomplish the purpose. (*Child Guidance*, p. 283 Emphasis supplied)

## Four Parenting Styles

**Support and control.** Current parenting research reveals some interesting correlations with both the Micah passage and the concepts of Ellen White. Research shows the significance of two dimensions—*control* and *support*—to the development of emotionally healthy, well-functioning children. *Support* refers to the warmth, affection and sense of belonging that parents convey to their children. Support may be *high* or *low*. *High support* means high sensitivity and responsiveness to a child's need for love. Time for games, undivided attention when the child wants to talk, good eye-contact, healthy touch, as well as lots of verbal affirmation and expressions of love are found in these families. In *low support* families, children's needs are neglected or disregarded at best; at worst, the child is treated with hostility. *Control* is a technical term having to do with the degree to which parents provide structure, management or regulation in their children's lives. *High control* parents always know where their children are and expect compliance with family rules and regulations. *Low control* parents lack structure. If rules exist at all, they are often inconsistent. Rarely are there any consequences for breaking rules.

If we place *support* and *control* at right angles to each other to form a horizontal axis and a vertical axis (See Handout 8 *Four Parenting Styles*) four quadrants emerge which represent four styles of parenting (Neff & Ratcliff, 1995, p. 65):

**Neglectful.** This style (sometimes called “Indifferent”) gives neither emotional support to children nor sets limits. Children are basically left to care for themselves as the parents have for one reason or another abdicated their adult responsibilities.

**Permissive.** Here there is high support but low control; parents show a great deal of affection and tend to be very involved with their children, but no limits are set. Children are allowed to do as they please, either because the parents find limits hard to set and maintain, or because they mistakenly believe that, if you “love” a child enough, the child will behave appropriately and grow into responsible adulthood. Of this style of parenting E. G. White writes: “Too often the parents are not united in their family government. . . . A fitful government—at one time holding the lines firmly, and at another allowing that which has been condemned—is ruination to a child” (*The Adventist Home*, p. 310).

**Authoritarian.** Authoritarian parents are very strict and demand obedience, but emotional support, love and warmth between parent and child are lacking. Children are often forced to comply

with parental demands. Harsh discipline, rigidity and a lack of understanding regarding the needs of children characterize such homes. Children often behave out of fear, or to avoid punishment. Some rebel in their teen years, others move into adulthood desperately trying to please but feeling they are never good enough. Others have great difficulty making wise choices and taking up adult responsibility. Ellen G. White makes a revealing comment:

The discipline of a human being who has reached the years of intelligence should differ from the training of a dumb animal. The beast is taught only submission to its master. For the beast, the master is mind, judgment, and will. . . . It is not God's purpose that any mind should be thus dominated. . . . While under authority the children may appear like well-drilled soldiers; but when the control ceases, the character will be found to lack strength and steadfastness. Having never learned to govern himself, the youth recognizes no restraint except the requirement of parents or teacher. (*Education*, p. 288)

**Authoritative.** Of the four parenting styles, the *authoritative* style is optimal. Authoritative parents offer their children both high support and appropriate limits. Love and affection are in abundance. Affirmation flows freely. Expectations are realistic and appropriate to the age of the child. Rules are few and the consequences of not following them are clear. There is follow-through on consequences. Responsibilities are released to children as they are able to assume them, and communication is open. The authoritative style greatly increases the likelihood that when children emerge from their families of origin they will:

- Accept their parents values as their own
- Develop morally in keeping with their ages
- Be socially responsible and caring in their relationships with others

**Parenting styles and correction.** A home in which the principles of kindness and firmness are present has a built-in mechanism for correction. With the great twin principles of justice and mercy in operation (cf. *Child Guidance*, pp. 261, 262), correction is an on-going, integrated process, beyond which few, if any, supplementary measures of specific correction may be necessary.<sup>2</sup>

**Class exercise.** Evaluate the parenting practices in the families of Jacob (Genesis 37:3, 4), Manoah (Judges 14:1-3), and Eli (1 Samuel 2:22-25; 3:13). How could parenting with both firmness and kindness have made a difference? What practical changes would be necessary in order to incorporate these aspects?

**Class exercise/Assignment.** As time permits, invite participants to work on the exercise *How's My Parenting Style?* (Handout 9). Participants should work on this individually, then share with their spouses.

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<sup>2</sup> There may be some times, however, when children exhibit such traits as self-centeredness, unkindness toward others, and disobedience toward authority despite the best efforts of parents to meet their needs and to implement a parenting style that is loving, kind and firm. Some children demonstrate “hatred of restraint,” “love of indulgence” and “indifference to things of eternity.” These “must be carefully dealt with” (*Child Guidance*, p. 250). For additional resources on correction, see “Correction with Grace,” in Flowers et al., 1996, pp. 48-63; Neff & Ratcliff, 1995, pp. 69-71.

## **Closing Prayer**

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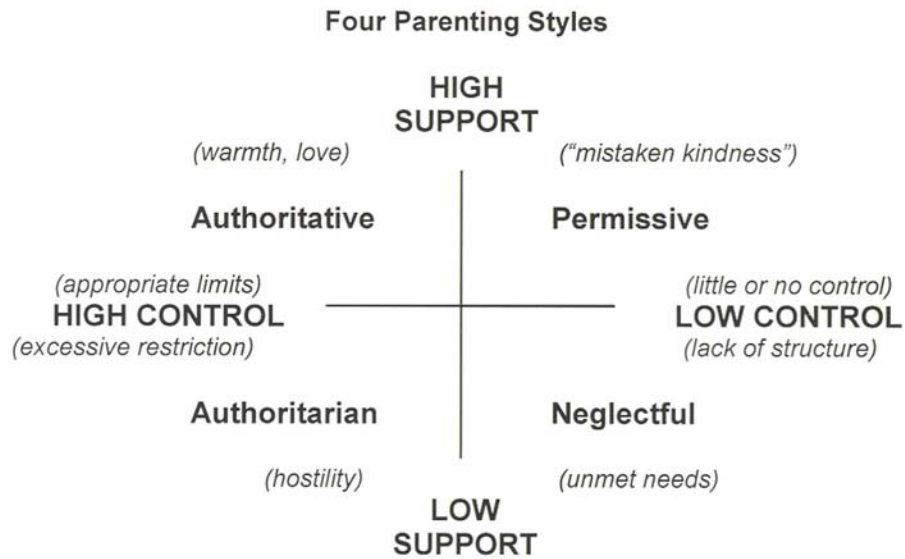
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## Four Parenting Styles



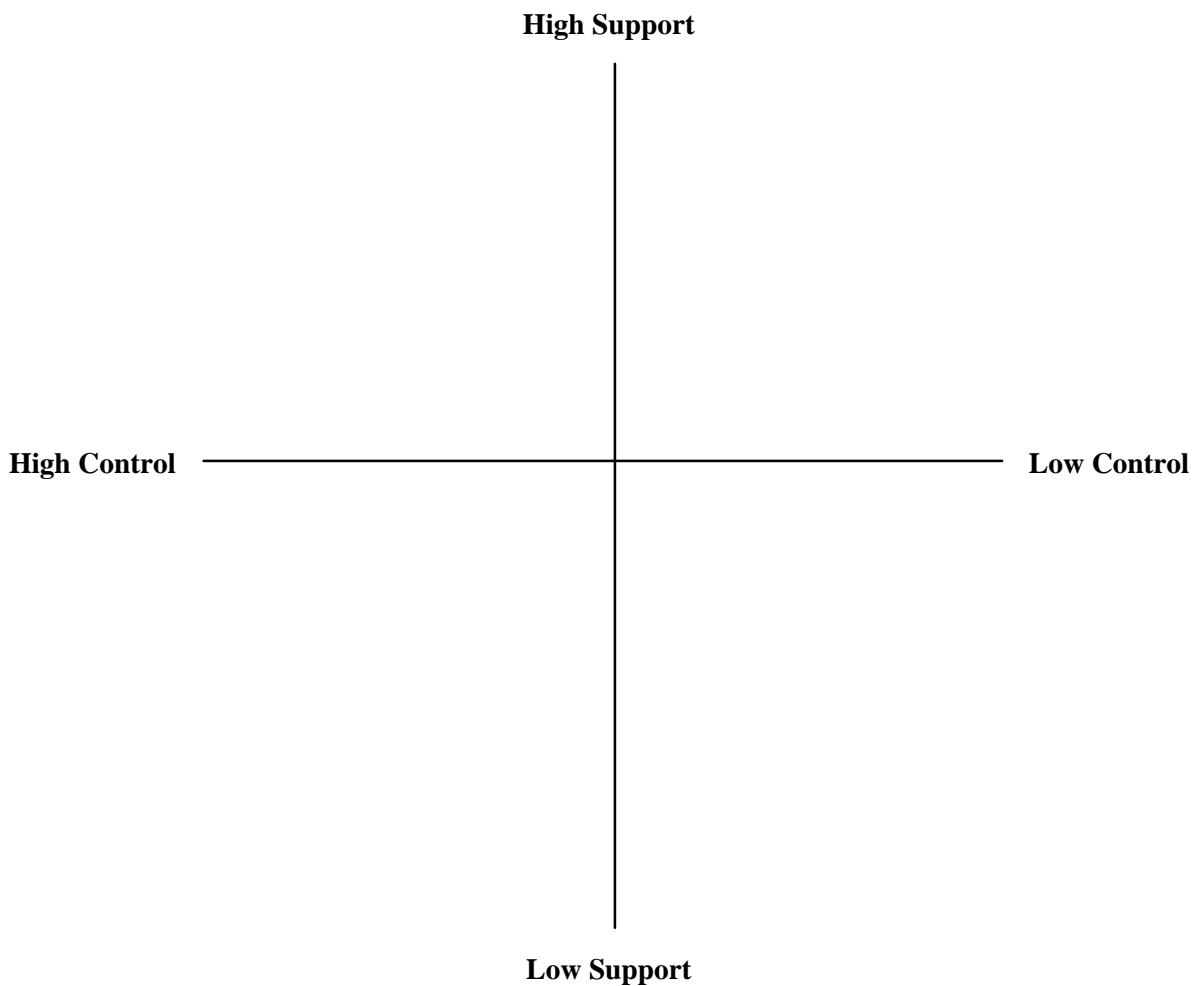


## How's My Parenting Style?

- Discuss parenting styles with your group. What new information have you gathered? What has your parenting style been like? How would you like to change or develop?

- In the space below, draw your own graph which shows the combination of support and control you'd like to exhibit in your parenting. (Start by determining a point A on the horizontal (control) axis which represents where you would like to be as a parent. Likewise, locate a point B on the vertical (support) axis. Then, from the intersection of the support and control axes, draw a graph line which extends to that point in the quadrant represented by the outward extension of A and B.)

- What changes will you make to parent in this way? Decide on one change you will make this week to move in the direction of your goal.



## Session Four

### Tuning In on Your Child's Emotions

*A vast difference exists between the physiological process of hearing and the emotional one of listening. – Donna J. Habenicht*

#### Key Bible Text

“Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4).

#### Bible Principle

Parents are sensitive to the individual emotional needs of their children.

### Session Preview

This session seeks to develop parents' sensitivity to their children's feelings. The contrast is drawn between counterproductive and constructive ways of dealing with emotions in the light of the biblical call to rear children in the training and instruction of the Lord. An emphasis is placed on developing communication skills of vocabulary development and listening that acknowledge the crucial role of emotions.

### Understanding Your Child's Emotions (and Your Own)

“Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). The emphasis on “fathers,” as contrasted with “parents” (vs. 1), is likely an acknowledgement of the socially powerful role of the father, since the government and discipline of the house typically rested with him. The apostle may also have in mind the abuses of power by the *paterfamilias*, the Roman father whose ways could, and often did, exasperate or embitter their offspring.<sup>3</sup> The overall instruction of the verse surely has truth applicable to both fathers and mothers.

The counsel given is presented negatively—“do not.” The first thing to be done by parents is to stop doing that which produces harm. Some of our attitudes, behaviors and feelings expressed toward children are not in their best interest. Certainly we are to avoid injustice, severity, unreasonable demands, petty rules, or favoritism which bring discouragement, resentment, and bitterness. But also, if a strategy or a style of parenting we have been using is not working or is counterproductive to our long-range objective to disciple our children for Christ, we should stop and evaluate it, discuss it with our spouse, a trusted counselor or a professional with expertise. The

<sup>3</sup> It was common in pagan society for the father, the *paterfamilias*, to have wide-ranging powers over his children, including some recorded instances where fathers allowed disobedient children to be sentenced to death (Dixon, 1992; Rawson, 1991).

Scripture's use of "instead" (vs. 4) is hopeful, for it implies that change is possible; a new direction can be taken. We can adopt new attitudes and learn new skills that will benefit our children.

The passage sets up a contrast between what a parent might currently be doing to raise negative emotions of "wrath" (NKJV) or exasperation in a child and what a Christian parent has the responsibility to do—to rear them in harmony with the training and the instruction of the Lord. "Fathers, don't exasperate your children by coming down hard on them. Take them by the hand and lead them in the way of the Master" (*The Message*). The "training" and "instruction" is "of the Lord," not pagan. It gets its characteristics from the teaching of Jesus. There will be no lording over one's children as the Gentiles do, but serving them as Christians do (cf. Matthew 20:25-28).

The text implies that Christian parenting will pay attention to a child's emotions. Christian child rearing will stimulate the healthy emotional development of children. Children (human beings after all) come with an emotional package that is capable of a wide array of feelings. Someone has said that human emotion can be summed up in four feelings: glad, sad, mad (angry), afraid. Some feelings are positive, some are negative. When negative emotions arise, a Christian parent does not condemn the child, but unconditionally loves and accepts him as he is with his feelings and attempts to provide comfort. In some situations, parents with high levels of empathy are so "attuned" to their children, as Daniel Stern has put it (Cited in Goleman, 1995, p. 114), that they are often able to readily discern their child's feelings from body language and tone of voice. Even so, the parent asks herself, "I wonder why he feels that?" Is there a fundamental need that the child has which, if cared for, would alleviate the fear, or sadness or anger? So the parent says, "Tell Daddy/Mommy about it." And a specific kind of loving begins that has enormous benefits for the developing child.

### **Identifying Feelings**

**Class exercise.** Invite class members to develop a feeling word vocabulary. Start by having a 60-second speed drill in which participants write down as many feeling words as they can in the time allowed. Then have those with the longest lists read their words, going around the group until everyone has written down everyone else's words. After this exercise, distribute Handout 10 *Feelings*. Discuss with the group any new feeling words that you find. What is the experience like for you to see the feelings named?

While we may have few words in our personal vocabularies to name our feelings, all of us as human beings have all these feelings listed and probably more, given the complexity of human nature. People have different attitudes regarding the social acceptability of discussing or even acknowledging feelings. Children, however, are generally open with their feelings, unless they have been conditioned not to acknowledge them or to suppress them. As adults, we may need to give ourselves a sense of "permission" to be comfortable with having feelings, with naming them and then expressing them to one another. A read through the Psalms can be helpful, for these poems are very expressive and run the gamut of emotions. In Psalm 40, for example, David's feelings go from elation and jubilation to feeling troubled, anxious, and afraid. The clear sense that we get from Scripture is that feelings are not good or bad, they just are. What the feelings reveal and how we act on them with regard to ourselves or others is what should concern us.

**The role of emotion in communication.** Our communication takes place via our words, tone of voice and body language, i.e., our facial expression, body posture and symbolic gestures. Studies show that feelings are conveyed largely through non-verbals (55%) and tone of voice (38%). Spoken words convey only about 7% of the feeling content (Mehrabian, 1972). Words usually express content information, but nonverbal communication is the primary means of expressing feelings. Inconsistencies between verbal and non-verbal communication are common and can be confusing. If there is incongruence between the messages coming through the words and the message being delivered through the body language and tone of voice channels, the message conveyed non-verbally will be what is primarily heard.

Furthermore, it is often the case that words are more likely used to comment on another's actions, while nonverbal messages comment on the other as a person. Non-verbal messages that are being sent influence how the spoken words are understood. If a teenager leaves the kitchen a mess after fixing herself a snack, her mother may say, "It's okay. I'll clean it up." But by how Mom says it—her tone of voice and body language—the daughter hears "Mom forgives my carelessness," or "Mom thinks I'm a slob." Children, perhaps especially early teens, are hyper-sensitive to the emotional content that is conveyed in the non-verbal channels.

### Roadblocks to Relationships

"The first step toward establishing good communication within the family is reducing negatives. Without realizing it, parents sometimes speak to adolescents in ways that are all but guaranteed to cut off communication" (Steinberg & Levine, 1997, p. 28). Here are some verbal comments that are emotionally hard on children and youth. Imagine the impact of the verbal message compounded by the non-verbal message that typically accompanies these:

"That's just like a teenager."

"You look ridiculous."

"When I want your opinion, I'll ask for it."

"You're acting like such a child."

"How many times have I told you not to do that?"

"Do it now, or else!"

"You think you have it bad; when I was your age . . ."

"How many times do I have to tell you . . . ?"

"I hope you have ten kids just like you when you grow up."

It is unlikely that most parents set out to deliberately sabotage their relationship between themselves and their children or to convey the idea that their children are not loved. However, when we threaten, lecture, interrogate, preach to, advise or judge another's actions and feelings, we produce the effect of exalting ourselves and putting others down. The other person especially feels devalued when one's tone of voice is condescending. The other person tends to hear:

"I know more than you."

"It has to be done my way."

"You dummy, don't you know . . ."

"I'm always right."

"I'm an expert at this."

"I can do anything better than you."

"Your mistakes are dumb."

"I can't accept your feeling the way you do."

“I don’t trust you to work out this problem yourself.”

“I think it’s your fault.”

“I don’t take you very seriously.”

“I don’t care how you feel.”

Older children and teenagers tend to stop communicating with someone by whom they feel put down. If we could hear their hearts, they would likely be saying: “It’s risky business to show you who I really am, because if you don’t like me, reject me, I have nothing left to give. I’m all I’ve got. But, on the other hand, if you accept me as I am, try to understand me, give me room to grow, I will blossom in your love to become more than I could ever become by myself.”

## Listening

In *How to Help Your Child Really Love Jesus* Dr. Donna Habenicht shows how important listening is to helping a child feel loved and cared about:

In the hurry-scurry of everyday home life, how can you communicate real listening to your children?

**First**, stop what you are doing. Mumbling “uh-huh” while you continue to read the newspaper isn’t listening. But pausing in your activity means “you are more important to me than anything else.”

**Second**, bend down to the child’s level and look her in the eye and smile. Eye contact and smiling say “I care about you.”

**Third**, make appropriate comments. Responding to what the child is saying communicates “your ideas are worthwhile and important” (Habenicht, 1994, p. 11).

As children grow their need to feel loved and cared about does not diminish. The teen years especially can be a challenging time. The emotions of all in the adolescent family are often on a roller-coaster. Staying connected with your teen emotionally through this period is important. “My friends listen to me,” one teenager said, “but my parents only hear me talk.” Dr. Habenicht’s comment that “a vast difference exists between the physiological process of hearing and the emotional one of listening” gives a clue as to what more is needed (Habenicht, 1994, p. 11).

Listen to your child’s words and tone of voice; observe her facial and body language. When her words and body language send different messages, believe the body language. Remember that just as your child’s non-verbals convey feeling messages, so do yours. As you are listening, send non-verbal messages with your body:

- Maintain good eye contact.
- Give appropriate facial expression.
- Nod your head, smile or gesture with your hands occasionally as appropriate.
- Stay close physically, with your body position leaning slightly toward the speaker.
- Touch occasionally.

Give a little verbal response to indicate to your young person that his message has been heard and correctly understood. Some responses are simple “door openers,” they encourage your child to continue speaking. Such responses let them know you are still with them, your attention is still focused on them:

- “Mm-mmm, I see.”
- “Yes”
- “Oh? Really?”
- “Then what happened?”
- “Wow!”
- “What a drag!”
- “Tell me about it.”

Allow your child to express herself as completely as she wishes without interrupting, except to summarize as often as is necessary for you to accurately reflect her message. At an appropriate juncture you can say, “Let me see if I’ve heard what you said.” Then endeavor to briefly summarize both the content and feeling. You can introduce your summary with “I hear you saying . . .”, “You seem to be saying . . .” or “It sounds like you feel . . .” Then rephrase her comments in your own words, incorporating the feeling words she has used or synonyms for them. If your teen has not used feeling words, then endeavor to identify her feelings and express them in words in your summary. “It sounds like you’re confused about whether to try out for the team.” “You feel good about your test results, but you were anxious during the exam.” “So, Randy asked Sally to go to the concert instead of you? That must’ve really hurt!” After each summary, you can say something like, “Is there anything more?” Or “I’m interested in hearing more” to encourage further sharing.

This feedback-to-clarify process not only improves the accuracy of the communication, but it gives the speaker (in this case, your child) the good feeling of being heard and especially of being heard by you. The process builds the bond between you. It conveys empathy, acceptance, and freedom with support. Although our teenagers may sometimes communicate anger, frustration, disappointment, embarrassment, pain and other negative emotions, they need to know that they are accepted even feeling the way they do. They need to know that someone hurts with them and takes their feelings seriously. They need to be given opportunity to work through these feelings and to reach some conclusions about their situation which includes an assurance of their own personal competency and worth.

**Class exercise.** Practice your listening skills with Handout 11 *Listening to Tanya*.

## Closing Prayer

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## Feelings

|              |             |              |              |               |             |
|--------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|-------------|
| abandoned    | blissful    | cuddly       | elated       | hassled       | lazy        |
| accepting    | bold        | curious      | electrified  | hate          | left out    |
| aching       | bored       | daring       | embarrassed  | hateful       | lively      |
| accused      | bothered    | deceived     | empty        | heavenly      | lonely      |
| adamant      | brave       | deceitful    | enchanted    | helpful       | longing     |
| adequate     | breathless  | defeated     | energetic    | helpless      | lovestruck  |
| adventurous  | bristling   | degraded     | enervated    | hesitant      | loving      |
| affectionate | bruised     | delighted    | enraged      | high          | low         |
| aggravated   | bubbly      | demeaned     | enraptured   | hollow        | lucky       |
| aggressive   | burdened    | demoralized  | enthusiastic | homesick      | lustful     |
| agony        | burned      | dependent    | envious      | honored       |             |
| alienated    |             | depressed    | esteemed     | hopeful       | mad         |
| alone        | calm        | deserted     | excited      | horrible      | mean        |
| aloof        | callous     | despair      | evil         | horrified     | melancholy  |
| amazed       | capable     | desperate    | exasperated  | humiliated    | mischievous |
| ambivalent   | captivated  | despised     | exhausted    | hurt          | miserable   |
| amused       | carefree    | destroyed    | exhilarated  | hysterical    | moody       |
| angry        | caring      | destructive  | exposed      |               | mystified   |
| anguished    | cautious    | determined   |              | ignored       |             |
| annoyed      | challenged  | different    | fascinated   | immortal      | naughty     |
| anxious      | charmed     | diminished   | fearful      | impatient     | nervous     |
| apathetic    | cheated     | dirty        | flattered    | impotent      | numb        |
| apologetic   | cheerful    | disappointed | flustered    | impressed     |             |
| appreciative | childish    | disconcerted | foolish      | incompetent   | odd         |
| apprehensive | clever      | discontented | forceful     | infatuated    | offended    |
| approved     | combative   | disgraced    | frantic      | infuriated    | ornery      |
| aroused      | comfortable | disgruntled  | frightened   | insecure      | outraged    |
| ashamed      | comforted   | disgusted    | frustrated   | insignificant | overwhelmed |
| assertive    | competitive | distracted   | frightened   | inspired      | overjoyed   |
| astonished   | complacent  | distraught   | furious      | insulted      |             |
| astounded    | condemned   | distressed   |              | intimidated   | pain        |
| attacked     | confident   | distrusted   | giddy        | isolated      | pained      |
| attentive    | conflicted  | distrustful  | glad         | intolerant    | panicked    |
| awed         | confused    | disturbed    | good         | irate         | panicky     |
| awestruck    | conspicuous | divided      | grateful     | irked         | paralyzed   |
|              | consumed    | dominated    | gratified    | irritated     | peaceful    |
| bad          | content     | domineering  | greedy       |               | peevish     |
| badgered     | contented   | doomed       | grief        | jealous       | persecuted  |
| battered     | contrite    | down         | grim         | jittery       | perturbed   |
| belligerent  | crabby      | dubious      | grouchy      | joyous        | petrified   |
| belittled    | critical    |              | grumpy       | jumpy         | pity        |
| bereaved     | criticized  | eager        | guilty       |               | pleasant    |
| betrayed     | cruel       | ecstatic     |              | kind          | pleased     |
| bitter       | crushed     | edgy         | happy        | keen          | powerless   |

|             |                |                |             |               |            |
|-------------|----------------|----------------|-------------|---------------|------------|
| pressured   | ruined         | smothered      | surprised   | torn          | violent    |
| proud       | sad            | smug           | sympathetic | tortured      | vehement   |
| quarrelsome | safe           | sneaky         | talkative   | trapped       | vitalized  |
| queer       | satiated       | solemn         | tempted     | troubled      | vulnerable |
| rage        | satisfied      | soothed        | tenacious   | trustful      | vivacious  |
| ravished    | scared         | sorrowful      | tender      | ugly          | warm       |
| refreshed   | scorned        | sorry          | tense       | unappreciated | weak       |
| regretful   | secure         | spiteful       | tentative   | uncomfortable | whipped    |
| rejected    | self-conscious | snatched       | terrible    | understood    | wicked     |
| relaxed     | selfish        | startled       | terrific    | uneasy        | wistful    |
| relieved    | settled        | stifled        | terrified   | uneasy        | wistful    |
| remorse     | sexy           | stimulated     | threatened  | unhappy       | withdrawn  |
| resentful   | shattered      | stuffed        | thrilled    | unsettled     | wonderful  |
| restless    | shocked        | stunned        | thwarted    | unstable      | weepy      |
| revengeful  | shy            | stupefied      | tickled     | upset         | worried    |
| reverent    | sickened       | stupid subdued | timid       | uptight       | worthy     |
| rewarded    | silly          | suffering      | tired       |               | wounded    |
| righteous   | skeptical      | suffocated     | tolerant    | valued        |            |
|             |                | sure           | tormented   | violated      | zanie      |



## Listening to Tanya

• Circle the response that best illustrates effective listening. Suggest an appropriate response for the last three daughter-mother exchanges.

Tanya: I'd like to get sick once in a while like Danielle. I think she's lucky.

- Mom:
- a. Don't be silly, be thankful for your health.
  - b. I can't imagine your wanting to be sick! What's so lucky about that?
  - c. You feel you're losing out on something.
  - d. Don't tell me you're jealous of Barbie again.

Tanya: Well, she gets to stay home while I have to go to that stupid school every day.

- Mom:
- a. Well, honey, just think of all the work she has to make up.
  - b. Of course you don't want to miss school; you have a perfect attendance record.
  - c. Oh, school isn't so stupid, at least you get to be with friends, which she doesn't.
  - d. You really would like to stay out of school more.

Tanya: Yes. I'm sick and tired of school. It's like the only thing I ever do—every day, day after day after day.

- Mom:
- a. Well now, really, it's not the *only* thing you ever do.
  - b. You should be thankful for the opportunity to go to a Christian school.
  - c. You really get tired of school.
  - d. I would have killed to go to a school as good as yours when I was your age.

Tanya: Sometimes I just HATE it!

- Mom:
- a. That's pretty strong language, young lady.
  - b. It's more than not liking it, sometimes you really hate school.
  - c. Now just the other day you were telling me how much fun you have at school.
  - d. It's not necessary to raise your voice like that.

Tanya: Right. I hate going to class, I hate the teachers, and I hate homework.

- Mom:
- a. I don't like to hear you talk that way about your teachers. Christians don't hate anyone.
  - b. There must be a few things you like about school, aren't there?
  - c. You just hate everything about school.
  - d. When you can talk nicely we'll talk, but not until.

Tanya: I don't really hate *all* the teachers—just a couple of them. One of them I can't stand. She's the worst.

Mom: a. Which one of your teachers are you talking about? I've met them all and I think they're quite nice.  
b. Listen here, teachers work very hard for what they're paid and I better not ever hear that you have been disrespectful to any of them!  
c. What did she do to you?  
d. You hate one in particular, huh?

Tanya: Do I ever! It's that Mrs. Barnes. I hate the sight of her. I have to be in her room next semester too.

Mom: a. So what is it you don't like about her?  
b. You feel you're stuck with her for a long time.  
c. Mrs. Barnes? Well, I can understand your not liking her.  
d. If she's done something she shouldn't have, I'll tell the school board.

Tanya: Yes, I don't know how I can take her for a whole year. You know what she does? Every day she gives us this long lecture and tells us how a responsible student is supposed to behave. She reads off all these things you have to do to get an "A" in her class. And all the while she has this pasted-on smile on her face. It's sickening.

Mom: a. You sure hate to hear all that stuff.  
b. Well, I should think you'd want to know how to do well in her class.  
c. I hope you don't mimic her in class like you're doing now! You better be careful!  
d. She's new; she'll do better after she's taught school a while.

Tanya: It's just that she makes it seem impossible to get an "A"—unless you're some kind of a genius or a teacher's pet.

Mom: a. Now, Tanya, you're smart enough to get an "A" in her class or any class; I know you are.  
b. Well I can't stand teacher's pets.  
c. So you feel defeated before you even start, because you don't think you can possibly get an "A".  
d. Poor dear, you're remembering that other class where you got a "C", aren't you?

Tanya: Yeah. I'm definitely not going to be a teacher's pet—the other kids hate them. I'm already not very popular with the kids. I just don't feel too many of the girls like me (tears).

Mom: a. You don't feel popular and that upsets you.  
b. Don't cry, honey, everything's going to be all right.  
c. If I were you I'd just be happy with the nice friends you have and forget those other snobbish girls.  
d. Now listen, Tanya, all your bawling isn't going to make me let you stay home from school tomorrow.

Tanya: Yeah. This one group of girls are the top ones in school. They're really popular. I wish I could be a part of their group.

Mom: a. Let's you and me go on a shopping trip and we'll buy you some new clothes so you'll be more popular than any of them.  
b. You really would like to belong to this special group of girls.  
c. If you'd just get yourself together you'd have more time to socialize and do things with girls like this.  
d. Ignore them! They're just a bunch of arrogant slobs!

Tanya: That's right. And I don't know how you get to be part of the group. Most of them aren't all that pretty. Some get high grades, but most of them get lower grades than I get. I just don't know.

Mom: \_\_\_\_\_

Tanya: Well, one thing is that they're all pretty friendly—like, they talk a lot and, you know, make friends. They, like, say 'hello' to you first and talk real easy. I can't do that. I'm just not good at that stuff.

Mom: \_\_\_\_\_

Tanya: I'm always afraid I'll say something that will be silly or wrong or something. So I just stand there and feel kind of left out. It's terrible.

Mom: \_\_\_\_\_

# God's Love with Us!

## An Interactive Worship Program Resource for All Ages

by Bernie and Karen Holford, Family and Children's Ministries Directors  
South England Conference, Trans-European Division

This is a service which can be used as a multigenerational program in a church or camp setting. It could work well as a Sabbath afternoon programme. It is designed to be used where there are children and parents present together, and includes several large and small group activities. Those present without families may be formed into friendship groups or "adopted" by the families who are present. The program can be adapted to suit your needs; you can choose which of the various parts to include.

### Singing – God loves us

Use songs on the theme of God's love such as the following or choose others you may know. (In some cases, words and music may be available on the Internet.)

- El Shaddai - <http://www.rockofmysoul.com/card203.html>
- Father God I Wonder - [http://shop.kingswaysongs.com/product\\_info.php?products\\_id=42](http://shop.kingswaysongs.com/product_info.php?products_id=42)
- Come On and Celebrate - <http://midis.fccanchorage.org/Christian%20music/Come%20On%20%20%20Celebrate.html>
- I'm Accepted, I'm Forgiven - <http://www.preciouslordtakemyhand.com/christianhymns/imaccepted.html>
- Shine Jesus Shine - <http://www.teddingtonbaptist.org.uk/tbcssjs.htm>

### Scripture - John 3:16

Here are several optional activities to give fresh perspectives on this Bible verse.

• **Act out the verse.** Body actions make learning Bible verses fun and easy for children. To lead groups in this activity, make sure all have the words and corresponding actions as shown below. Make photocopies of *Handout 1 John 3:16 with Actions*, write the words of the verse and the corresponding actions on a large piece of poster-board or a chalkboard, or prepare Powerpoint visuals. Demonstrate the actions to the group; then let the group practice the actions several times.

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| <b>For</b>          | Hold up 4 fingers.                      |
| <b>God</b>          | Point upwards.                          |
| <b>so</b>           | Use hands in a sewing motion.           |
| <b>loved</b>        | Hug body.                               |
| <b>the World</b>    | Make huge circle with both arms.        |
| <b>that He</b>      | Point upwards.                          |
| <b>gave</b>         | Move hands in a giving motion.          |
| <b>His</b>          | Point upwards.                          |
| <b>one and only</b> | Put up one finger.                      |
| <b>Son</b>          | Clasp and swing arms in rocking motion. |

|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| <b>that whoever</b> | Point around group.  |
| <b>believes</b>     | Left hand on heart and right hand to forehead.                                   |
| <b>in Him</b>       | Point to right palm with left hand and left palm with right hand.                |
| <b>shall not</b>    | Shake head and finger at same time.  |
| <b>perish</b>       | Draw finger across throat.   |
| <b>but have</b>     | Move arms as if collecting something towards you.                                |
| <b>eternal</b>      | Move both arms out sideways in two hill shapes, one nearer and one farther away. |
| <b>life</b>         | Jump up in air and stretch out whole body vigorously.                            |

• **Kids’ verse mix.** Write the several words of John 3:16 on separate pieces of white paper. Cut the white paper into squares, heart shapes, or into miniature shapes of freshly-laundered white articles of clothing (You can make the point that Jesus has washed us clean by loving us so much that He died for us.). Hang a line across the front of the room where you are meeting, give each child a word and a clothespin and let them pin their white paper “article of clothing” in the right order to make the verse. The words should be hung facing the congregation and placed in the proper order for the congregation to read. If you have a small group, give each child more words, for a larger congregation, have several groups or families working at the same time. Let parents or older children assist any younger children who want to be involved.

• **Personalize John 3:16.** Use Handout 2 *John 3:16 Personalized*. Work together in groups. Provide each person with a copy of the personalized text worksheet and let them fill in the blanks with their names. Read these to each other. Talk a few minutes about what it feels like to be loved personally by God. In groups made up of family members, a parent may read the child’s text to their child, and the child (with help to read if necessary) can read the parent’s text to the parent. An additional exercise that will encourage family bonding is to give each family group an extra worksheet and have them fill the blanks with their family name—“The Holford Family.” Various family members can take turns reading the version that has been personalized for the family.

Additional option: Decorate your Bible verse and display it in a prominent place at home.

• **Responsive reading – Bounteous blessing in Christ.** See Handout 3 *Bounteous Blessing in Christ*. Invite two readers to read the light and dark print. Alternatively, ask the two leaders to lead the congregational in antiphonal reading (one group reads the light print, the other the dark print.)

### **Prayer of Thanks that God Loves Us**

Make this a “Prayer of Thanks that God Loves Us.” Invite representatives from several families to pray. In preparation for the prayer, invite participants to tell of specific ways in which they have experienced God’s love. Ask those who pray to thank God for these and other special ways He has blessed us and shown His love to us.

### **Singing – We Love God**

Sing additional songs as a group on the theme of our love for God such as the following or choose others you may know. You may also assign in advance some individuals or families to bring these songs as special numbers. (In some cases, words and music may be available online.)

- Abba Father - <http://www.pwarchive.com/song.aspx?SongID=2370&v=1>
- The Greatest Thing In All My Life - [http://www.christianmusicweb.com/songs/All\\_Songs\\_Here/the\\_greatest\\_thing.txt](http://www.christianmusicweb.com/songs/All_Songs_Here/the_greatest_thing.txt)
- Father We Love You - <http://www.audiblefaith.com/pages/sg853006>
- As the Deer - <http://midis.fccanchorage.org/Christian%20music/AsTheDeer.html>
- In Moments Like These - <http://www.walkthroughlife.com/midis/christmas/inmomentslikethese.htm>
- Praise Him on the Trumpet - <http://www.audiblefaith.com/pages/sg853368>

### Scripture - Psalm 103

Encourage heartfelt praising! The leader reads aloud the psalm. Everyone responds with “Praise God” each time the attributes of God are mentioned. The Scripture text with response can be prepared as a handout (See Handout 4 *Psalm 103*).

### Prayer of Praise

• **Alphabet prayer.** The participants form into a circle and members offer sentence prayers of praise to God with words that use the letters of their alphabet. The person who begins praises God with a word that uses the first letter of the alphabet, for example, “I praise You God because You are *Almighty*” (“Almighty” begins with the first letter of the English alphabet—A). The next participant thinks of a praise word beginning with B, “I praise You God because You are *Beautiful* (or “Bountiful,” “Blessed,” etc.)” The prayer continues until the alphabet has been used. If someone is having difficulty, others can offer suggestions to help out. An alternate approach with more difficult parts of the alphabet might be: Q: “I praise You God because You *quiet* me” (*quench* my thirst, etc.); Y: “because You are *You*”; Z: “because You are *Zealous*.” When the praise prayer uses up all the letters of the alphabet, say “Amen” together.

Additional options: Invite the children to come to the front and take turns offering praise to God using the words that begin with the letters of the alphabet. Write the suggestions on a chalkboard. A variant of this is to give everyone a sheet of paper with an alphabet printed down the margin and invite them to supply an attribute or characteristic of God for each letter. Discuss the lists together in groups or as a whole. Tell what one of the attributes has meant to you personally or to your family. Invite someone to pray and thank God for this particular attribute.

### Singing —We Love Others

Sing songs as a group on the theme of our love for others. You may also assign in advance some individuals or families to bring these songs as special numbers. (In some cases, words and/or music may be available online.)

- A New Commandment I Give Unto You - <http://www.jaydroz.com/indexanewcommandment.htm>
- Bind Us Together Lord - <http://www.preciouslordtakemyhand.com/christianhymns/bindustgether.html>

- Let There Be Love Shared Among Us - [http://shop.kingswaysongs.com/product\\_info.php?products\\_id=136](http://shop.kingswaysongs.com/product_info.php?products_id=136)
- There's a Quiet Understanding - <http://www.audiblefaith.com/pages/sg853450>

### **Family or Friendship Group Activity**

Provide paper and drawing materials and invite each participant to draw a self-portrait. Ask them to write their names under their drawings. Then circulate the drawings among members of the family or friendship group, allowing time for several members of the group to write one positive attribute about the person next to their portrait. Return the drawings to their owners. A time of affirmation may follow, in which older ones in the groups read and affirm the attributes of the younger and vice-versa (parents to children and children to parents, etc.).

### **Sentence Prayers**

Invite each member of the family to pray a sentence prayer for each of the other members of his/her family or friendship group which includes thanks for something special about that person. For example, "Thank you God for Mummy because she is . . . ;" "Thank You God for Daddy; it is great when he plays football with me;" "Thank you God for \_\_\_\_\_ ; he's (she's) bigger than me and he helps me a lot," etc.

### **Closing Song**

Choose a lively and joyous song to close, perhaps one that has been sung earlier and especially enjoyed or one that has not been sung among those listed earlier.

## John 3:16 with Actions

|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| <b>For</b>          | Hold up 4 fingers.   |
| <b>God</b>          | Point upwards.   |
| <b>so</b>           | Use hands in a sewing motion.  |
| <b>loved</b>        | Hug body.  |
| <b>the World</b>    | Make huge circle with both arms.   |
| <b>that He</b>      | Point upwards.   |
| <b>gave</b>         | Move hands in a giving motion.   |
| <b>His</b>          | Point upwards.   |
| <b>one and only</b> | Put up one finger.   |
| <b>Son</b>          | Clasp and swing arms in rocking motion.  |
| <b>that whoever</b> | Point around group .   |
| <b>believes</b>     | Left hand on heart and right hand to forehead.                                   |
| <b>in Him</b>       | Point to right palm with left hand and left palm with right hand.                |
| <b>shall not</b>    | Shake head and finger at same time.  |
| <b>perish</b>       | Draw finger across throat.   |
| <b>but have</b>     | Move arms as if collecting something towards you.                                |
| <b>eternal</b>      | Move both arms out sideways in two hill shapes, one nearer and one farther away. |
| <b>Life</b>         | Jump up in air and stretch out whole body vigorously.                            |



*For God so  
loved \_\_\_\_\_ that  
He gave His one and only Son,  
that if \_\_\_\_\_ believes in  
Him  
\_\_\_\_\_ shall not perish  
but have eternal life.*

*John 3:16.*

## **Bounteous Blessing in Christ** **A Responsive Reading**

*Leader: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*

**People: Praise be to God.**

*Leader: For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.*

**People: Praise be to God.**

*Leader: In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ. . . .*

**People: Praise be to God.**

*Leader: In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.*

**People: Praise be to God.**

*Leader: And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.*

**People: Praise be to God.**

*Leader: In him we were also chosen, . . . in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.*

**People: Praise be to God.**

*Leader: Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.*

**People: Praise be to God.**

— Eph. 1:3-14

## Psalm 103

Oh my soul, bless GOD. From head to toe, I'll bless his holy name! **[Praise Him!]**

Oh my Soul, bless GOD, don't forget a single blessing! **[Praise Him!]**

He forgives your sins—every one. **[Praise Him!]**

He heals your diseases—every one. **[Praise Him!]**

He redeems you from hell—saves your life! **[Praise Him!]**

He crowns you with love and mercy—a paradise crown. **[Praise Him!]**

He wraps you in goodness—beauty eternal. **[Praise Him!]**

He renews your youth—you're always young in his presence. **[Praise Him!]**

GOD makes everything come out right; he puts victims back on their feet. **[Praise Him!]**

He showed Moses how he went about his work, opened up his plans to all Israel. **[Praise Him!]**

GOD is sheer mercy and grace; not easily angered, he's rich in love. **[Praise Him!]**

He doesn't endlessly nag and scold, nor hold grudges forever. **[Praise Him!]**

He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve, nor pay us back in full for our wrongs. **[Praise Him!]**

As high as heaven is over the earth, so strong is his love to those who fear him. **[Praise Him!]**

And as far as sunrise is from sunset, he has separated us from our sins. **[Praise Him!]**

As parents feel for their children, GOD feels for those who fear him. **[Praise Him!]**

He knows us inside and out, keeps in mind that we're made of mud. **[Praise Him!]**

Men and women don't live very long; like wildflowers they spring up and blossom,

But a storm snuffs them out just as quickly, leaving nothing to show they were here.

GOD'S love, though, is ever and always, eternally present to all who fear him, **[Praise Him!]**

Making everything right for them and their children as they follow his Covenant ways and remember  
to do whatever he said. **[Praise Him!]**

GOD has set his throne in heaven; he rules over us all. He's the King! **[Praise Him!]**

So bless GOD, you angels, ready and able to fly at his bidding,

quick to hear and do what he says. **[Praise Him!]**

Bless GOD, all you armies of angels, alert to respond to whatever he wills. **[Praise Him!]**

Bless GOD, all creatures, wherever you are—everything and everyone made by GOD. **[Praise Him!]**

And you, oh my soul, bless GOD! **[Praise Him!]**

— *The Message*

## *God's Hand in His Life*

by Rick McEdward, Director

Adventist Mission/Adventist Muslim and Buddhist Relations

Southern Asia-Pacific Division

With Ron Flowers

Ricky was a fifth-generation Adventist! He was the youngest child in his Adventist family. His parents were Adventists. His grandparents were Adventists. His great-grandparents were Adventists. Even his great-great-grandparents were Adventists! Five generations!

So Ricky remembers doing what all Adventists do—getting up on Sabbath morning, putting on his very best clothes and going to Sabbath School. He, his parents and three older sisters would climb into the family station-wagon car and drive to the little Adventist church in their neighborhood just outside the city. Ricky's favorite thing at church was the potlucks. He loved his mom's cooking! Ricky thought her food was the best at the potluck. So he had to get in line early if he wanted some of it.

When Ricky was nine years-old, his family moved to another state. Ricky didn't like to move for it meant leaving his home and room, his church, his neighborhood, his school and most of all, his friends. But Ricky did his best to adjust.

In the new place, some difficulties began for his family. His parents decided they did not want to be married any longer and so they got a divorce. That was a sad day for Ricky. The family broke apart. Half stayed in the new state with father and half moved back to their old home with mother. Ricky and his sister went with their mom, back the four hundred miles, back near the place where he had lived as a small child.

Ricky, his mother and sister were very poor. Life was hard. Mother worked hard as a secretary to support her family. Their apartment was small and in a poor part of town. Students in their new school noticed that their clothes were old and worn. Sometimes children can be very cruel to others when they should be kind. Some kids poked fun at Ricky and his sister for their worn clothes and coats and shoes. This was a very difficult time for Ricky.

Even though his parents were divorced, Ricky's dad would come to visit from time to time. Sometimes he would even stay overnight. Ricky wished his mom and dad were together again. When dad stayed overnight, it made Ricky feel like things were better, like when the family was whole.

After six months of divorce, Ricky's parents decided to live together again and to bring the family together—under the same roof. So his dad and the two oldest daughters moved in and there they were—all together again. Ricky felt good that everybody was together. But at the same time he felt a little funny inside and confused because he also knew that his parents were not married. They were officially divorced. People at church were not sure what to make of this family situation either, but still they were kind and helpful. The pastor was attentive to their needs as a family and made sure all of the children were able to attend the nearby Adventist school.

One night Ricky's parents came home with smiles on their faces.

“Why are you so happy?” Ricky asked.

“We have been to the pastor’s home and he married us!” they announced.

Ricky was delighted that his parents were re-married to each other.

A few months later, Ricky’s dad announced that he had decided to take a job in Saudi Arabia. Ricky hardly knew where Saudi Arabia was. He just knew it was far, far way from America. All he could think about was that he would have to move again. That meant losing his friends! And changing schools! Ricky did not want to go to Saudi Arabia. He did not want to move anywhere!

“We’re sorry,” his parents said. “But we have to move as a family.”

Ricky had no choice; he had to go. So Ricky and his family packed their few belongings and said goodbye. Ricky had to say goodbye to his dog. The children had to say goodbye to their grandparents. Then they boarded a big plane and flew to Saudi Arabia, the country that was so far, far away.

Ricky learned to like life in Saudi Arabia. They lived near the Red Sea, the same great sea of water where God miraculously opened the way for Moses and the Israelites to cross on dry ground as they fled from Egyptians. Ricky loved to snorkel in the Red Sea. He learned some Arabic, the local language. And

he learned to like Middle Eastern food.

As Ricky tells his story, it was while he was in Saudi Arabia that God began to work in his heart and to change him.

“I developed the beginning of a heart for God,” says Ricky. “It happened so gradually. Every evening before bedtime I would pray and ask Jesus to take my life and help me to be a blessing.”

Later, as he prepared for the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Ricky moved again. This time it was his choice. He wanted to go to Auburn Adventist Academy in the USA.

“It was at Auburn Adventist Academy that a teacher came to me and asked me if I wanted to be baptized,” he says. “I told him that I wanted to give my heart to Jesus and join his church.”

Today Ricky is grown up. He serves as a missionary in the Philippines, telling others about the good news of salvation. Ricky’s story reminds us that God never leaves us, whether we move to another state or another country. God goes with us through all the difficult changes in our lives. His love calls us back, even when we make wrong choices. And God uses dedicated pastors and teachers to help us and our families to live for Him.

Today, let us thank God for His great love for us.

## *Family Love for Little Brother*

by Kathleen Sowards, Editorial Assistant  
Department of Family Ministries, General Conference

DeeDee had a baby brother. His name was Tommy. But everyone called him “Little Brother”. Little Brother would follow her around the house all day watching her do her chores. Little Brother would play with her whenever she would let him which wasn't as often as Little Brother would have liked. Everyday was the same until school started. Then everything changed.

Now Little Brother Tommy didn't take kindly to the idea of DeeDee leaving everyday for school. It was such a long day. But there was nothing either he or DeeDee could do about it. So when the first day of September came, off to school DeeDee went.

Before leaving for that first school day, DeeDee pointed to the living room clock. She showed Little Brother Tommy exactly where the hands on the clock would be at 3:30 p.m. Little Brother Tommy learned to tell time very quickly. He got so he knew exactly when it was 3:30 in the afternoon.

One day, shortly after the school year had started, DeeDee was walking home. She turned the corner onto their street and had just started climbing the hill when she saw Little Brother running toward her. His little legs were pumping as fast as they could go. His arms were waving and as he ran he called her name and yelled, “Catch me”!

DeeDee dropped her books, opened her arms, and caught her brother as he leapt toward her. She swung him around and around. And the whole time she was hugging and swinging him, Little Brother was hugging her tightly around her neck, laughing and giggling. After

a few minutes, she put him down, picked up her books, took his hand and walked the rest of the way home.

Now there was just one problem with Little Brother's plan to greet his big sister . . . He wasn't supposed to leave the yard. And he especially was not to leave the yard without anyone at home knowing about it. But he had been too excited to ask mom if it would be okay for him to do this.

When they arrived home they found mom really unhappy about his little adventure. Little Brother Tommy was in deep trouble. Little Brother immediately looked sorry for what he had done. He told mom he was sorry for leaving the yard.

You know what happened next? Grace wrapped in family love happened. Mom realized how much Little Brother missed his big sister DeeDee. She sensed how happy he was to be with her. So she offered loving forgiveness to Little Brother instead of the punishment he deserved.

Then she told him that on school days she would watch with him from the porch for DeeDee. When DeeDee turned the corner on her way home, then it would be okay for him to run to her.

And that's just what they did. Everyday for the rest of that school year Little Brother Tommy would watch with his mom and then he would run—down the hill and into DeeDee's arms. And around and around she would swing him. Then she would take his hand and they would walk home together.

Do you know that Jesus waits to meet us every day too? He longs for us meet Him and tell Him about our day. He longs to take us in His arms and show us that no matter what has happened He is there for us. He will help us, protect us, and forgive us. The Bible tells us that God's grace is sufficient for us.

When we do something we shouldn't and we ask for forgiveness, God forgives us. He throws our sins to the bottom of the sea so that they are completely gone. God is able to this because He gave His only son, Jesus to die for our sins. What perfect love He has for us as members of His family!

## *Covering our Mistakes with Love*

by Kathleen Sowards, Editorial Assistant  
Department of Family Ministries, General Conference

Katie's mom was sick; in fact she was in the hospital and had been for a long time. Everyone missed her hugs, kisses and love. Being the oldest, Katie tried to make things better for her brothers, Danny and Tommy. One morning her brother Danny was especially upset. Hoping to cheer him up and help him feel better, she offered to make his favorite breakfast – pancakes.

Though Katie had never made pancakes before, she was confident she could, for she loved to be in the kitchen with Mom and had seen her make them many times. She felt sure she could make pancakes just the way her brother liked them.

Katie got out all the ingredients, measured everything carefully into a mixing bowl and stirred it all together. Next she got out a frying pan and poured a little oil in it. Then, after a few seconds, she poured some batter into the frying pan – just like her mom would have done.

It wasn't long before Katie had a nice stack of golden pancakes ready for her brother to eat. He was so happy. He buttered and poured syrup over his pancakes and cut out a bite . . . .

Katie proudly watched him take his first bite. As she looked on, his face turned to shock. Although the outside of the pancake looked perfect, the inside was still raw and uncooked.

Katie felt so bad that she told her brother she'd make some more for him. But do you know what her brother did? He grinned at Katie and

told her that yes, he thought she needed to practice some more. Then, he took another bite! And another! He wouldn't give up those half-cooked pancakes until Katie handed him another plate of fully cooked ones!

As Danny ate all those half-cooked pancakes, he was also doing something else. He was covering Katie's unskilled cooking with his love. He let Katie know that her efforts were important to him. Even though those first pancakes didn't turn out very well, he loved his sister anyway.

Katie did go on to learn to make and cook pancakes that are well done inside and out! But she has never forgotten that day and how, when she tried to cheer up her brother, it was he who made her feel special and loved.

Jesus does the same for us. He covers our mistakes with His love. Jesus showed His love by becoming a little baby, living a perfect life, and dying on the cross. Jesus shows His love to us everyday in lots of ways. He wants us to feel special and loved! He wants us to know that even when we fail, He loves us.

We can show Jesus how much we love Him by giving our heart to Him and when we do He shows us how to love others so they will feel special and loved too!

Maybe you can think of ways to show your brother, sister, family and friends you love them too. Hopefully, it won't be with uncooked pancakes!



# *Searching for Love and Intimacy in Marriage*

by Bryan Craig, Director  
Family Ministries Department  
South Pacific Division

It was a most extraordinary event. The funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales on September 6, 1997 evoked such a public outpouring of grief that some journalists and commentators referred to it as a “special moment in history, after which nothing will ever be the same again.” The world-wide telecast of the funeral was in fact the biggest live outside broadcast the BBC has ever made, shown in one hundred and eighty-seven countries and heard in forty-four languages by nearly two and one-half billion people. Outside the gates of the royal residences at Kensington and Buckingham Palaces, a vast field of sixty million flowers were placed in honour of the Princess who called herself “the Queen of Hearts.” Obviously, many people had been “touched by the magic” of Diana’s life and service and even the most cynical observer was bewildered and surprised by their own tears.

The Queen said that there were lessons to be found in Diana’s life. Certainly her life was full of paradoxes. Her fairytale courtship and marriage to the Crown Prince of England had ended in acrimony and divorce. She dazzled the world with her radiant beauty, yet she had to work hard at looking good. She was a dynamic and compassionate spokesperson, yet she struggled for acceptance and credibility. She made love a priority, yet she sacrificed her own self-esteem along the way. Carol Gilligan, Professor of Gender Studies at Harvard University said that most women felt a strong sense of connectedness with Diana (Gilligan, 1997). She was rejected, unloved and alone yet she groped for a way of life that would end her isolation and shame and reconnect her with others. She had become an icon of emotional need, befitting our time.

## **Searching for Love and Intimacy in a Post-Modern World**

Commenting on the phenomenal outpouring of emotion that Diana’s tragic death had evoked, John Gray, Professor of Politics at Oxford University, said in *The Express* newspaper the following day that “the funeral was a mirror in which the nation saw clearly for the first time how profoundly it has changed” and how it had “opened up the spiritual vacuum in the hearts of post-modern people.” In reflecting on how Britain had changed, he spoke of the massive cultural shift that has occurred in the western world which has seen society move from modernist ideals to post-modern values.

The events surrounding the life and death of Diana certainly highlighted for most of us the extent to which this shift in values has occurred in recent decades. We have all become a lot more independent, self-sufficient and pragmatic. Disenchanted with dogma and authority, we have dispensed with the old boundaries and social institutions. Marriage, family and community life have broken down and the Christian values that have under-girded public morality have lost their appeal and credibility. Perhaps the existential grief experienced by so many at the time of Diana’s death underscores just how much we feel the loss of meaning and purpose in our lives and how much we long for the certainty and hope that comes from being connected to others in community.

Our search for love and intimacy has always been influenced by our social context and carried out against the backdrop of the culture in which we live. The rapidly changing social and

economic conditions of the past few decades have definitely changed our expectations of marriage and the nature of human relationships. Marriage has shifted from being an institution that provides stability and security in the struggle for survival, to being a relationship or partnership built on companionship and emotional intensity (Ladbrook, 1995, p. 22).

The most profound change in our expectations about marriage has come as a result of the gender revolution which has grown out of changes in the status of women. Because of these changes, men have also been challenged to act and respond in new ways. They have had to develop new patterns of partnering in order to connect with women who are more informed, articulate and sexually literate. The new partnership mode of marriage that many couples now aspire to achieve places a strong emphasis on the need for effective relational skills and a greater adaptability as they face each other with a new sense of honesty and openness (Sternberg, 1988, pp. 119-138).

Is it any wonder that forming and maintaining quality relationships have become the number one social issue today? Is it surprising that our search for love and intimacy in marriage has become so confusing and frustrating? Helping people to connect in a disconnected world is a challenging task indeed. When people are unclear or uncertain about the script for marriage it always makes intimacy more difficult to achieve.

Because of this, we are confronted with the need to generate a clearer understanding of what we mean by “love” or “being in love.” We need to explain more fully what processes generate intimacy in marriage and how to develop a quality, long-term relationship.

### **What Is This Thing Called Love?**

In our attempt to minister to couples in this changing social context, what can we do to help them develop a sense of closeness and togetherness? What information and practical guidance can we give on how to establish and maintain a companionate marital relationship that will be both instructional and motivational? Without question, the key to the quality and viability of this companionate relationship is love—a love that is romantic and passionate, nurturing and satisfying.

The problem is that the word “love” itself is one of the most misused and misunderstood words in our language. Furthermore, there are many myths or irrational beliefs about love that prevent us from coming to an adequate understanding of what genuine love really is. Most of the myths are perpetuated by story-tellers in novels, movies and television and suggest that love is a matter of chemistry, associated with intense passion, an overwhelming sense of romantic love, and a preoccupation based on fantasy that believes in instantaneous connection with another.

As a result, romantic love has come to be highly prized as a value that expresses the passionate attachment between two people who were not only emotionally involved but sexually attracted to each other. This understanding has led people to view love as a delightful passion and a priceless emotional gift capable of generating the most profound ecstasy. In our present society that fiercely prizes individualism, personal freedom and individual choice, it is not hard to see why romantic love is so deeply rooted in our conscious pursuit of happiness.

Our understanding of love tends to be sabotaged by the following myths:

**Love is blind.** This belief suggests that a person who “falls in love” simply accepts the other person without any conscious awareness or cognitive acknowledgement of their weaknesses, differences or shortcomings.

**Love is external.** In other words, love is beyond our control. It is not a feeling that is generated from within. We are simply victims of fate and the external forces of love that are so mysterious, intense and volatile they just “come over” us. “Being in love” does not require a decision on our part, because love just “hits you” unexpectedly; it is your destiny!

**Love is uncontrollable.** “Falling in love,” being “swept off your feet” or being “head over heels in love” are experiences that can strike you at any time when you least expect it. They are intense, short-lived and pursue their own course. There is no suggestion that you could or should nurture this love or indeed, accept any responsibility for its presence or growth.

That we cannot agree on a definition of what love only serves to highlight that love is different things to different people. We use the word “love” to describe everything from a hypnotic emotional response to a zero score in tennis. It is associated with feelings of attraction, infatuation, sexual arousal, affection and admiration. So perhaps a fitting beginning in our journey to find intimacy in marriage would be to first define love and see how it manifests itself in healthy stable marriages.

## **Toward a Definition of Love**

Social scientists have attempted to define, measure and describe various conceptions of what love is. However Nathaniel Branden (1988) warns us that first we need to be sure we know what kind of love we are talking about because “there are different kinds of love that can unite one human being to another. There is love between parents and children. There is love between siblings. There is love between friends. There is a love made of caring and affection but devoid of sexual feelings. And there is the kind of love we call romantic love.” He goes on to suggest that when we do speak of love we are describing “our emotional response to that which we value highly” and that “to love another human being is to know and be known by them.” Love, he says, is “the experience of joy in the existence of the loved object, joy in proximity, and joy in interaction or involvement” (Branden, 1988, pp. 219-222).

Luciano L’Abate defines love as “the importance we attribute to ourselves and to others”, evidenced by our ability “to share joys, hurts or fears of being hurt.” The result of such sharing, he believes, is the development of a committed, close and prolonged relationship” (Cited in Carlson & Sperry, 1999, p. 34). Bernard Murstein, who has been studying the nature of love for the past four decades, says that love is not just a feeling of the heart, a decision of the mind, or a behavioural response, it involves all three modes of expression. He is stressing here the multi-dimensional way that love is manifest in human experience.

Professor Pat Noller (1996) agrees. She believes that love is best understood as an attitude we adopt towards a particular person that has three components:

**A cognitive component**—*attitudes* about oneself and others, a *decision* to commit oneself to the loved one, and *beliefs* and *expectations* about love that come from our culture.

**An emotional component**—*feelings* of warm enjoyment, of companionship, highly sexualised passionate feelings and other feelings such as admiration, respect and caring.

**A behavioural component**—where love is revealed in *tangible actions* that express love towards another. These loving actions will be influenced by one’s gender, personality and beliefs about what love is and the appropriate ways to express it.

Noller also suggests that “the way these three aspects of love are manifest in each individual will determine whether an experience of love involves a stable, healthy growth producing relationship or an immature, over-dependent and growth-stifling relationship” (Noller, 1996, pp. 99, 100). She further asserts that the emotional and behavioural aspects of love are both strongly affected by the ideas and cognitions about love that are prevalent in the culture which we embrace (pp. 111, 112).

A model of love that integrates many of our ideas and concepts about love is contained in the work of Robert Sternberg (1988) from Yale University. His significant research about what we actually mean when we talk about “love” is summarized in a triangular theory of love which focuses on clusters of factors involved in our expressions of love. His theory suggests that building a mature, complete or consummate love relationship involves three active components that are balanced but vary in intensity over time. The three components of love according to Sternberg are *intimacy*, *passion* and *commitment* (see Figure 1).

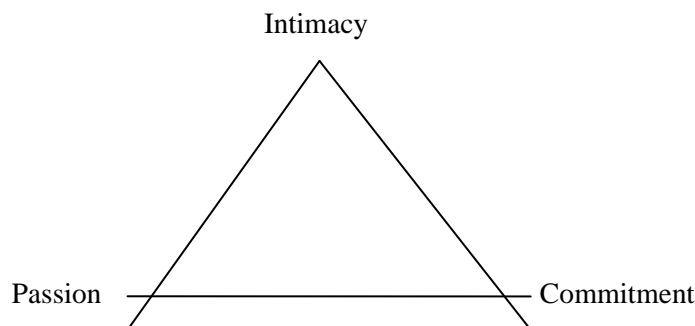


Figure 1: Sternberg’s Model of Love

**Passion** is a component that involves the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction and sexual consummation in a loving relationship. It involves sexual desire and attraction and an intense longing for union with the other person. Sternberg states that although sexual needs may form the major part of passion in many relationships, there are other needs such as self esteem, affiliation with others, dominance over others, submission to others and self-actualisation which may constitute the component of passion in relationships.

**Intimacy** refers to the feelings of closeness, connectedness and bonding that individuals may experience in a love relationship. It includes those feelings that create the experience of warmth, respect and concern. In fact, Sternberg identified the following ten signs of intimacy which he believes exist in all love relationships: (1) desiring to promote the welfare of the loved one; (2) experiencing happiness with the loved one; (3) having high regard for the loved one; (4) being able to count on the loved one in times of need, (5) mutual understanding with the loved one; (6) sharing oneself and one’s possessions with the loved one; (7) receiving emotional support from the loved one;

(8) giving emotional support to the loved one; (9) having intimate communication with the loved one; (10) valuing the loved one in one's life.

**Commitment** is the decision/commitment component of love and consists of two aspects: (1) the *decision* that one makes to love someone and (2) the *commitment* one makes to maintain that love through good and bad times (Sternberg, 1988, pp. 119-138).

Sternberg's model also differentiates between eight possible types of love generated by the triangular theory. He explains that when love is deficient in any of the three components of passion, intimacy and commitment it can be seen as less than mature, complete or consummate. In some cases, it is immature. Sternberg classifies and represents these eight different kinds of love as subsets of the three components:

**1. Liking** refers to the set of feelings and experiences in relationships that are true friendships. An individual feels closeness, bondedness and warmth toward another person without intense passion or long-term commitment.

**2. Infatuated love** is "love at first sight," the love that turns towards obsession with the loved person being an idealised object rather than himself or herself. It results from passionate arousal in the absence of the intimacy and commitment components of love. It can arise and dissipate quickly and is characterised by a high degree of mental and physical arousal.

**3. Empty love** is often found in stagnant relationships that have lost the mutual emotional involvement and physical attraction that once characterised them. It is a relationship in which there is commitment, but no intimacy or passion.

**4. Romantic love** is when two lovers are drawn to one another both physically and emotionally but demonstrate no sense of commitment to each other. They may feel passionate toward one another and feel that they can bare their souls to each other, but realise that permanence in the relationship is unlikely, impossible or simply an issue to be dealt with at some future time.

**5. Companionate love** results from a combination of intimacy and commitment in a relationship in which physical attraction (as a major source of passion) has waned.

**6. Fatuous love** is the type of love that is high on passion and commitment but low on intimacy and lacks the stabilising element of intimate involvement. Sternberg describes this love as the kind of love we sometimes associate with Hollywood or with whirlwind courtships.

**7. Non-love** is simply the absence of all three components of love.

**8. Consummate or complete love** results when all three components are present. It is the kind of love towards which many of us strive, especially in romantic relationships. Attaining it can be difficult but keeping it is even harder. This constitutes a mature love experience, a love that we want to make as complete as possible (Sternberg, 1988, pp. 122-129).

Another fascinating aspect of Sternberg's triangular theory is his concept of an "action triangle" that represents the various ways in which the three components of love get translated into

actions. Actions indicating *passion* are expressed through touching, hugging, kissing and making love; actions that give expression to *intimacy*, include communicating inner feelings, offering emotional and material support and expressing empathy for the other; and actions that express *commitment* may include such things as expressing fidelity, staying in a relationship through tough times or giving some tangible symbol like a ring to the other person.

The overall strength of the triangular model of love is that it provides a dynamic view of what makes love relationships work and offers a simple diagnostic measure that is helpful in those settings where couples desire a greater sense of connectedness and intimacy. It also enables them to move more easily from a cognitive understanding of the components involved in love to generating those behavioural changes that will create a greater affective involvement and maintain their relationship through good and tough times.

### **The Commitment Component**

The commitment component in Sternberg's theory has received some additional interesting elaboration through the work of George Levinger (1988) and Scott Stanley (1996). The current phenomena of "commitment phobia" that manifests itself in many post-modern love relationships has generated a great degree of interest among researchers wishing to understand the importance that commitment plays in the creation of a stable, mature love relationship. For Sternberg, the commitment component determines the stability and maintenance of the relationship and involves two aspects: a *decision* to love a certain other and a *commitment* to maintain that love.

Levinger, in analysing marital cohesiveness, found that the commitment-related aspects of the marital bond grew out of two distinctly separate sources. One source of commitment to the relationship he found to be internally driven, i.e., a sense of internally experienced obligations. The other is externally generated and involves a sense of externally generated constraints around marriage (Levinger, 1988, pp. 144, 145).

**Dedication and constraint.** Work on marital cohesiveness is further extended in the research being carried out by Scott Stanley at the University of Denver. He has developed a model of commitment that features two elements: *dedication* and *constraint* (Stanley, et al., 1998, pp. 165-173). *Dedication* is evidenced by a desire (and associated behaviours) not only to continue in the relationship, but also to improve it, to sacrifice for it, to protect it, to invest in it, and to seek the other's welfare, not simply one's own. These six desires are closely associated with an internally motivated decision to commit to the marriage relationship. Stanley found that dedication is strongly associated with the quality of the marriage and is something that the individual has a choice about, namely how much of themselves they are going to give to their spouse.

*Constraint* refers to forces that constrain an individual to maintain a relationship regardless of their personal feelings about it. It involves a sense of obligation towards the other person and the relationship in which they are both involved. There are certain constraints that make the termination of the relationship more economically, socially, personally and psychologically costly. For Stanley, constraint is what gives stability and a sense of security in a marriage. Without "constraint commitment," he believes that it is possible that no marriage would stay together because no marriage is consistently satisfying. His research shows that constraint grows over time and changes in marriage. It really is evidence of choices that have been made from dedication in the past. Constraint

leads individuals to make more constructive choices in marriage during times of trauma and crisis. When it is all boiled down, commitment in all of its complexity leads to a long-term view in a marriage. This is vital to a marriage because it enables two people to see beyond the ups and downs of relational life and make an investment in the marriage for the long haul (Stanley, 1996, pp. 24-26).

These concepts of love and marriage and the components of love expressed so simply by Sternberg in his triangular theory of love bear a remarkable similarity to the emphasis given by the Creator-God at the beginning of human history. The Bible clearly states that God instituted marriage based on a partnership sustained by love and companionship (Genesis 2:18, 24) and that this relationship was characterised by its oneness or sense of mutual intimacy (intimacy) that grew out of mutual attraction (passion) and a covenantal relationship (commitment). These factors were designed to keep the relationship stable over time through an ongoing quality interaction and to deepen the emotional investment between the two marital partners.

### **Understanding How Intimacy is Achieved**

So far we have explored a number of concepts and models that help us understand what love is. This discussion has been necessary background material for our quest to discover and understand what intimacy is and how it is achieved in marriage. While it is possible that intimacy may be achieved for some couples through immediate emotional connection, it is not, generally speaking, an instantaneous process but rather a journey that takes years to develop. Bagarozzi (1999) says that intimacy is “a dynamic interactive and reciprocal process that evolves over time along with the development of a committed relationship. As the relationship grows and matures, intimacy deepens as self-awareness and self-disclosure increase” (pp. 67, 81).

The word “intimacy” comes from the Latin word *intimus* meaning “innermost.” It refers to the unveiling of the “most deeply internal or inmost qualities of a person” (Prager, 1995, p. 65). It involves two people who know each other and who intentionally disclose their thoughts and feelings to one another. They are open, honest and affectionate towards each other, and while they recognise each other’s weaknesses, they refuse to exert power or control over one another when resolving their differences.

L’Abate clarifies our understanding intimacy by suggesting that it occurs when we develop the ability to share your joys, hurts or fears of being hurt with another person. Exercising this ability is what develops emotional connections and personal closeness between two people and leads to a close, committed, long-term relationship. According to his research, “couples who do openly express their feelings of hurt, fear and anger can have potent experiences of intimacy” (Cited in Prager, 1995, pp. 55, 56), because it allows them to access the heart and soul of their partner. His studies also show intimacy is not particularly common in relationships and most couples struggle to connect with each other’s emotional experiences.

In summary, intimacy involves the importance we attribute to ourselves and others, the degree to which we are able to self disclose and share in the intense emotional experiences (the joys, hurts and fears) of another, and the ability to be emotionally available and join with another in their joys and pains without compromising our own personal boundaries and personhood. Of course, this pre-supposes that we have a secure sense of self and the ability to communicate effectively our thoughts and feelings, resolve our differences and negotiate our way through conflict. Intimacy will

obviously be inhibited if couples do not have the ability to listen with empathy, articulate their own inner experiences and convey to the other person that they have heard, understood and accepted their message.

Other obstacles to achieving intimacy in marriage may be centred on the different fears people may have about being shamed, abandoned, belittled or engulfed by their partner or by the interactional processes of the relationship. The level of intimacy that individuals are able to reach may also be influenced by the developmental and situational needs and concerns encountered throughout the various stages of the life cycle. As couples deal with the stresses and strains of life, intimacy levels fluctuate considerably, especially during child-rearing and the middle years of marriage.

We also need to recognise that intimacy is multi-dimensional and is experienced across the many different dimensions of a relationship. Schaefer and Olsen identify the following seven dimensions of marital intimacy:

- Emotional intimacy** - sharing feelings, warmth and desire
- Social intimacy** - sharing group experiences and common experiences of fun and play
- Sexual intimacy** - sharing a deep personal closeness through sensual, erotic experiences and the experience of self abandonment to another
- Intellectual intimacy** - sharing thoughts and ideas
- Recreational intimacy** - sharing leisure and re-creational activities
- Spiritual intimacy** - sharing spiritual beliefs, values and experiences
- Aesthetic intimacy** - sharing together the world of beauty and creativity (Cited in Carlson & Sperry, 1999, p. 66).

## Summary

Improving the level of intimacy in their relationship is generally a common goal of most married couples. In our quest to understand what love is and how intimacy is achieved in marriage we have explored a variety of factors that researchers say influence our relational satisfaction and happiness. Sternberg's model of love has been instructive in helping us understand what we mean and expect when we talk about "being in love." His three components of love—passion, commitment and intimacy—highlight important components in the process of developing a satisfying intimate relationship.

L'Abate's definition of intimacy, that focuses on emotionally connecting with the joys, hurts and fears of another person, helps us begin to see just how critical the emotional dimension is to building and maintaining a healthy marriage. Sternberg argues that intimacy is primarily an affective experience, despite the fact that intimate relationships are bound to wax and wane in emotional intensity over time. It is the positive feelings of love, affection and warmth that marriage partners express to each other that build intimacy and continually enhance the awareness that what transpires between them is healthy and desirable (Prager, 1995, 53, 63).

For true intimacy to flourish in their relationship, a couple must be mutually invested in working at improving the quality of their interactions and seeking greater depths of understanding. Researchers suggest that there are three relational qualities that are necessary for sustaining intimacy in marriage:



**Mutual trust and respect.** Couples need to feel totally secure in sharing their innermost thoughts, feelings, beliefs and values. They must be willing to trust and respect each other so that when they self-disclose to one another they do not fear the possibility of being judged, evaluated, ridiculed, exploited, harmed or betrayed. Intimacy never survives where there is no trust or respect.

**Availability.** Another important quality for intimate couples is the need to be emotionally available to each other, willing to mutually share hurts and joys. Being available means being open to hearing and listening to your partner's pain; to empathising with them. It means being committed to the relationship and willing to spend time building and supporting a partnership that works and that is based on friendship and companionship.

**Responsiveness.** The third quality to sustaining intimacy involves a willingness on the part of couples to mutually share at similar levels of self-disclosure and self-revelation; to respond to each other with acceptance, affection, sensitivity, and understanding; to affirm common assumptions about the relationship; and to demonstrate the ability to stand back and reflect on feedback given about one's own style of communication, and to consider the possibility of changing how one relates. Being responsive also means being willing to deal with resentment and bitterness; to forgive and heal the hurts of the past.

By embracing these qualities, couples are most likely to experience satisfying levels of intimacy and achieve what Karen Prager (1995) describes as major benefits that occur in healthy and effectively functioning relationships. The three major benefits she lists are stability, satisfaction and harmony (p. 219). Couples who successfully bond with each other will have not only attained new levels of meaningful connection but will have discovered that love is not a thing or commodity to be purchased but a way of describing a relationship that is enjoyed. They will have discovered that intimacy is really about maximum closeness with a minimum of threat.

Perhaps the prayer of the Apostle Paul for the Philippian believers is appropriate for all couples:

So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your *head* and test your *feelings* so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1: 9-11 TM, Italics supplied)

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# *Helping Couples to Connect Emotionally*

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Within every human heart there is a yearning for intimacy, a deep desire for connection with other human beings. From the moment we are born, we crave the acceptance of others; we want to feel that we are loved, that we belong and are part of community.

We were made for community and connectedness. Every one of us has an innate capacity for giving and receiving love. The way we come to think and feel about ourselves is fashioned and shaped by the way we perceive others treat us.

In our search to belong, to make connection and to experience a sense of love and intimacy in our lives, many of us turn to marriage. This is where all social connectedness between people begins. In marriage, we crave the companionship and affirmation that comes from our partner; we relish the deep and intimate connection and thrive on a companionship that embeds us in a cocoon of safety. Through giving and receiving love we generate feelings of mutual trust, loyalty and respect. Because of this, a good marriage has always been seen as the primary relationship that best satisfies our basic emotional needs and as the strongest predictor of personal happiness and wellbeing.

## **Interest in Emotional Connection in Contemporary Marriage**

Over the past fifty years, expectations regarding marriage have changed in response to the radical shift in values and beliefs that has been occurring within our societies. As a result of rapid social, economic and technological changes, individuals and couples have come to look on marriage quite differently. This revolution in marriage is what Jack Dominian (1995) calls a “shift from social to emotional aptness.” He suggests that contemporary marriages are focused not so much on “instrumentality, but on feelings and emotions,” a “companionate” relationship in marriage.

The companionate variety emphasises a male-female egalitarian partnership in which company, communication, support, healing, the exchange of feelings and sexual satisfaction are of paramount importance. It is no longer the discharge of social roles but the quality of the relationship that matters. In a vague and ill-defined way, it is love that matters. (Dominian, 1995, p. 5)

This companionate relationship is no longer just about children, families, stability, or mutual comfort. It is primarily about the quality of the relationship between a man and a woman and the strength of the emotional connections that exist between them.

Current research indicates that the main reason for the demise of most marriages is that couples had become dissatisfied with the affective quality of their relationship (Wolcott & Hughes, 1999, p. 8). Couples clearly recognized that their lack of intimacy and emotional closeness was the major contributing factor that had led to the end of their relationship. In his book *Emotional Intelligence* Daniel Goleman (1995) further suggests that we need to really understand and recognize

the important part that emotion plays in our lives. His argument is that if we cultivate and promote greater emotional intelligence by understanding and regulating our own emotions and connecting empathetically with the emotions of others as we work together with them, we will actually generate a greater sense of connection and more significantly improve the quality of our lives.

Other prominent marital researchers have recently stressed the importance of conceptualizing adult intimacy as an emotional bond and have called for marital therapists to recognize the crucial part that emotions play in intimate relationships (Johnson & Greenberg, 1994, p. 3). Emotions, they assert, are clearly a vital part of the responses that marital partners make to each other—responses that form the building blocks of interactional patterns in the marriage.

### **Emotionally Intelligent Marriages**

John Gottman's research suggests that "emotionally intelligent" marriages are those that work not because the couple are "smarter, richer, or more psychologically astute than others" but because they are "more in touch with their emotions" and better able "to understand, honor, and respect each other and their marriage" (Gottman & Silver, 1999, pp. 3, 4). Every couple, he believes, creates in their own marriage and family relationships a unique culture about emotion as they exchange positive and negative emotions. These exchanges of emotion are what he calls the "hidden emotional dynamics of marriage" or "the invisible forces that hold a marriage together or tear it apart" (Gottman, 1994, p. 26).

Furthermore, studies have clearly shown that emotion is a key to understanding the development of marital distress and dysfunction. Gottman's studies of the physiological arousal of couples in conflict have provided a very powerful argument for the primary importance of understanding and focusing on emotion in intimate relationships (Gottman & Silver, 1999, pp. 36-42).

What is clear from the research is that most attempts by individuals to control, avoid or manipulate emotion inevitably create some kind of relational problems. When people have difficulty processing, articulating, or regulating their own emotions or connecting with the emotions in others there are usually significant negative implications for the relationship. If feelings are not acknowledged, they cannot be addressed. So researchers are suggesting that a very successful way to improve troubled relationships and enhance individual functioning is to focus on working with the emotional or affective processes of the relationship.

The emotional dimension of life lies at the very heart of all relationships. Any attempt to improve the level of intimacy in a marriage must focus on the way a couple connect with each other emotionally. Our emotions are the heart and soul of who we are and they play a vital role in the processes of attachment that lead to the development, maintenance, or deterioration of our relationships. Our emotions monitor the status of our needs and goals; they drive us to get what we want and to avoid what we do not want. They profoundly influence the meaning and purpose that we attribute to our lives and our relationships. They shape our personality and serve as the connection between our beliefs, values, ideas, and feelings. It is through our emotions that we respond to others, bond with them, and communicate to them our needs and longings.

## **The High Cost of Neglecting Emotional Connection**

For far too long the part that emotions play in marriage and the development of a quality long-term marriage relationship has largely been ignored. We have completely avoided talking about the emotional realm and overlooked the whole issue of the importance and power that emotional connection plays in relationships.

What is more, the Christian church has for centuries been very suspicious of emotions and regarded them as “spoilors” that sabotage and overwhelm the intellect, creating obstacles to responsible and holy living. The church has subscribed to what some have called the “Doctrine of Rational Supremacy” which asserts that emotion and passion must be brought under the control of reason and rationality (Johnson & Greenberg, 1994, pp. 173, 174). This belief, so dominant in Christian circles, has been used to suggest that a person who acts on impulse or otherwise displays intense emotion is either irrational, eccentric or “out of their mind.”

By stressing the importance of rational decision-making in its ministry to individuals, couples, and families, the church has often failed to acknowledge the significant part that the emotional life plays in the bonding or attachment processes that form the heart of true intimacy in marriage. This comes on top of the fact that men and boys are taught by society not to show their weakness or deny their masculinity by giving expression to their emotions. Experience shows just how devastating this can be to intimacy levels in a marriage.

Many couples who attend church-run and community-run marriage education programs or marriage enrichment seminars have given evidence of just how much they are struggling to deal with the emotional side of their marriage and, as a result, failing to connect or bond effectively with their partner. Couples often know so little about their own emotions mainly because they have not learnt how to effectively identify, own, connect with and process their own emotional responses. Consequently, many relationships flounder or at best plateau or stagnate, rarely achieving a satisfying level of intimacy.

## **Taking a New Approach to Marriage Ministry: Developing Emotional Closeness**

Certainly a key strategy for improving many marriages would be for couples to learn how to develop and maintain an intimate love relationship. In particular, they need to be made aware of the crucial role of emotion in marriage and how it is the key to intimacy and connection. They need to understand how emotional closeness is developed through effective communication with one another and how they can successfully deal with the emotional component in marital conflict.

I believe that there is an urgent need for the Christian church to be more intentional in its ministry to couples. In the past, the church has not taken seriously enough the impact that social change has had upon people’s lives and the way in which individual attitudes and lifestyle practices have changed as a result. It has not sought to confront, in any real depth, the changing attitudes towards marriage and relationships in ways that approach or challenge the thought processes of the post-modern mind. It is time for the church to recognise more than ever that the subjective, pragmatic, and fragmented nature of post-modern society provides it with a wonderful opportunity to say something relevant and meaningful to couples who are looking for value and certainty in a world that has become quite uncertain and confusing.

**Helping couples develop an emotionally healthy marriage.** Over recent years I have sought to provide a marriage enrichment experience based on research and resources that both inform and educate married partners and those preparing for marriage about the processes and skills involved in building an emotionally healthy, happy, secure and stable marriage relationship. I have called this approach “Emotionally Focused Marriage Education” (EFME). EFME sees the emotional connections between marriage partners as the primary pathway through which intimacy, understanding and a sense of closeness develop in marriage. It targets emotion not only as the gateway to marital growth and development but as the most effective avenue to bringing about change in the relationship. By focusing largely on the emotional aspects of their relationship a couple are encouraged to develop an “Emotionally Intelligent Marriage.” This is achieved when the couple learn how to be more emotionally competent and responsive to each other by first being in touch with their own feelings and then being able to understand and connect with their partner at the emotional level.

EFME was inspired and shaped by the concepts developed by Susan Johnson in *Creating Connection—The Practice of Emotionally Focused Marital Therapy* (Johnson, 1996). Unlike marital therapy, EFME is not so much about directly creating changes in the marital relationship, but more about creating awareness and insight, and learning the skills necessary for marital growth and change. In this sense it is a preventative approach to marriage that helps couples generate an inner awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses and develop an understanding of how the emotional bonding process works. It also seeks to highlight ways that couples can generate powerful new emotional events and experiences.

### **Core Ideas of Emotionally Focused Marriage Education**

This emotionally-focused approach to educating people about marriage and the development of intimacy in their marital relationship is based on the following ideas and beliefs.

- ***Love and the process of emotional bonding***

The focus in EFME is on understanding adult love as the development of emotional ties or the process of attachment that develops secure bonds between two people. It seeks to understand how this process occurs and it stresses the part that emotional accessibility and responsiveness play in the building of these bonds. It also highlights the importance that the skills of empathy and validation play in creating feelings of security, comfort and connectedness for each marriage partner. It acknowledges that people actively process and construct their perceptions and experiences of themselves, the other person, and their mutual relationship through the interactions that they share together.

- ***The importance of emotion***

EFME stresses the importance of emotion as the key to fostering the creation of attachment bonds. It recognises that it is through our emotions that we discover what matters most to us and what meaning we place on particular events and experiences. This approach begins with a focus on self awareness and the need to develop emotional competence and confidence through listening to, managing and resolving one’s own feelings. It recognises that a poor self image can hold individuals back from being emotionally and spiritually alive and from contributing positively to a relationship.

EFME does not ignore or overlook the fact that attachment bonds between people consist of behavioral, cognitive and emotional elements, but chooses to make a matter of priority its focus on emotional responses. It emphasises that emotional responses and expressions constitute the primary signalling system used by intimate partners to activate and orient themselves towards each other and organise and motivate their bonding or attachment behaviors.

• ***Focus on the process of interaction***

As a way of understanding and relieving marital distress, EFME focuses on identifying the rigid and destructive interactional patterns, acknowledging and regulating negative affect, and identifying the specific emotional triggers that occur between the couple in conflict. This approach to marital distress recognizes that problems tend to be self-maintaining and occur when partners keep repeating the same old vicious cycles, disown feelings or aspects of themselves, or constructing unhelpful ways to resolve their insecurities. Emphasis is placed on creating emotional engagement by the recognition and validation of individual needs for security, protection, comfort or connection as a way of reducing distress and regulating negative emotions. Stress is also placed on creating new and more positive experiences that deepen intimacy and strengthen bonding.

• ***Investing in positive bonding experiences***

EFME highlights the need for couples to intentionally create powerful new bonding events or moments by being accessible and responsive to each other. This action constitutes the basis for building and reinforcing secure bonds. Couples are also encouraged to see the importance of developing strong social networks (community) that support personal and relational health and well being, and strengthen the level of intimacy that they experience.

## **Experience with EFME**

I have conducted the EFME program in the past few years mostly as an all-day seminar. This has the distinct advantages of keeping the cost per couple down to affordable levels especially for lower income families and requiring less time, since frequently both husband and wife are working. It also alleviates the need for couples with younger children to arrange overnight baby-sitting as required by a weekend program or retreat. I have used a longer format—a weekend retreat—but have found the one-day event to be much more popular with couples and church groups.

The actual seminar program typically features seven different one-hour segments. The segments usually have three parts:

1. A didactic or “discovery” period begins the segment.
2. An experiential exercise follows that allows each couple time to interact with one another and to explore specific issues that relate to their relationship.
3. To conclude each session a brief time is allowed for the group to discuss their observations and reactions to the assigned activity and what they found helpful and difficult about that particular exercise.

### **Session One: Warning Signs of a Marriage in Trouble**

This session outlines nine common warning signs of a marriage in trouble. A brief presentation addresses marital satisfaction and the factors that produce good, stable long-term relationships. Couples receive a check sheet to individually assess their own levels of marital satisfaction and then compare and discuss their results with their partner.

### **Session Two: Understanding Emotional Connection – the Heart of Marriage**

This section explores the biblical understanding of love and marriage and the way in which we all yearn for intimacy in relationship. It also explores how we socially construct our understanding of love. Special attention is given to the nature and purpose of marriage as a journey towards intimacy that was clearly expressed by the Creator-God when He instituted marriage at the beginning of human history. Emphasis is also given to Robert Sternberg's (1988) triangular theory of love that proposes three components—passion, intimacy and commitment. Parallels are drawn between this model and the biblical story in Genesis. Couples then explore how the process of bonding and awareness of love as attachment takes them to a deeper level of understanding about the importance of emotional connection at the heart of marriage.

### **Session Three: Communication—Key to Emotional Closeness**

Couples are invited to examine the way in which their process of communication contributes to emotional closeness and marital intimacy. It highlights the importance of active listening, empathy and validation. Couples are challenged to discover how effective they are at listening to each other's feelings by engaging in a series of exercises that enables them to practise their active listening skills and give feedback to each other on the feelings expressed behind the words and the story shared. Feelings are seen as the gateway to connection and understanding.

### **Session Four: Identifying Your Style of Conflict Management**

This session helps couples investigate how they deal with their differences. Frequently, couples rate this as the session in which they gain the most helpful amount of insight into their relationship. Using a grid that features the five major styles outlined by Thomas and Kilmann (1974) in their "Conflict Mode Instrument," couples identify the dominant style they tend to use in their marital relationship. They then discuss four questions in groups: where they learnt this style, what they like about this style, what they dislike about this style, and how they might like to change the way they currently manage conflict in their relationship. When the individual groups share their responses to the questions, much insight and learning occurs. Couples frequently reflect on the significant role that emotion and feeling play in maintain recurring cycles of conflict and how negative affect and its management influences and drives each style.

### **Session Five: Conflict—the Gateway to Intimacy**

Most couples have never been taught how to deal with their anger and conflict. They don't have a model for dealing with differences. They have learnt simply by observation and tend to adopt or react to conflict in ways they saw as they were growing up. Yet research has clearly shown that marital distress is related to the way couples deal with their differences and resolve the marital



problems that develop, particularly as one or both of them feel flooded by negative emotions and trapped in narrow, negative interactional patterns that constrict and contain conflict and regulate feelings of fear and rejection (Johnson, 1996, pp. 1, 3).

This segment explores how to understand and manage anger and provides couples with a simple seven-step process for successfully dealing with conflict in their relationship. It highlights the importance of first recognising the feelings and emotion being expressed, then confidently and assertively handling the issue with honesty and fairness. Dealing effectively with conflict truly becomes the gateway to deeper levels of intimacy, understanding and connection.

Couples are given time alone to explore a specific conflict issue by using their active listening skills and the model process outlined to reach resolution or reconciliation of their differences. Time is provided for group discussion of what was helpful or difficult in trying this approach to conflict resolution.

### **Session Six: Sexual Intimacy and Satisfaction**

Sexual intimacy reflects the commitment and emotional bonding that couples experience with one another and symbolises the sense of unity, interdependence, pleasure, communion and creativity that they aspire to achieve. This emotional connection transforms an impersonal biological process into an act of love and provides the grounds for intimacy in the marriage (Keleman, 1982, pp. 15, 18, 19).

Couples in this segment discuss the role and function of sex in their marriage and explore male and female difference in the sexual response cycle. Emphasis is given to the emotional aspects of sexual intimacy and how to achieve greater satisfaction in their marital relationship. Time is given for couples to negotiate changes in their current relationship and affirm those things that work for them and bring ongoing satisfaction.

### **Session Seven: How to Keep Love Alive**

The final session outlines biblical guidelines and practical suggestions for increasing intimacy in marriage and summarizes the key points outlined and experienced throughout the day. A number of positive strategies are given that assist couples to recognise and prevent marital burnout and achieve optimal levels of intimacy in their marital relationship.

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# *Tell It to Your Children*

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Recently, I visited a certain country for the first time. Entering one of its cities, my attention was drawn repeatedly to huge posters hanging everywhere. These large posters all featured the same person, the national leader, an individual who was celebrating several decades of rule in that country. As I arrived at one of the educational institutions, I saw the same picture again—in every classroom—of the national leader and his wife. When I inquired about this man, I learned how highly respected, honored and loved he is by his people. To hear how the people love their leader and his family, to see the many things they do in order that each citizen and visitor like me can learn about him and the country over which he rules—this had a profound impact on my thinking.

As a Christian Seventh-day Adventist parent and educator, I ask myself: What should I be teaching, what should all educators be teaching—to all students—that each one may learn about our heavenly King Jesus, His kingdom, and His soon return to establish His kingdom forever?

The prophet Daniel provides an answer. Daniel 7:9, 10, 13, 14 identifies fundamental truths that students need to learn, to love, and to incorporate into their lives about the King of Kings and His kingdom. In these they can place their hope.

“As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened. . . .

“I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:9, 10, 13, 14).

*As I meditated on Daniel’s words, I came to the conclusion that parents in the home and teachers in Christian schools should help every student, every son and daughter, all sons and daughters of Christ, to come to know about and commit themselves to the Heavenly King.*

## **A Focused Lifestyle**

Our lifestyle must be focused on the will of God the Father and Jesus the Son in every possible way. At the end of the road of life, whether it be in one year, five or ten, life will only

have meaning through the Almighty God, the one Daniel called “the Ancient of Days” (Daniel 7:9), and His Son Jesus, “the Son of man” (Daniel 7:13)—the King of Kings, the “author of eternal salvation” (Hebrews 5:9).

A question for parents and Christian teachers to reflect upon is: What do my children and students learn through my voice about God the Father and Jesus the Son? I find great encouragement in Jochebed’s teaching of her son Moses. Before he could face life’s challenges, she knew he must worship God the Creator.

Knowing that her child must soon pass beyond her care, to the guardianship of those who knew not God, she the more earnestly endeavored to link his soul with heaven. She sought to implant in his heart love and loyalty to God. And faithfully was the work accomplished. Those principles of truth that were the burden of his mother’s teaching and the lesson of her life, no after influence could induce Moses to renounce. (White, *Education*, p. 61).

### **Filled with Hope and Passion**

We must develop hope and passion as citizens of the kingdom of God. An everlasting truth that parents and teachers need to repeat to students is that to Jesus, “the Son of man,” has been given an everlasting dominion. His kingdom shall never be destroyed. We should endeavor to guide students to develop a vision, a hope, a passion of being in that congregation of saints when God establishes His everlasting Kingdom. As the Book of Daniel portrays, no matter how powerful earthly kingdoms seem today, the day will come when they will no longer be in existence.

The final destiny of earthly kingdoms is illustrated by King David in Psalm 73. Here he wonders how it is that the wicked, who do not fear God, who do no good, always seem to prosper. “When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny” (Psalm 73:16, 17). The progress of these oppressive powers would only be for a short time, then they would be no more. It will be the same with all earthly kingdoms; they will come to an end and the Ancient of days will establish His kingdom forever.

The constant challenge to Christian parents and teachers is to keep alive the Blessed Hope that we await this kingdom. It is ours to learn about it and to live in harmony with the promise of it in our hearts. Course content, meditations, reflections, all aspects of our Christian education enterprise should help students to picture themselves among those who will receive the Lord at His second coming and dwell with Him in His kingdom. Nothing is more important to achieve, nothing is of higher priority in our education program than this.

*As I reflect on this, I ask myself: What adjustments do I need to make in my home, in my life, and in my classrooms as a Christian parent and teacher?*

### **Prepared to Stand**

We must prepare to stand with the multitudes in the presence of God. As Daniel 7: 9 says, “Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.” A

teacher's major aim in education must be to encourage students that one day they will be there. As the Psalmist states, "my eyes are ever on the Lord" (Psalm 25:15). Different writers express the same vision and hope:

- John, the disciple of Jesus who was later isolated at the island of Patmos, visualized the beautiful scene of those standing before the throne (Revelation 14:5).

- Luke, researcher and admirer of Jesus, reminds us, "Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:36).

- King Jehoshaphat, during the time of trouble for his people, brought all Judah—young and old, male and female—as one body to stand "before the Lord" (2 Chronicles 20:13).

- King Nebuchadnezzar, great emperor of the past, wanted the Lord's faithful followers—Daniel and his friends—to prepare themselves to stand before him (Daniel 1:5). However, Daniel made clear to him that there is only one King before whom he and his friends would stand. He is the King of Kings, whose kingdom will stand for ever.

*As I reflect on this giant challenge of helping young people to respond to Christ that they may stand before God, my prayer is: Lord please help me and use me as your instrument to be there at your return, along with my loved ones and students.*

### **Assured of Judgment Day Coming and of His Keeping Power**

Teachers must teach students about the day of the Lord, the Judgment Day (Daniel 7:10). The final test of the world will be given by God Himself. This age has its levels of accountability, its standards and policies, an established decision-making process. All these are man-made. Yet God's Judgment Day will be a time of testing and evaluation of all humanity. The criteria for this day of accountability—the great Judgment Day—are established in the Word of God. Yet those who believe, He will keep in the hour of trial. As is found in Revelation 3:10, "Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth."

*As I reflect on this day, I pray and ask the Lord that His promises may shield me and my students in that moment. I see the need to help my students learn about God's provision for this occasion, and by faith thrust in God for His deliverance.*

### **Bonded with God the Father and Jesus the Son**

The education of young people, whether at home or at school, should encourage students in developing their bond with God the Father and Jesus the Son (cf. Philippians 1:13). Part of the mission of those of us who work with the young is to minister to them that their name may be written in the Lamb's book of life (Daniel 12:1).

As I share these ideas of the challenges of teaching and parenting youth in the age of knowledge, technology, information, accountability, relativity, of globalization in economy and

rapid changes, I'm reminded that Daniel predicted these would come to pass in the end time (Daniel 12): "Many will go here and there to increase knowledge" (vs. 4); "Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked" (vs.9); "None of the wicked will understand, *but those who are wise will understand* (vs.10). *Those who are wise will shine as the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever* (Daniel 12:3, Emphasis added).

As I reflect on these words, I want to encourage each one to continue in the line of the "wise" who minister to all our youth and loved ones to watch and be ready, for the time of the end is near.

Again, the challenges before are:

1. Focus our lifestyle on the will of God the Father and Jesus the Son in all accounts.
2. Develop hope and passion as a citizen in the kingdom of God.
3. Prepare students to stand before God upon His return.
4. Teach students about the day of the Lord, the "Judgment Day".
5. Encourage all students to develop a "bond with God the Father and Jesus, the Son" (Philippians 1:13), so that their names may be written in the Book of life in heaven today.

The prophet Joel reminds me of my sacred mission as a Christian parent and teacher: "Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation" (Joel 1:3). My prayer is that the Lord may empower us to be a blessing for all, that we can meet each loved one around the throne of the Ancient of Days, and Christ His Son.

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## *It's About Love*

by Karen & Ron Flowers

Estrangement in families hurts. Whenever upheaval rocks a household, thrusting its members apart, shockwaves are launched that shake all in the vicinity. The reverberations often resound across generations, with children and grandchildren impacted by family troubles of which they may not even be aware.

Every family experiences garden-variety problems that can usually be quite readily resolved. Some face dire threats to their family relationships in the wake of crushing betrayals of trust like adultery, incest and family violence. Others struggle for years with the fallout of resentment and bitterness: Brothers separated for a lifetime over perceived unfairness in the property distribution of their dead father's will. Children forbidden to speak to certain relatives because of vicious rumors a generation old. Family reunions brought to an abrupt end because a widowed mother remarries. Stony silence between father and daughter after he boycotts her wedding. Husband and wife sleeping apart—he accusing her of infidelity, she protesting innocence. Some of these tragedies are open to public view, with relatives, friends, and even fellow church members drawn into the fray. Others are cloaked in secrecy, the family silently enduring their pain behind a façade of normalcy.

We recall the day our sons bore the sad news home from school that the mom of one of their little classmates had left town, leaving him and his daddy behind. All she said was she didn't want to be a mother or a wife anymore. She never came back. For those of us looking on, it was all so sudden, so unexpected, so antithetical to the picture-perfect family we thought we knew. The jolt shook the community of faith as well as the neighborhood. Even as relatives, friends, and neighbors offered their support to this family, tremors of anxiety coursed through them. If it could happen to that family, could it happen to us? There was much introspection as we each looked to our own household.

God is no stranger to fractured family circles. Scripture is replete with stories of family members fighting, scheming, disowning, deceiving, depriving, and even destroying each other. Think of the sad narratives of the murder of Abel by his brother Cain, the lifelong animosity between Jacob and Esau, the betrayal of Joseph by his brothers, Amnon's brutal violation of his sister Tamar, Absalom's conspiracy against his father David, and Jesus' anecdote of an elder son who wouldn't welcome a prodigal brother returned home. Scripture preserves these stories to help us see that family disruption today is but an extension of age-old family maladies. God's redemptive activity in Christ is directed to these very kinds of sins. Jesus' prayer encapsulates His desire for all such families: "That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21).

What is it that holds a family together? What goes so very wrong that it can cause a family to scatter in fragments, like shards of rubber on a highway when tread flies off a truck tire? Is there hope that families so badly shattered can be restored, or is the children's rhyme true of families too: "All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again."?

## **The Missing Ingredient**

Having grown up with the 4-H Club, Ron enjoys an evening at the county fair as much as anyone does. Because his dad kept horses, Ron always gravitates toward the horse-pulling contest. Individual teams of horses take turns trying to drag a flat, weighted sled the greatest distance.

The last time we watched, one pair of mighty draft horses seemed certain to win. However, to the onlookers' surprise, the overwhelming combined strength of this team was completely squandered as first one and then the other jerked at the load. Despite their driver's urging, they couldn't move the load far. Other teams fared better.

Then the smallest horses entered in the contest were hitched to the heavy stone-drag. A titter ran through the crowd: What could this diminutive team possibly do? The crowd fell silent as the driver clucked and the muscles of the horses' shoulders, backs, and legs grew taut as tested the weight. The chains strained. Then, as if some unspoken cue passed between them, they pulled in unison matching step to sure step. Slowly they hauled the sled forward. In a few seconds, the victory distance was theirs. The scene certainly conveyed a powerful illustration of what unity can accomplish.

Of course, human beings are not animals. Family unity and harmony do not spring from habit and conditioning, but from the hearts of family members. So what is the heart ingredient that makes the difference?

A couple once asked to talk to us in a last-ditch effort to save their marriage. We quickly detected the absence of warmth and caring between them. They kept their appointments, but they did little of the reading and the practical "doables" to which they agreed at the end of each session. And the sought-after warmth never came. In its place there grew an ever more perceptible indifference—a malaise of callous coldness and insensitivity filling the void where kindness, understanding, and love should have been. We later learned that this couple had divorced.

Someone has said that the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. Strange as it may seem, the presence of hatred in a relationship yields a more hopeful prognosis for growth than a diagnosis of indifference. The expression of even a strong negative emotion signals that attachment still exists. Indifference indicates that the relationship is running on empty.

Karen's brother Les is quite the gourmet cook. Everyone looks forward to his roasted garlic tomatoes at Christmastime. Last year, Karen had run out of extra-virgin olive oil, so Les tried to make do with what she had on hand. It soon became clear, however, that there's no substitute. In families, there's no making do without love. It's the only glue that stands a chance of putting "Humpty Dumpty" families back together again.

We're not thinking of romantic love, nor even the friendship kind of love, though both will be present in a healthy marriage. At the foundation of all love lies a caring attitude, a mindset that accepts and respects every person. It is a love that moves people to celebrate together in the good times and, in times of distress, to provide strength, empathy, and support. Such love is like soil nutrients to a plant. When the nutrients are present, the plant thrives; when they are absent, the plant withers and eventually dies.



## **A Fundamental Human Need**

Years ago, a wise Christian child psychologist suggested an important question that is basic to understanding problematic behavior: “I wonder why he [or she] does that?” The question reflects her understanding that, often, inner needs drive outward behavior. In our dealings with one another in the family, this question encourages us to look beyond the problem to consider whether there is a fundamental human need that, if met, might go a long way toward correcting the misbehavior.

One day when I (Karen) was working as a volunteer at a nearby Christian school, a teacher showed me a note written by a small boy who had the reputation of being perpetually in trouble. Hardly a day passed, it seemed, when his desk wasn't pulled up by the teacher's to keep him on task, or when he didn't get into a fight on the playground. Some of the faculty pressed for strong disciplinary measures, perceiving his naughtiness as a challenge to authority that demanded a firm response. Others agreed that misbehavior must come with consequences, but that it reflected problems in the family that were affecting the boy.

The teacher told me that after one particularly exasperating day, she was praying for her students. As she called up the little boy's face in her mind, she saw the sadness in his eyes as never before. She made a decision that night to try to think of him not as a bad little boy who made her job difficult but as a hurting little boy with more worries than a child should have to bear. While she continued to expect him to follow classroom rules, she made a special effort to smile at him often, to give him a hug whenever she got the chance, and to affirm him for everything she could find to approve. One day after she had begun making these efforts, he left a note on her desk. Printed in a child's uneven hand, it read simply: “Dear Teacher, Thank you for loving me when I gots troubles. I gots so much troubles. Love, Jon.”

It is true that sin has filled the human heart with selfishness. But there is another truth that can also help us understand the human condition and the behaviors that arise from this heart-sickness. This truth recognizes more than the selfishness that fills the fallen human heart. It perceives that the sin-sick heart is also empty, drained of the love for which it yearns because the connection with God who is Love is broken. As much as the heart needs to be emptied of selfishness, it needs to be filled with love.

Difficult people tend to bring out the worst in us. Their unpleasant qualities easily prompt reactions of cold silence, anger, and retaliation. We want to change them, so we lecture, argue, threaten, punish, ignore, or even cut off relationships all together. But Jesus sees beyond their unloveliness to the emptiness of their hearts. The words of the prophet Samuel describe Him well: “‘Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart’ ” (1 Samuel 16:7). Jesus saw people as “bruised reeds” bent to the point of breaking in the wind, and “smoldering wicks” with the life nearly snuffed out (Matthew 12:20). Rather than destroying the reeds and extinguishing the wicks, He sought to bind them up and to fan the flickering flame back to life again.

Jesus' love proved to be a most powerful change agent. It rescued the fickle Peter from despair and transformed him into a steadfast leader. It inspired the no-longer promiscuous Mary to mingle costly perfume with her tears in gratitude. It changed the contentious, power-hungry John into a gentle pastor who could write, “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11). No less today, we need what Teresa Whitehurst has called Jesus'

“heartseeing” vision—His capacity to see beyond frustrating behavior to the fundamental human need for love.

*Agapē* is the kind of love Jesus willed for us in His prayer. Such love is the essence of God’s very nature (1 John 4:8). It is a radically different love from any that human beings can generate on their own. This high and lofty love toward which we stretch has the following qualities:

*Unconditional.* God’s love is spontaneous. It flows from Him unconditionally, irrespective of human goodness and worth. The natural human heart offers love in exchange for something it wants. This love is conditional, dependent on returns, always attached to an “if.” Paul captured the contrast when he wrote, “For a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:7, 8; cp. Ephesians 2:4-9).

*Unchangeable.* God’s love is everlasting, unfailing, and constant (John 12:1; Romans 8:35-39; 1 Corinthians 13:8), while the affections of the human heart are changeable, fluctuating, and unreliable. Human love inevitably breaks down when severely tested. At the Last Supper, Peter declared his love for Jesus: “I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.” Hours later, his love failed under the strain of accusation and fear (Luke 22:33, 57-62).

*Self-giving.* God’s love gives, serves, benefits and uplifts others (John 3:16; 1 Corinthians 13:5). “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16). Human love is preoccupied with self, primarily concerned with self-interest (Philippians 2:21; 2 Timothy 3:2; 1 John 2:15, 16). Jesus’ parable of the praying Pharisee plainly unmasks this fatal human flaw: “ ‘The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get” ’ ” (Luke 18:11, 12).

### **Jesus: Love Embodied**

John 3:16 is the gospel in a nutshell: “ ‘God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.’ ” The universe stood in awe as God reached out with agape love to a rebel world. Then, in the grandest finale ever, God presented Himself—the very embodiment of this love—in human flesh so that we might know Him as He is.

The Gospels record the story of Love walking in our midst. We follow Him, through the testimony of real people like ourselves who felt Love’s touch. We witness the gruesome pain and agony Love bore for us, the anguish suffered as Love became the object of God’s curse—all for love. We stand by John at the foot of the cross and hear the echo of Christ’s words: “ ‘Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends’ ” (John 15:13). Ellen White speaks for Christians of all times when she wrote, “When you appreciate His wondrous love, love and gratitude will be in your heart as a wellspring of joy.”<sup>1</sup> It is hard to imagine any other response.

The life and death of Christ are, however, more than simply an awesome display of love. “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19). Christ brought a change in the status of humankind before God. From the first announcement of His birth, the good news rang out. In Him, a state of peace is restored between earth and heaven. God’s favor once again rests on humankind. At the Jordan, God Himself spoke: “This is

My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” With Christ our Representative, we are all His sons and daughters in whom He is well pleased. Christ moved humankind from condemnation to justification (Romans 5:18). God has done everything He could do for our salvation. The call of the gospel is to accept this reconciliation and be at peace with Him (Romans 5:1; 2 Corinthians 5:20; Colossians 1:21-23).

But the good news doesn't end there. Paul goes on to declare that through Christ's crucifixion, all humanity has been reconciled to one another (Ephesians 2:13-16). Peace and oneness among all peoples, including our families, have become spiritual realities in Christ. “God *made* reconciliation . . . In God's eternal purpose the death of Christ brought the death of alienation—not only between God and man but between man and man.”<sup>2</sup> “Because we are one with God, we are also one with each other.”<sup>3</sup> God calls us to make that spiritual reality our own and to walk in that oneness by living together according to the principles of Christ's kingdom.

In his monumental work *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer shows how Christ stands between us as our great Center: “Since the coming of Christ, his followers have no more immediate realities of their own, not in their family relationships . . . nor in the relationships formed in the process of living. Between father and son, husband and wife . . . stands Christ the Mediator, whether they are able to recognize him or not. We cannot establish direct contact outside ourselves except through him, through his word, and through our following of him.”<sup>4</sup>

A wonderful new spiritual reality exists, Jesus Himself connects us. We are like spokes on a wheel with Him as the Hub. We can come together and find community only in Him—as a family, as a church, as a global village. We do not put Christ in His central position; we can only acknowledge it, follow Him, and reap the blessings of unity that come from the station He holds as our Mediator, on earth as well as in heaven.

### **The Fruits of Love**

Love is the hallmark that distinguishes Jesus' followers (John 13:35). This love does not spring naturally from ourselves but will flood our hearts as Jesus abides there through His Spirit. He prayed that it might be so—“that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them” (John 17:26). And a braided cord of believers stands with Paul to testify to God's lavish response: “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Romans 5:5). Christ's love in our hearts is the key to the love and unity that mark us as His disciples: “The cause of division and discord in families and in the church is separation from Christ. To come near to Christ is to come near to one another. The secret of true unity in the church and in the family is not diplomacy, not management, not a superhuman effort to overcome difficulties—though there will be much of this to do—but union with Christ. . . . The closer we come to Christ, the nearer we shall be to one another.”<sup>5</sup>

The agape love of God in our hearts ushers in new attitudes of caring for others. We once knew a sister in one of our churches whose weekly petition at prayer meeting echoed the same refrain, “Lord, make us tolerant of one another.” After we were members of that church for awhile, we understood the utter urgency of her request of God. Behind the scenes lay a lot of narrow-mindedness and dissention.

But God's love calls us beyond tolerance. Paul, in fact, urges believers: “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love” (Romans 12:10)—literally, “with brotherly love to one another loving

dearly.” “Loving dearly” translates two words *philos* and *storgē*, which typically describe fondness and affection in families and close relationships. In effect, Paul was saying, “Be fond of one another; *like* each other.” That can surely be a challenge. But when Christian homes and congregations become settings where fondness and caring draw people together, others will seek their warmth and come in out of the cold.

When our sons came home from school that day bringing the sad news about the mother who abandoned her family, we sensed that unspoken worries might well lurk within them. So we wanted to do something that would signal our own commitment to stay together. That evening for family worship we took our then fifteen-year-old wedding photo album off the shelf and summoned our boys to sit with us on our sofa. With our arms around each other, we paged through it and smiled with them at the young couple and all the happenings depicted on the pages. And there, before our sons, we pledged ourselves to each other again.

“How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along!” wrote the Psalmist (Psalm 133:1, TM). God’s love can make it happen. With His love in our hearts, we can live the love we promise.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1923), 304.

<sup>2</sup> Robert S. Folkenberg, “Diversity and the Divine Experiment” in Delbert Baker (ed.), *Make Us One* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1995), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Caleb Rosado, “Challenges of Change and the Church Mission” in Delbert Baker (ed.), *Make Us One* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1995), 46.

<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York, NY: The MacMillan Company, 1963), 108.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1952), 179.

## *Are You Blaming Yourself for Your Prodigal?*

Name Withheld

The author is writing anonymously to protect her daughter's privacy.

My husband and I have experienced the reality of knowing that “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (John 3: 4). Our two daughters professed Christ at an early age, witnessed in their schools, traveled on mission trips, and embarked into adult life with a passion for Christ. Our family life has been built around joy and laughter, and even through our girls' teen years, we enjoyed close family times backpacking and ministering together here and abroad. The girls have been characterized as leaders, constantly encouraging and challenging those around them to live their Christian beliefs.

It always brought us great joy, knowing that our children were walking in the truth. Then one bought into a lie. Now we see the flip side to the above verse; there is no greater sorrow than seeing your children walk in a lie. Since our daughter's ungodly choice, we have grieved for the loss of our close family relationships, for our witness in our community and family, over the eventual consequences of her decisions, and even grieved that God would allow this to happen. Our joy, peace, energy, and focus have been drained and replaced with despair, anger, fatigue, and distractedness. We have been plagued by questions. How could this happen? What should we do? What would influence her? How should we respond? Our close family was thrown into crisis: joy turned to sorrow, and lies were twisted truth. The parable of the prodigal son has become a real and personal journey with a precious, yet prodigal, daughter.

At one point in this heavy journey, I had a mental picture of us facing our prodigal daughter, she standing with her back to us. We were pleading and begging for her to turn around, to listen to God's Word, and to recognize the lies. Then the focus shifted. God was standing behind me, my back turned to Him, and He was calling me to turn around and recognize the lies. God was trying to get *my* attention while I was trying to get my daughter's attention. Her lies were different from mine. But nonetheless I had also been ensnared by lies. God was pleading with me to recognize and accept His truth in my own life.

God's truth needs to be sorted from the enemy's lies. I cannot allow my daughter's actions to *define* me, but I can, through God's help, allow them to *refine* me. Through godly counsel and His Word, the truth is being sifted from the enemy's subtle and pervasive lies. The refinement process is not complete, but I have identified, examined, and discarded the following lies:

### **What if?**

The enemy loves to get us into the “what if” blame game. What if I had been more persuasive? What if I had counseled her with more studied words? What if I had been more discerning? What if I had just been a better mom? I was consumed with analyzing every nuance over the past years, reviewing my interactions and questioning my role as both mother and wife. My analytical thoughts became paralyzing, and I spiraled downward into a pit of remorse and inadequacy. Slowly, I began to see that it was not all about me. My

eloquence or lack of it, my parenting skills or lack of them, will not ultimately change a heart. That is the Holy Spirit's job. I can be obedient to God's direction. I can do the best I can in parenting and counseling. But the ultimate work is God's. My pleas will not bring a prodigal into right thinking, right living, or right decisions. Our daughter made this choice in spite of Scripture, godly models, and counsel, and she will also reap the consequences of her choice. Ezekiel 18:20 reminds us that "the son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him." I can neither accept the blame nor take the credit. The "what ifs" must cease because they are not from God.

### **Parent well and your child will not make ungodly choices**

When my daughter turned away from her firm foundation, I questioned how this could happen to *my* family. Subconsciously and incorrectly, I presumed that Proverbs 22:6 — "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" — guaranteed a child's godly choices. Through my own heartache, the Lord showed me that I have wrongly judged others and their parenting abilities. I thought if someone had a child not walking with the Lord, it was always a direct reflection on their parenting skills. Now on the other side with a wayward daughter, I realize the lie and repent of my judgment of others. Godly parenting does not guarantee a godly child.

### **My prodigal adult child disqualifies me for ministry**

One of the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3:4 for an overseer is to "manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect." This does not refer to adult children. But Satan wants to fuel our insecurities, point out our inadequacies,

and cripple our ministries. Instead of stepping out of ministry, we should step up to be used by God. The more open and transparent we are in our parenting journey, the more dependent we are on Him for strength, and the more opportunities there will be for us to minister. Answering concerned inquiries about our daughter has allowed us to be open to those sharing similar burdens. One embarrassing instance of addressing pointed questions at a neighborhood party resulted in a phenomenal opportunity to share God's truth. Leadership is not about being perfect — it is about being humbly obedient and available. Transparency and vulnerability can make us better servant ministers.

### **God is powerless to intervene**

Somewhere in this extended battle, I crossed the line from believing God *would not* act to believing God *could not* act. I fell prey to the lie that God could not change our daughter's mind or way. My personal systematic theology had me spinning in circles around God's sovereignty and the free will of man. The Lord has chosen to not answer my fervent prayers to radically intervene in our daughter's life. Since faith and hope are intricately entwined, I used to feel hopeless. My view of God was too small. I still do not understand how God's sovereignty and free will work, but I have become convinced that God is so much bigger than we can ever imagine. He can and will intervene if He so chooses. This mom needs to trust more, worry less, and stop trying to figure everything out. He is God and I am not! My God, our God, is a God of hope that fills us with all joy and peace as we trust in Him (Romans 15:13), and He is more than able to do great things.

This mother's journey in parenting a prodigal is far from over. The hurt and sadness are still very real. But as the Lord has revealed the insidiousness of the enemy's lies, the burden has become more manageable. Now I can focus on what I am learning instead of on what

my daughter should be learning. This was reiterated during a recent visit. We were scheduled to rendezvous with our precious prodigal after church. The sermon was unexpectedly relevant: “Grace Demands a Death.” The pastor pointed out that if we are to extend grace as Christ did, we must also experience death. As parents, we need to die to our dreams, our desires, and our expectations for our children. We need to love them unconditionally, expecting nothing in return. Still stirred from this poignant message, we exited the church building and saw our daughter standing on the far side of

the parking lot. My husband *ran* to our cold, stiff daughter, standing sullenly by the car, and wrapped her in a warm, loving hug. That was our best visit to date! My hope has been renewed; He is restoring my soul. Like Habakkuk, I will wait and keep watch from the ramparts to see what the Lord will do. God is in control, and He loves us and our prodigals dearly.

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# Coming Home

by Richard Rice

If you really want to learn a language, you have to get a handle on word meanings that are hard to find in textbooks and dictionaries. When my daughter went to Collonges to study French her sophomore year in college, she had the good fortune to room with a teenager who couldn't speak English.

During the day, Allison learned the French of the classroom and the office. In the evenings, with her roommate she learned the words her teachers would never tell her. In other words, she really learned how to communicate. You know, the stuff that gets you beyond "Hello," "How are you?" "What time is it?" "Where is the train station?" and lets you express what you really think and feel.

The most basic words we use go way back to the roots of the English language, before the Norman invasion and the influx of scholarly Greek and Latin derivatives. They are solid, one-syllable Anglo-Saxon expressions like *heart* and *home*. Words like these are heavy with sentiment and emotion. Nobody sings about residences and domiciles. But there are hundreds of songs about home. And nobody sings about cardiac conditions. But we have all heard about heartaches and heartbreaks.

When Loma Linda's University's physicians performed the famous operation on Baby Fae twenty years or so ago, some people were concerned about what a baboon's heart would do to a little girl. The doctor's were quick to emphasize that the heart has no psychological function. Its purpose is purely mechanical. It's just a pump that sends blood around the body. It's a vital organ, of course, but it's not the seat of the soul.

Well, maybe not. But in spite of our anatomical insight, heart language persists. No organ in the body attracts such colorful descriptions. It is hard to talk about your emotions without using "heart" words. Hearts can be light or heavy, warm or cold, soft or hard. We do things wholeheartedly or halfheartedly. When we learn something really well, we learn it by heart. On Valentine's Day, we remember our sweetheart. And if you don't have one, you may be heartbroken.

Words like *home* and *heart* often go together, as in the familiar adage, "home is where the heart is." Jesus brought the two together in one of his last "heart-to-heart" talks with his disciples. On the night before he died, he said, "Let not your heart be troubled. I'm going to prepare a place for you, and after that I'm coming back, and I'll take you home with me."

Home and heart go together. In fact, we need homes because we have hearts.

The ninetieth Psalm was written by a man who spent the most important years of his life wandering in the wilderness of Sinai. I've been to the Sinai desert several times. It's a fascinating place to visit, but it is so barren that it makes the desert terrain of Joshua Tree National Park in southern California look like a rain forest. Yet somehow, in that wilderness Moses found a home. No, it wasn't a tent or a lean-to or a cave in a canyon. It was a person. It was God.

"Lord," said Moses, "you have been our dwelling place in all generations. From everlasting to everlasting, you are God."



Or, as Isaac Watts put it centuries later, “O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.”

What does it mean to call God a home? Well, what does it mean to call any place home? One factor is a sense of safety we have there. Home is a place of security. At least, it is supposed to be.

The summer I was eleven years old I spent most of my time hanging around with Ted, Bob, and Ronnie—a small group of friends who, like me, were going into seventh grade the following year. One hot afternoon, we were standing in the breezeway of Ted’s house trying to keep cool, when a younger boy, an annoying fourth grader who lived across the street, decided to make us his source of entertainment.

Terry walked across the street into Ted’s yard and began to tease and pester us. We chased after him, but he escaped into his house. A few minutes later, he was back, and we chased him home again. This scene repeated itself several times. Each time we got more irritated and he had more fun.

Finally, we had had it. Terry taunted us again, and again we chased him. Once again, he ran laughing up the steps to his house and into his living room, letting the screen door bang shut behind him. He assumed he would be safe. But we had discovered that his parents were gone at the time and he was all alone. So this time we didn’t stop at the front door.

We barreled right into the living room after him. And his attitude changed dramatically. We had finally managed to frighten him. He bounded up the stairs and locked himself in the second floor bathroom just before we could grab him. So we stood in the hall pounding on the door and telling him how

much worse things would be for him if he made us wait.

Suddenly, our quest for revenge was interrupted when someone urgently said, “Stop. Terry’s parent’s are back! They’re coming in though the back door.” Sure enough, they were. Then it was our turn to run. We ran down the stairs, out the front door, across the street, and into the breezeway by Ted’s house, where we stood gasping for breath.

After a few minutes, we regained our composure and laughed about the close call we had just had, when the door across the street opened once again. This time, Terry’s mother emerged, and she walked toward us with a purposeful stride. We tried to act nonchalant, as if we didn’t have the slightest idea why she wanted to talk to us. But it didn’t work. I found out later that she had been a junior high teacher in her earlier years.

Terry, she said, went into his house for protection, and we had no business following him there. After all, what did we think a home was for? It was obvious she had only heard Terry’s side of the story, so we gave her our perspective, and the conversation ended on a friendly note. But we all knew that she was right. It was OK for us to chase Terry out on the street and even into his yard. But we should never have entered his house. Home is a place where people should be secure—even obnoxious fourth-grade boys.

Home is also the place that is always open to you, no matter what. On the outside, people care about you only if you’re successful. But at home people care about you whether or not you are successful.

During my freshman year of college, I missed a quiz point in a Life and Teachings of Jesus class because I didn’t know the meaning of the

word *prodigal*, as in *prodigal son*. To be prodigal, I have remembered ever since—it is amazing what you learn from your mistakes—is to be recklessly spendthrift.

So this parable is named after the wasteful things the son did in the far country. But the real focus of the story is not on what happened when he left, but what happened when he returned. In other words, it is a parable of homecoming. Its bold and brilliant message is this: you *can* go home again.

The prodigal son went to the far country with a lot of money and came back with nothing. His friends lasted as long as his money did. And when it ran out, so did they. Finally, with nowhere else to go, he went home. And as Robert Frost put it, home is where, when you go there, they have to take you in. Home is a place of unconditional acceptance.

Something else that makes home what it is, is the sense of belonging it gives you. Your home is an essential part of your identity. Home is where you feel yourself, and find yourself. It's where you just fit in.

A friend of mine moved to another state years ago and faced the challenge of house hunting with his family. They looked at one place after another. They discussed the merits of this house versus the shortcomings of that house, and measured the mortgage payments against their bank account.

Their search wasn't going well until they came to one house in particular. They went their separate ways, walked through its rooms, looked out its windows, inspected the closets, and surveyed the yard. When the four of them went back to the car, they climbed inside, looked at each other, and all of them said, "This is it. Our search is over. This is home."

They realized that this was the place where life could go right on for all of them. Home is the place where you know you belong.

If we think of home in terms of security, acceptance, and belonging, we can see why Moses described God as our eternal home, our dwelling place in all generations. Only in God do we find a permanent source of security, acceptance, and belonging. After all, when it gets down to it, it's not where you are, it's who you're with that makes a home.

Arthur Maxwell tells the story of a little girl whose father had returned from overseas and was looking for a place to settle with his wife and daughter.

During this time, someone asked the girl, "Where do you live?"

"We don't have a place to live right now," she said.

"Oh, you don't have a home?" the questioner repeated.

"We do have a home," the girl replied, "we just don't have a house to put it in."

The idea that we can be truly at home in this world, that we have a heavenly companion from whom nothing can separate us, faces some real obstacles today. The thought that we have a cosmic friend who is always there for us, eager to meet our needs and give us strength and comfort, is a beautiful sentiment. But the more we learn about the world we live in, the less like a home it seems to be.

There's a famous picture of the earth taken from a position 3.7 billion miles away as Voyager 1 sped towards the edge of the solar system fifteen or sixteen years ago. Our

planet, this third rock from the sun, is so hard to spot in the middle of a vast sea of lights that they put a box round it to identify it.

In response to this dramatic photograph, Carl Sagan made this observation: “Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.”

Sagan’s words echo those of another noted scientist, Jacques Monod, a Nobel Prize winning biologist. At the end of *Chance and Necessity*, a book on the genetic code, Monod asserts, “Man knows at last that he is alone in the universe’s unfeeling immensity, out of which he emerged only by chance. His destiny is nowhere spelled out, nor is his duty.”

Cosmology and biology seem to agree. We are utterly alone. There is no purpose for our existence. There is no hope for the future. Our cosmic environment is utterly indifferent to our existence.

As Steven Weinberg put it, “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.” There is no home for the human in this universe. There is no security, acceptance, and belonging here.

So is there any evidence that we are at home in the universe?

I’ve taught philosophy of religion many times over the past thirty-two years, and I enjoy studying and talking about the great arguments that philosophers have constructed to demonstrate the existence of God. Some thinkers appeal to the intricacy and complexity of the universe. Others argue that everything in the universe depends on something else, so

there must be Something or Someone outside the universe who created it and keeps it going.

But the strongest evidence of all is the evidence of the human heart. “Thou hast made us for thyself,” said Saint Augustine, “and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee.” Is there a home for the heart? That is the great question of life. The best way to answer is not to seek it in the world around us, but to explore the world within. Because it is here, in the profound depths of our experiences, in our deepest joys, our darkest fears, our greatest anguish, and our most fervent desires, that we will finally encounter God. God is the heart’s true home.

Years ago, my wife and I drove up to Pine Springs Ranch to pick up our son at the end of the first junior camp he ever attended. There wasn’t much water at the ranch that summer and it was clear that none of it had reached him. He was bursting with stories about all the things that had happened during the week. He told us about the nature center, the bicycle races, the boys in his cabin, the horse he rode, and so on.

It was clear that we had missed him a great deal more than he had missed us. So I guess for reassurance, we asked him if he ever got homesick. “No,” he said, “but one of the boys in my cabin did. You know,” he continued, “until my counselor explained it to us, I thought being homesick was just like being carsick or having a cold. I didn’t realize that it just meant feeling lonely.”

“Just feeling lonely” may not sound like much of a problem, but when you are homesick, deep inside, you know it can hurt more than any physical affliction.

To find a home is to find a place where you really belong. Bailey Gillespie and I began leading study tours to the Middle East and southern Europe in 1983, and we have

returned almost every year since. Our guide in Greece for a number of years was a young woman who lives in Athens, the capital of the country. She is thoroughly urbanized and modernized, in every way a woman of the world. But she once described what it would be like for her to return to the little village where she grew up. She said the people there would recognize her as someone they once knew, but to be sure they would ask her this question—whose are you? In Greek villages to this day, a woman's identity is determined not by asking her, "Who are you?" but by asking, "Whose are you?"

To whom do you belong? Who has a claim on you? A man has identity in his own right. But a woman is always connected to a man—either to her father, or to her husband.

We may not appreciate the politics, but there's

a wonderful spiritual lesson here. Finding the heart's true home is not a matter of location. It's not where you are, it's who you're with. And it's not a matter of identity, it's a matter of relationship. So much has happened to some of us over the decades that we may have to ask each other, "Now, who are you? And what have you been doing?"

Those are important questions, but not the most important. The vital question is not Who are you? but Whose are you? God is the heart's true home. And if you belong to Him, then you'll always be at home, no matter where you live or what you do.

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## *Lessons From a Loving Couple*

by Karen and Ron Flowers

The pleasantly pungent scent and smoke of incense drifts toward the sky, mingling with the dust churned up along the crowded processional route. The royal carriage porters, their muscles straining, march with even cadence while on their shoulders they bear their regal cargo. An elite armed escort, 60 men strong, clears the way ahead and guards the flanks and rear. Praises and hosannas fill the air as eager spectators stretch on tiptoe to see His Majesty King Solomon and to glimpse the shy, deeply tanned Lebanese bride beside him. At the appointed wedding site, all the eyes of Jerusalem rest upon the youthful couple as they make their marriage vows to each other. Unlike his many political marriages that would later tear apart his own moral fabric as well as that of his nation, this wedding is a cause for rejoicing. The queen mother waits to crown her son with the wedding coronet and give her blessing to him and his bride. Through the brief autobiographical glimpse Solomon presents in Song of Solomon 3:6-11, we too can view the festivities.

The public ceremony ended, the scene shifts. The newlyweds retire to their private chamber. To our surprise, even astonishment, the Song of Songs opens this room to us as well. The word pictures of Song of Solomon 4:1-5:1 contain the most tender and sublime scenes of human marriage that God has given in His Word—the rapture a couple find in each other.

As we realized that we were being permitted to overhear the pillow talk of a couple on their wedding night, we experienced a flood of feelings. First came disbelief at what we were reading in the Bible. Then came the joy of discovering that God has not left out this part of human experience from His Word. We were curious to read on, yet uneasy. What right did we have to be here? Was this not a most private time and place?

I recall vividly our own concerns for privacy on our wedding night. Several of my college classmates had boasted that they knew the hotel where we had made reservations and planned to pay Karen and me a visit. Not knowing for sure they knew or what prank they might be up to, we took no chances. When we left our wedding reception on the university campus where we were both students, we asked a friend in campus security to seal off the parking lot with his cruiser for a little while so that no one could follow us. While the blue lights of the campus police car guarded the exit behind us, we sped away with a trusted faculty member who chauffeured us to our secluded car. Safe thus far, we decided on one more precaution and stopped at a pay phone en route to our hotel just long enough to cancel our reservations and book a room in another hotel 30 miles further down the road. Even then, I remember being nervous, fully expecting my crafty companions to discover our whereabouts.

But the Song of Songs reveals no such nervousness. Of course, in reading the Song, we are not, as it were, bursting in like pranksters upon the couple's intimacy. God would never sanction such intrusion. But that we may behold the exquisite design of married love as it came from the hand of the Creator, the couple and yes, God Himself (who has preserved this piece of biblical literature over long centuries for us) invite us to read on. Our heavenly Father has something wonderful in store for us.

## A Discomforting Contrast

The openness and candor with which the Song addresses the intimate acts of married love may make us uncomfortable because the Song apparently disregards two commonly held convictions.

**The intermarital taboo.** First, it seemingly ignores a universal unwritten rule passed down from generation to generation that married couples do not disclose their marital experience to others. One culture will soundly beat a wife who shares the intimate details of her marriage with another. In a myriad of other corners of the earth we have sensed the awkwardness people have in finding words to ask about sexuality. The anxiety that grips couples who sense their need for help in their marriages may take days, weeks, even years to overcome.

This unwritten rule about marital disclosure, sometimes called the “intermarital taboo,” represents both a piece of God’s intent and a tragic distortion. When it represents a sacred circle that gives a family identity, security, and appropriate privacy, it is helpful. But it is harmful when it creates a wall of seclusion that traps spouses or children in hurtful relationships that could benefit from learning new relational skills. It is devastatingly destructive when it cloaks abuse. And it is sadly isolating when it deprives us all of a much-needed wider circle of companionship and support. We can testify that some of the moments in which our marriage has grown the most have occurred in the presence of other couples who felt the freedom to share the workings of God in their married lives so that others might find the courage to pursue their own journey toward oneness.

**Sex and spirituality don’t mix.** The sexually explicit themes of the Song go against yet another deeply ingrained conviction—that sex and spirituality are incompatible. While sexual intercourse for procreation is obviously a necessity, many suffer from a lingering worry that sexual pleasure between husbands and wives may violate a thoroughgoing holiness. Once we read to a marriage enrichment group one of our favorite quotations about the holiness of physical married love. “Angels of God will be guests in the home, and their holy vigils will hallow the marriage chamber.”<sup>21</sup> One wife across the circle immediately became visibly agitated. Cupping her hand to her mouth, she exclaimed, “Oh, no!” Little did we imagine the pain that hid behind her gesture. Privately the couple later shared with us their agony. At the heart of their struggle lay voices from her childhood. Sex, her background had drilled into her, was only for having babies. And really good Christians must put away sexual activity in preparation for translation. Imagine her distress when she thought she heard us saying that angels were checking up on her!

This contrast between the Song and what is socially and religiously acceptable has disturbed religious people as far back as we have record. Over the centuries they have viewed the Song as a source of embarrassment, religious confusion, even heresy. Church prelates have regularly condemned, even destroyed the writings of those who insisted upon its literal, natural interpretation. Shrill voices have called for religious leaders to throw the book out of the Sacred Canon. Sadly, for much of Christian history, the church has tolerated the beautiful love poem only because of the allegorical interpretation given its lines. Through the allegorization of its every phrase and symbol it has transformed the Song from “an hot carnall pamphlet,” as the English Westminster Assembly put it, to an expression of spiritual love without fleshly taint.

Some religious teachers have rightly sensed that part of the difficulty raised by the Song lies within the readers themselves. But their solutions only put further distance between the book and the people. One had to “qualify” in order to study the Song. The Hebrew sages allowed only those 25

years of age and older to read it. Origen, in keeping with the Greek philosophy of dualism that colored his thinking, kept it out of reach of everyone “who is not yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood and has not ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature.”<sup>2</sup> Jerome (c. 340-420) counseled that one should thoroughly study every other Bible book and memorize most of the Old Testament before one could safely read the Song of Songs! Yet through it all God has had His hand over the Song and its message for relationships in all times.

### **Called to Be “Naked and Unashamed”**

The openness and candid portrayal of sexuality in the Song testify to the gap that exists between marriage today and the Edenic blueprint when “they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed” (Gen. 2:25). In Eden the first couple did not have to resort to hiding or secretiveness when discussing their sexuality. No awkwardness or rift existed between sexuality and spirituality. Listen as Old Testament authority E. J. Young describes the role the book plays:

“The Song . . . is didactic and moral in its purpose. It comes to us in this world of sin, where lust and passion are on every hand, where fierce temptations assail us and try to turn us aside from the God-giving standard of marriage. And it reminds us, in particularly beautiful fashion, how pure and noble true love is. . . . By its very inclusion in the Canon, it reminds us of a love that is purer than our own.”<sup>3</sup>

The apostle Paul observes, “I would not have known sin except through the law” (Rom. 7:7). The sharp contrast the law reveals between God’s standard and our condition prods us to an awareness of our need. So also with the Song. We must not alter the Song’s message to suit us, but we must let the Spirit transform us into its ideals. The Song of Solomon beckons us toward the Edenic experience of being “naked and unashamed.” Certainly, if we are to believe the rest of the Bible, it is not an excited state reserved only for the passion of young love, nor is it safely opened only to relationships whose passions religious propriety have subdued. Rather it is an intimacy and oneness that lies at the heart of the Creator’s design. Nothing but God’s grace can prepare us for the Song and can work that change in us that will bring us closer to its ideals. For only God’s love made our own can turn marriage into dynamic, ever-opening, ever-accepting, ever-discovering, ever-deepening relationship portrayed in the Song of Songs.

### **Winsome Words: Our Terms of Endearment**

Perhaps with a bit more comfort now we may return to the bridal chamber. In its intimate setting we hear Solomon and Shulamith whispering their affirmations, their affectionate names for each other. “Behold, you are fair, my love [*rayahti*]!” he cries with delight as he looks at her. Later she invites him, “Let my beloved [*dodi*] come to his garden.” Names say a lot about the kind of closeness a couple share and the emotional temperature of a relationship. *Rayahti* and *Dodi* are cozy pet names that unfold and warm the heart, and at the same time delight and excite it.

How different from the names permitted in a home not far from where I grew up. There lived in our community a family I will call Jones. The iron-fisted father ruled his household as some medieval knight might have lorded it over his serfs. So rigid was he that he insisted his wife address him at all times as “Mr. Jones.”

Now my wife has called me “Mr. Flowers” after I tracked mud in on the kitchen floor she has just scrubbed. But I much prefer “H. B.” (for “Honey-bunches”) and she is my “Babe.” I have no idea

how we started using the terms, and somehow on paper they seem a little silly, but we each wear them like well-worn slippers. They are uniquely ours, as I discovered one day when I phoned my wife's office. Fully expecting her to answer, I said exuberantly, "Hi Babe," before the female voice on the other end of the line got out the words, "Church Ministries, this is Carlene. I am *not* Babe!" the voice further affirmed. It was our secretary!

Compliments, the emotional lifeblood of relationships, flow freely throughout the Song and are especially intimate in Song of Solomon 4:1-5:1. Comparisons to animals, precious stones, fruits, even buildings, help give voice to feelings and sensations. Mountains depict her charms. To him, her teeth are like shorn sheep, her hair like a flock of goats on a mountainside. We appreciated the comparison with goats more after a Lebanese pastor in one of our seminars pictured for us the black goats common to his homeland. As the herdsmen lead their huge flocks homeward in the evening, they stream like rivulets down the mountainside, their ebony coats glistening in the setting sun. The sense of many of Solomon's compliments escape the modern reader, and we may well have not understood them even then. However, Shulamith knew what he meant! This is love's language, encoded and decoded by the couple. All of these verses contain this kind of intimate, playful pillow talk that loving couples know.

Solomon's greatest compliment is a commentary on true love. "You are all fair, my love, and there is no spot in you" (S. of Sol. 4:7). Every loved one will have flaws and imperfections, though young love tends not to detect them. Happy is the couple who, after the early intensity of romance abates, can still say of each other, "there is no flaw in you" (RSV). "Love will cover a multitude of sins," Peter explains (1 Peter 4:8). "There is no flaw in you" says as much about the lover as about the one loved. It speaks of the deep value the lover bestows upon the beloved. Truly it is a look born of heaven, seated in the love of the Father who declares, "You are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased," clocking our imperfections in the seamless white robe of His only begotten Son.

### **Differences in Loving for Him and Her**

Many verses in the poem highlight the well-documented fact that men and women tend to experience love in somewhat different ways. Men can quickly become aroused romantically through visual stimuli and by touching their mates. Note Solomon's many references to seeing her face (S. of Sol. 2:14), delighting in her physical beauty (S. of Sol. 4:1ff.; 6:4ff; 7:1ff), being captured by her hair (S. of Sol. 7:5), holding the "branches" (verse 8), and embracing her (S. of Sol. 2:6; 8:3). Women, on the other hand, respond more to the overall quality of the relationship. Emotional intimacy and the commitment of their husbands to them and their children rank high in their priorities. Romantically women respond best in an atmosphere that is unhurried, with time for plenty of words of love and affirmation accompanied by closeness and caressing. Shulamith links herself with women of all time by her references to her yearnings to be with him (S. of Sol. 1:7), her desires for his companionships and friendship (S. of Sol. 2:3, 10; 5:16; 7:11ff.), her fears of separation from him (S. of Sol. 3:1; 5:6), and her pleas for his committed love (S. of Sol. 8:6, 7). She enjoys having him kiss, hold, and caress her (S. of Sol. 1:2; 2:6; 8:3). The extended loving remarks of the husband (S. of Sol. 4:1-15) to which the wife responds (verse 15) highlight this difference in sexual response.

### **One Flesh: The Ultimate Return to Eden**

The Song revolves around two delicately worded verses, Song of Solomon 4:16 and 5:1. Here, with equal lines of Hebrew text from the beginning of the book on one side and exactly the same number to the end on the other, we come to the heart of Solomon's Song. The focal point of the



chiastic structure, these verses emphasize its major theme. Veiled in the symbolic language of “coming to the garden,” they describe the happy consummation of Solomon and Shulamith’s marriage.

In terms of the Song’s “return to Eden” motif, the verses expand upon Genesis 2:24: “Therefore a man shall . . . be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” Genesis 2 describes how God separated the man and woman from their original one flesh union. The Song of Solomon celebrates the great delight that accompanies their coming together again in all the aspects of oneness now available to them.

Invitation and response characterize these central lines. “Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its pleasant fruits” (S. of Sol. 4:6). To her invitation he responds, “I have come to my garden, my sister, my spouse” (S. of Sol. 5:1). The invitation-response pattern illuminates the nature of true love. Marriage’s most intimate act uses no force, pressure, or manipulation. The physical and emotional responses of Shulamith herself offer the best evidence of the atmosphere of loving freedom that should exist in it. Into this relationship she freely and joyfully enters. “My garden” is “his garden” (S. of Sol. 4:16).

In the New Testament Paul sets forth a principle that complements the mutuality of the Song. “Let each of you look not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4). In matters where we have no explicit “thus saith the Lord,” this principle will guide couples in knowing how to love each other. Neither should push the other beyond that with which he or she is physically, emotionally, or spiritually comfortable. Each will seek the other’s comfort, pleasure, and overall satisfaction.

The Song poetically describes the rapture of their physical communion through its most elaborate use of line parallelism:

“I have come . . .”;

“I have gathered . . .”;

“I have eaten . . .”;

“I have drunk . . .”

The metaphors of the three ambrosia-like mixtures—myrrh and spice, honeycomb and honey, and wine and milk (S. of Sol. 5:1)—portray the absolute ecstasy of the garden experience.

In the loving commitment of one to the other in marriage, physical union elicits a response much deeper in the human heart. Elizabeth Achtemeier gives us insight into the unifying potential of the “one flesh” experience:

“In the process of sexual intercourse, we feel as if the most hidden inner depths of our beings are brought to the surface and revealed and offered to each other as the most intimate expression of our love. All we are as male or female becomes open to the other, and is made complete by being joined with the inner self of one’s mate. We know each other in a way otherwise utterly impossible,

and that knowing and that fulfillment carry over into our whole married life, and strengthen and deepen and periodically refresh it.”<sup>4</sup>

Couples have often confided to us how much their intimate union has enriched their spiritual experience with God. In a sense such lovemaking can be akin to worship and praise. Ephesians 5:21 states, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (RSV). The married love of a husband and wife especially illustrates the meaning of this text. In the act of sexual union they submit to each other in a special way, serving each other. It is a joyful celebration, a reveling in the good way God created and redeemed them as male and female. In such romance, such companionship, such committed love between husband and wife, Paul saw the key to understanding the most sublime and holy oneness ever— “This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (verse 32).

In their insightful book of devotional readings for couples, *In the Presence of God*, David and Vera Mace draw upon passages from the journal of Temple Gairdner, a missionary to Cairo during the past century. The journal reveals a deeply spiritual man who approached marriage as the Song of Songs did, with reverence and joy. As he prepared for his wedding, Gairdner prayed:

“That I may come near to her, draw me nearer to Thee than to her; that I may know her, make me to know Thee more than her; that I may love her with the perfect love of a perfectly whole heart, cause me to love Thee more than her and most of all.

“That nothing may be between me and her, be Thou between us, every moment. That we may be constantly together, draw us into separate loneliness with Thyself. And when we meet breast to breast, O God, let it be upon Thine own.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home* (Nashville: Southern Pub. Assn., 1952), p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> Marvin H. Pope, *Songs of Songs* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), p. 117.

<sup>3</sup> E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1949), p. 327.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Committed Marriage* (Philadelphia: the Westminster Press, 1976), p. 162.

<sup>5</sup> Temple Gairdner, quoted in David and Vera Mace, *In the Presence of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), p. 63.

## *Searching for the God of Grace*

by Stuart Tyner

Nampa ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2006. 320 pages

Reviewed by Bryan Craig

By his own admission, Stuart Tyner is passionate about grace and about revealing the truth about God. His book is about the search to find and hold on to an accurate picture of what God is like and to clearly discern the means by which He saves us.

His search reveals an undeniable treasure, the glorious truth about the extravagant gift of God's grace—a gift to be treasured, a gift that is “free, inexhaustible, valuable beyond measure.” Max Lucado said that grasping this amazing gift of God's grace was, in fact, “the greatest discovery of my life.” And it's the greatest discovery of our lives too!

This discovery begins when we accept God's wonderfully kind and merciful attitude toward us even though we are empty, lost and disconnected from Him, each other and ourselves. Along with this awareness also comes a recognition that our salvation is entirely at God's initiative without any effort or work on our part (it's not what we must do but what He has already done). Embracing His goodness and grace is “what motivates us in the cooperative sanctification process” causing us “to put on” the garments of His grace (Col. 3:12-14). This “good news” experience transforms our mundane lives, gives us a whole new identity and releases us from lives of meaninglessness and futility.

The truth is that so often we have been afraid of grace. We don't know what to do with it. Grace seems all a bit too easy. We are afraid that such an emphasis on grace will lessen commitment to obedience and it will give us an excuse to do nothing or to do as we please. Somehow we feel that we can and must do something to merit God saving us. Our constant dilemma is that we keep losing the plot by seeing “merit in the nobility of our own behavior” which we magnify in the hope of attaining salvation.

Throughout the pages of Tyner's valuable book grace is a constantly recurring theme. The author stresses that grace is not just incredibly good news, but is the most important and fundamental of all truths. Grace is not just a good idea or sentiment to hold in our heads; it must change the whole of our lives. Refusing or ignoring this gift of grace is something that we do at our own peril, so there is a need for us to be forever vigilant, not allowing this gift from God to be intentionally modified or adulterated, perversions of this truth that have happened time and time again.

*Searching for the God of Grace* is not just a biblical discussion about the significance of grace. In it we journey through time discovering how religious people have dealt with God's good news. Like a super-sleuth, Tyner works his way from Old Testament stories and New Testament teachings and events on into church history, through the Middle Ages, the Reformation period and the Council of Trent, exposing the ways human beings have constantly struggled to accept and honour the simple truth of God's grace. Often they wound up altering it. Through the period of the Great Disappointment and our development as the Seventh-day Adventist church, Tyner carefully reveals how Adventists have sometimes subtly and other times obviously “gotten off the gospel path and tried to forge our own way to heaven.”

Tyner shows how, over the centuries, the Church Fathers have been seduced by the “desire to contribute something to salvation,” something that merits the Father’s love, and have been tempted to abandon their understanding of His free gift of grace. We today, like God’s people throughout history, seem unable to help ourselves; we must do something to merit or gain God’s favour. We seem to be constantly dragged back into a belief system embedded with a works-oriented, performance-oriented religious experience.

### **A Practical Impact on Family Ministries**

Now, if you have stayed with me this far, you’re probably wondering what all this might have to do with ministering to families! What has a book about grace got to do with couples, parents and family life? Just this: if we “get it right” about grace, you know, first things first, then it will make a huge difference to the way we “do” family. It will profoundly affect the way we treat each other. It will have a significant impact on the way we talk about and teach marriage, parenting and family living. Understanding what God is like and how He wants us to respond and relate to Him has got to dramatically affect the way we live our lives with each other. It’s about love, grace, meaning, satisfaction and quality in our lives.

Couples need first to hear a message of grace. They need to understand how to be gracious and to apply the principles of God’s grace to their relationship. It takes a lot of grace to nurture a caring and committed marital relationship in which a couple learn to live together with love, compassion, respect, peace, and safety.

Parents need first to hear a message of grace. They need to understand how to show kindness. They need to know how to love, accept, and forgive just as they have been loved, accepted and forgiven by their heavenly Father. Parents who are drawn into being over-anxious, over-protective or performance-driven in their parenting role, need to learn how to worry less and focus more on the relational dimension.

Families need first to hear a message of grace. In ministering to families it’s hard to see how the message of grace is not central to all that motivates the growth, change, and worship of individuals, couples and families as they seek to live the Christian life and become true followers of Jesus Christ. The family, and indeed the church, are to be “mediators of God’s presence” or “God’s embodied presence” in this world as they give evidence that they know and have received God’s wonderful gift of grace.

I’ve come to see that the real joy of the Christian message is summed up by this one little word “grace.” Jesus came to this world to show us what grace means. The apostles Peter and Paul both preached about grace and used the word to describe the heart of the Christian message. Ellen White says that “Christ’s favorite theme was the paternal tenderness and abundant grace of God” (*Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 40). Further, “the sacrifice of Christ as an atonement for sin is the great truth around which all other truths cluster” and “is to be the foundation of every discourse given by our ministers” (*Gospel Workers*, p. 315).

This book is a fascinating read. Its message is dynamite and wonderfully instructive for preachers, educators and counsellors seeking to find ways to empower individuals, couples, and families on the journey of life.

# *The Five Love Languages*

by Dr. Gary Chapman

Chicago, IL: Northfield Publishing, 2004. 203 pages.

Reviewed by Kathleen Sowards

Dr. Gary Chapman has spent 30 plus years as a Marriage Counselor and a leader in Marriage Enrichment Seminars and has spoken to thousands of people. He has found that communication or the lack thereof is the key to why marriages fail and families fall apart.

Most people will agree that communication is the key to any successful relationship. Communication is colored by each person's experiences, expectations, and observations—both the listener and the speaker. The increasing number of families torn by divorce and children/adolescents seeking love in all the wrong places show us that somehow we are not speaking the love language of our spouses and children.

The questions are: Are you successfully communicating your deep love feelings to your spouse, children and family? Are you satisfied with how they communicate their love to you?

Dr. Chapman in his book *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Commitment to Your Mate* says, "We must be willing to learn our spouse's primary love language if we are to be effective communicators of love" (p. 15). The five love languages are likened to the languages of the world—English, French, Spanish, German, Chinese, etc. If you were to speak to your loved one in Portuguese and they only speak English, then we know without a doubt they will not understand you and the communication will be lost. A different dialect within the same language can have the same effect.

By using experiences from working with couples over the years, he has come up with five primary love languages. To experience full "love tanks," we need to understand: *Words of Affirmation, Quality Time, Receiving Gifts, Acts of Service, and Physical Touch*. Most of us have a primary and possibly a secondary love language; many will relate to all these languages, at least to some degree, but one will usually stand out as your primary love language. This is the one you need to feel loved, safe and secure. When your primary love language is being fulfilled, you will find yourself in a closer, more intimate relationship with your spouse.

If we do not know our spouse's love language we cannot meet their love needs. We cannot communicate effectively with them and fill their "love tank." Your car will not continue to run once the fuel tank reaches empty. It will cease to function properly. It will stop. Chapman explains that the same thing happens in our marriages when we cease to fill our loved ones' "love tanks;" they run dry and the closeness and love we once felt will die away.

One problem that develops is when the one communicating believes they are "loving" with the right language, yet find a growing distance, a coldness developing or feel their spouse doesn't love them anymore. Possibly, your loved one sees themselves as "loving" and daily they remember to affirm you with love with statements as: "I love you." "You make me happy." "You are such a good provider." And, yet, you feel distant from them, wondering when they will stop and take a moment to

just sit down and hold your hand. Obviously, your love language is *physical touch* and not *words of affirmation*.

Perhaps your spouse is one that remembers all the special occasions with thoughtful gifts. He even thinks to surprise you with notes of love on the bathroom mirror and flowers for no special reason, but you find yourself lonely and wishing for a walk on the beach. Your love language is not *receiving gifts* but *quality time*.

Maybe you are speaking to your child or teenager by *acts of service*, but it just seems to you that they take you for granted; they don't appreciate all you do for them. Do you feel a wall separates you and there is no connection when you speak to them? It is likely that they speak a different love language. Is it possible you miss the love language of hugs from your child and the playful pushes and taps on your shoulder from your teenager as he/she passes as they express their love language in the form of *physical touch*?

Unfortunately in these cases, the "love" being spoken is not the recipient's love language. They do not recognize the language as love. These may be nice gestures, but if it doesn't fill their "love tank," then it is just a gesture. If they remain unfilled they will remove themselves from the relationship emotionally and eventually the relationship altogether.

We were created with a basic need to be loved and to love. When our love is not met or returned in a language we don't understand, we are left feeling lonely and bereft. "When the tank is low . . . we have no love feelings toward our spouse but simply experience emptiness and pain" (p. 165). All too often the marriage will fail and families are torn apart. But, "people behave differently when their emotional love tanks are full" (p. 24). When we learn to speak the primary love languages we will no doubt encounter different, more positive responses and enjoy better relationships.

Chapman's book gives us the tools we need to truly fill our loved ones' "love tanks." It can help our marriages and families to flourish.