

Families Building Relationships



for Now and Eternity

Karen and Ron Flowers, Editors
Compiled by Paul Tompkins

Contributions by

Mary & Jonathan Barrett ♦ John & Delivon Francis ♦ Heather Haworth
Bernie & Karen Holford ♦ Andreea, Ion & Zoica Lascu ♦ Carina Lillbäck-Larsson
Augustus Lawrence ♦ Apostolos Maglis ♦ Bongani Ndlovu ♦ Victor & Gry Marley ♦ Anne-May Müller
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A Department of Family Ministries publication

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Software formatting by Kathleen Sowards

Other Family Ministries Planbooks in this series:

Passing on the Torch
Families Reaching Families
Empowering Families for Growth & Change
Making Families Whole
Family Seasons
Peace & Healing: Making Homes Abuse-free
Families Filled with Joy
Facing Family Crises: Supporting One Another with Love
New Beginnings
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Families of Faith: Biblical Foundations for Family Living
It Takes a Family: Discipling Children & Teens for Christ
Family Evangelism: Bringing Jesus to the Family Circle
Celebrate Marriage!
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Relationships Where Grace is in Place
Relationships Where Love is in Place

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Preface

Welcome to the 2009 Family Ministries Planbook: *Families Building Relationships for Now and Eternity*. This manual has been designed as a resource tool to complement the special family emphasis periods in the Seventh-day Adventist World Church Calendar of Special Days and Events. This resource is divided into two main sections corresponding to the two weeks of emphasis. The three special Sabbath days are listed within these weeks.

Christian Home and Marriage Week – February 14-21

Christian Marriage Day – February 14

Christian Parenting Day – February 21

Family Togetherness Week – September 6-12

Family Fellowship Day – September 12

The resources for sermons, seminars, children stories and other material found within will aid your preparation for events and programming that will enable individuals, families and church relationships to be enriched.

The material for 2009 has been prepared by Family Ministry teams from across the Trans-European Division, which has acted as the lead division in the preparation process. We have also worked in consultation with the Family Ministries Directors of the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division and the Southern Asia Division. The task forces from the various TED unions offer these practical resources as a guide for their fields and for use throughout the world field.

We trust that *Families Building Relationships for Now and Eternity* will be used by pastors and family ministries practitioners to strengthen relationships in the family and in the church.

Paul Tompkins
Family Ministries Director
Trans-European Division

Introduction

Tell – and Show – the World

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

A book we read recently assesses contemporary culture and the unusual opportunities that are opening within the culture for sharing the Christian gospel message. The author points out that, within a highly mobile society where traditional family life has broken down, relationships are prized commodities, for they are difficult to obtain and maintain. “The postmodern age,” he concludes, “is an anonymous age with a yearning for relationship.”¹ For those engaged in relational ministries with a gospel message to share, as we are in Family Ministries, these words fall on our ears with an impact not unlike the words of Jesus, “I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.”²

In a world hungry for relationships, Christian families are in a strategic position to meet this emergent need. The gospel message we have to share is often presented in Scripture in relational terms: a personal God, whose very essence is love, cares about His connection with human beings. He has restored by His own act in Jesus Christ that which was disrupted by our failed commitment in our relationship with Him. God holds out to us the invitation to say yes to fellowship with Him and those who know Him in His redeemed community.³ Wherever the disciples of Jesus are found, the words in their hearts and on their lips are ever the same: “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”⁴

So there is a message, a *proclamation* that Christians have to tell the world. However, dissemination of the gospel, especially its relationship aspects, is accomplished in part by proclamation, but perhaps even more by *exemplification*, i.e. by providing examples, by modeling and mentoring. The Bible’s emphasis on “follow” and “imitate” indicates that communicating the gospel by example is also an important way the message of Christ is shared. In the Book of Hebrews we find the appeal, “Consider the outcome of [your leaders’] way of life and imitate their faith.”⁵ Paul urges his followers, “Imitate me.”⁶ With proclamation, faith springs up in the heart through hearing.⁷ With exemplification, faith is encouraged through seeing.⁸ Since people tend to become like whom or what they watch, our task is not only to “tell the world,” but to “show the world.”⁹

It is not either/or, of course. Some combination of both proclamation and exemplification is always involved in the formation of disciples. Individuals meet Jesus, attach to Him and become new believers through the modeling of older believers as the newcomers observe the way of life and listen to the prayers, personal testimonies and teaching of Jesus’ followers. This relational modeling applies particularly to settings like the home, where imitation is common. Children imitate their parents, siblings imitate one another, and married partners often exert a profound influence over each other.

Through their faithful exemplification of life in Him, couples and families can bear Christian witness to non-believing relatives as well as to couples and families in the community around them.¹⁰

All human examples of faith are flawed, of course, but the notion of imitation is a call for individuals to follow believers who follow Christ. The idea is that individuals will connect with Jesus and His people as they see the Christian way of life lived by others as human and fallible as they are. The Holy Spirit acts within the context of the connection—the relationship—that believers have with others to draw the unbelieving toward belief. “Social influence,” wrote Ellen White, “is a wonderful power. We can use it if we will as a means of helping those about us”¹¹

Jesus loves people. When He walked on earth among us, the Scripture reports that He was not always able to form the relationships with them that He wanted to, but His first inclination was to try to do so. In this He provides an example and an incentive to us. “Go and make disciples,” He said.¹² “As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”¹³ He is calling us to love, to go, to form relationships, to make disciples. To paraphrase Paul, “How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone relating to them?”¹⁴

¹ Harry Lee Poe, *Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 27.

² John 4:35

³ 1 John 4:8, 16; John 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:18

⁴ 1 John 1:3

⁵ Heb. 13:7

⁶ 1 Cor. 4:16

⁷ See Rom. 10:17.

⁸ See Matt. 5:16; 1 Tim. 4:12.

⁹ See Eph. 5:1; 1 Thess. 1:6; Heb. 6:12; 3 John 1:11.

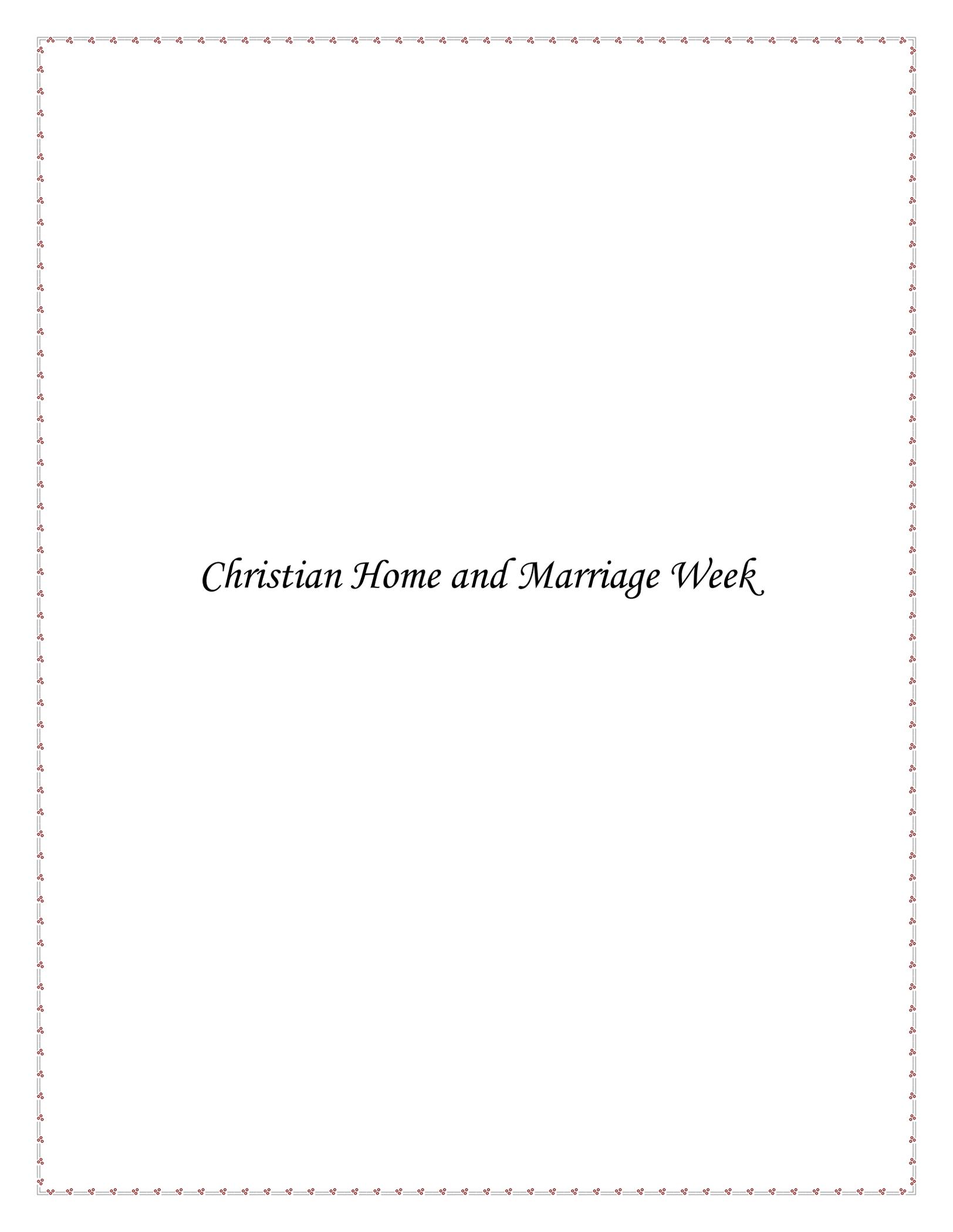
¹⁰ There are many biblical examples of the saving influence members of families and communities have on each other. The exemplification of Naomi and her family clearly had a profound effect on her daughter-in-law Ruth’s becoming a believer (Ruth 1:14-16). Andrew’s enthusiastic sharing and introduction to Jesus launched his brother Peter on the way to becoming Jesus’ disciple and an apostle (John 1:40-42). Likewise, the excitement the Samaritan woman exhibited about Jesus and her introduction of her community to Him were made possible because she was connected to that community (John 4:28-30). The faith-building mentoring of Mary by Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56), of John Mark by Barnabas (Acts 15:37-39), and of Timothy by Paul (Acts 16:1-4) was based in each case on the relationship. The moment-by-moment nurturing, relational connection of parents with their children is integral to transmission of faith to the next generation (Deut. 6:6-9; Eph. 6:4). The effect of the relationship in which an authentic Christian spouse dwells with a non-believing married partner is clearly in the mind of Paul in 1 Cor. 7:14.

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1942), 354.

¹² Matt. 28:19

¹³ John 13:34, 35

¹⁴ Rom. 10:14



Christian Home and Marriage Week

Christian Home & Marriage Week

An Overview

by Heather Haworth
Family Ministries Director
British Union Conference
Trans-European Division

Pastors and family ministries leaders can make Christian Home and Marriage Week an extra special time for all those who come to church and those whose lives are touched by those who attend church. How? First of all, it is important to think about all who will be influenced by the messages and programs offered at church during this week.

For sure there will be the regular church attendees. But there will likely be visitors, some coming to church for perhaps the first time, men, women, children and teens—all with individual and relational needs.

There will be those who are married and those who are not. Singles often make up a majority of the congregation. How will this Christian Home and Marriage Week impact them? Is this relevant to them? How can this week be celebrated in a home that is occupied by only one person?

We need also to think about the people who are in the daily lives of these churchgoers. What can those who participate in these special programs and events gain this week that they can share with such friends, family, work or school mates?

The resources for Christian Home and Marriage Week embrace both an emphasis on marriage and on parenting and parent-child relationships. They are of several types:

Sermons

- *Back in Vogue: Marriage Tips From 1913*. This is a sermon on marriage by Cyril Sweeney.
- *Dating: Making the Right Choice*. This sermon on dating relationships by Mary and Jonathan Barrett could be used for youth attending a seeker-style service.
- *Parenting for Growth*. A sermon by Victor Marley and Supplementary Material and Children's Activities by Gry Marley combine to provide a resource for an interactive worship service on the topic of parent-child relationships.
- *Show Jesus to the Children*. This is a sermon on a crucial aspect of parenting by Anne-May Müller.

Mini-Seminars

- *SoulMates: Reaching Out to Married Couples*. Karen and Bernie Holford offer a fun-filled evening program to help retain the sparkle of marital romance.
- *Love Connects – A Day Retreat for Married Couples*. This unique seminar by Bernie and Karen Holford focuses on a couple's love for God and each other and helps them explore ways they can team up to share God's love with others.
- *Our Children, Our Responsibility, Our Time - Being a Christian Parent Today*. Carina Lillbäck-Larsson's parenting seminar focuses squarely on the God-given responsibility parents have to communicate spiritual values to their children.
- *Passing Spiritual Values to Children: A Study of Bible Parents & Caregivers*. This parenting seminar by Lotte Rechter gives parents an opportunity to discover parenting principles from several biblical families.

Children's Stories

Two children's stories help include the younger set in worship and provide lessons on how children can build their relationships with God and others.

- *Building Friendships* by Heather Haworth
- *I Want to Do Something for God - Together With You* by Carina Lillbäck-Larsson

Family Ministries Leadership

- *Babies Bring Families to Church*. This interview with Pastor Mick Smart on a service called "Baby Blessing" offers an interesting idea for outreach to families in the community.
- *Family Camps: Reaching People for Jesus!* Karen Holford shares a number of helpful pointers for planning and conducting family camps to enrich the lives of Christian families and appeal to those who are "not-yet-Christian."

The Marriage Course: A Personal Report. John and Delivon Francis provide a testimony of their couple enrichment and stimulus to minister to other couples growing out of their experience with *The Marriage Course*.

Reprinted Articles

Three articles by Karen Holford suggest things to practise and share during the week that will help us relate better in our own home and family, with friends, people at work, at school and in college. Taken from *The Family Book – Creative Ideas for Families*, published by The Stanborough Press Ltd.

- *Relating to Each Other in a Biblical Way*

- *Building a Closer Relationship with Someone You Love*
- *Strengthening the Marriages of Family & Friends*

Book Review

- *Families Finding Faith* by John Hattam. Augustus Lawrence reviews Hattam's concept that the church needs to put greater emphasis on relational evangelism as the starting point for drawing families to Christ.

We are hopeful that the various resources offered in this section of the Family Ministries Planbook will help to address the needs in the lives of those in our congregations and those within their realm of influence. May they help all to build relationships for now and eternity.

Back in Vogue: Marriage Tips From 1913

by Cyril Sweeney
Family Ministries Director
North England Conference, British Union
Trans-European Division

As I sat in the living room scanning the Daily Express newspaper of Tuesday, 29th May 2007, wearing my “family life spectacles” (as it were), the following article jumped out at me: *Back in Vogue: Marriage Tips from 1913*. These were bits of marriage counsel given before I was born. I just had to read on.

“Tips for a happy marriage published nearly a century ago look set to be a hit this year [2007]” begins the article by Jo Willey. Two books – *Don’ts for Husbands* and *Don’ts for Wives* – are expected to be bestsellers. The guide books penned in 1913 by Blanche Ebbutt are seen now as amusing and wise and relevant in 2007. They remind men not to complain about their wives’ cooking and warn wives never to utter the hated words: “I told you so.” The books originally remained in print for twenty years at a time when men worked and women stayed at home. Although times have changed since then, one tip that is still very relevant states: “Don’t increase the work of the house by leaving all your things in different places. If you are not a tidy person by nature, at least be thoughtful.” Ebbutt advises husbands: “Don’t talk down to your wife. She has as much intelligence as your colleague at the office; she lacks only opportunity. Talk to her (explaining when necessary) of anything you would talk of to a man, and you will be surprised to find how she expands.”

Willey tells wives not to flirt with other men, in case they succeed more than they intended. It is like playing with tigers and edged tools and volcanoes all in one. She also states something quite radical for its time: Women are reminded to try to make the best of the flawed, often ridiculous men they have married. For advice like that to be given was pretty new.

An Older Manual on Marriage

There are some marriage tips we should consider which are even older—not just a century old, but thousands of years old. In fact, these tips are not just for marriages but for successful family living. Where can these tips be found? In an ancient manual we call the Scriptures, the Holy Bible.

Manuals are important. My car needed some much required attention. I knew that, if I had a mechanic’s manual, this was something that I could attend to and save some money. The local car mechanic’s per hour rates were exorbitant. So I went down to a local Ford dealership to purchase a standard or generic car manual. The Ford dealership could not understand why I should come to them when I drive a Citroën. “There is no such thing as standard car manual,” they said. “You are better off going to a Citroën dealer.” “After all,” they said, “They make the cars in the first place. So a Citroën manual is best for you.” Needless to say, they were right. Eventually, I got a Citroën manual and with its help I fixed my car.

Right now, all over the world, there are marriages, parents and families who are in need of the Bible manual to help do some necessary work on their relationships.

The manual, the Holy Bible, informs us that God made the first family. Everything was perfect for the first family. They had a beautiful home, good food, a wonderful loving relationship with each other and with their maker—God. What more could one ask for? Genesis 3 describes how the first family became dysfunctional.

However, the manual describes how, despite the dysfunction of every family since then, we all have something in common. This is highlighted by the Scripture passage for today found in Matthew 7:24-27. Having read this well known story you might be thinking, what has this passage got to do with family life?

Matthew 7:24-27 is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He is not only addressing His newly appointed and ordained disciples, but those who have followed Him wishing to hear His words of wisdom. Men and women, boys and girls, peasants and fishermen, even those who wanted to bring back bad reports about Jesus and who only wanted His downfall were present. Jesus spoke of a kingdom to which all could belong. His kingdom is not for the future but for the present. Jesus wants to establish His kingdom in the hearts of human beings, permeating their lives by His Spirit, and overflowing into other people's hearts and lives with dynamic power, the compelling power of love.

Whilst He outlined the privileges and responsibilities of being a citizen of the kingdom of love toward the end of His sermon on the mountain, Jesus made a call to decisive action. In verse 24 He states that it is unwise to listen but not to act. Hearing inevitably brings with it responsibility for corresponding action. Reading the passage with my family life spectacles on gives me a new perspective on the characters in the passage and what they have in common with every married couple, every family today.

Everyone Engaged in Building

What the two men in Matthew 7:24-27 have in common is that they are both building—building a shelter to keep them warm or shield them from the hot midday sun.

When couples contemplate marriage and embark on premarital preparation, they begin to build. In fact, I believe every couple in the world in every faith group is seeking to build for a happy, loving and lasting relationship. I believe that every couple who walks up the aisle and says, "I do," is hoping that their relationship will be filled with joy and happiness. Generally, couples are not only looking at building a physical home environment for themselves to enjoy, but one in which children can be born, nurtured, trained and surrounded by an aura of love.

Here are some building blocks you can use as you build your home. They are basic essentials which must be allowed to permeate all relationships in the home.

- *Love* - This can be the most rugged of the building blocks listed here (John 3:34, 35; Gal. 5:13).
- *Trust* - This can be the most fragile.
- *Understanding* - This one can take the longest to develop.
- *Honor & respect* - These are probably the most neglected (Rom. 12:10).
- *Commitment* - This is undoubtedly the most determined.

It is impossible to have a good relationship with someone whom you do not love, trust, understand, honour and respect and to whom you are committed. If people in a relationship lose their love, trust, understanding and honour and respect for each other and their commitment to each other, the relationship will wither and die. Similarly, it is impossible for someone who is unloved, mistrusted, misunderstood, dishonoured and shorn of their self-respect to relate well to other people let alone make a commitment to commit to a relationship (Marshall, 1991).

Builders Choose Their Foundations

Both men in Jesus' parable were fine until it came to the choice of foundations. In our marriages we have a choice of foundations. In parenting we have a choice of foundations. We can choose our foundations based on examples given us from the media, film and pop stars, or from the popular television serials. We can attempt to build solid marriages on premarital sexual encounters or extramarital relationships which the world seems to deem as acceptable. We can allow the values of the streets, of TV or our peers' values with their not-so-subtle pressure to be the foundations on which we allow our children to be brought up. Or we can build our lives on godly values. Some couples who are getting married believe that money and good looks form a good foundation for marriage.

The best foundation for a happy marriage is not money. If only we could suddenly come into a good substantial inheritance we'd be happy! No, you wouldn't. You would have the choice of which misery you experience, but you wouldn't be happy. If money was a good basis for marriage, you would expect that millionaires and those who have come into money unexpectedly—through inheritance or the lottery, for example, would have the best marriages of all. But they seem not to. In general, couples have to work and earn in order to keep going. The single-minded pursuit of money costs too much, and one of the prices to be paid is trouble in marriage. Don't, however, be selfish with what you both have. "My wife is always asking for money," a man complained to his friend. "Last week she wanted three hundred dollars. The day before yesterday she asked me for a hundred and fifty. This morning she wanted two hundred bucks." That's crazy," said the friend. "What does she do with it all?" "I don't know," said the guy, "I never give her any." Get the point?

The best foundation for a happy marriage is not good looks. Well, everyone wants their partner to be attractive. The great church leader and preacher, Charles H. Spurgeon, once advised young pastors to marry women full of grace *and* beauty — so that should they fall from grace they could still live with them. But if physical attraction by itself is the only thing that keeps you together, your relationship will not last long. If beauty was a good foundation for marriage, you'd expect that film stars and fashion models would have the best marriages of all. But they seem not to. By all means, take care of your appearance for your own sake and each other's. But don't give it undue importance. Do, however, pay each other compliments.

Kevin and Sarah, a young couple, were sitting out on a porch swing. Sarah asked, "Kevin, do you think my eyes are beautiful?" Kevin answered, "Yep." A few seconds later: "Kevin, do you think my hair is attractive?" Again Kevin answered, "Yep." A few more seconds later: "Would you say that I have a gorgeous figure?" Once again, Kevin answered, "Yep." "Oh, Kevin," she said, "You say the nicest things." You may have to work a little harder than Kevin on your compliments of each other.

However, many married couples I know believe that the values of God's word make for a stronger foundation. Here are some important elements that must be part of a good foundation for a marital relationship:

- Invite Jesus into your hearts personally and as the unseen Partner in your marriage.
- Make time for each other and have fun together.
- Keep talking with each other and keep listening to each other.
- Take note of the way your partner feels loved.
- Talk about your differences and pray together.
- Practice forgiveness.
- Honour your parents but do not be controlled by them.
- Do not neglect sexual intimacy. (Lee, 2000)

All foundations will be tried. Whilst both men used different materials for their foundations, what they both had in common was the fact that the foundations were tested. Winds blew and rain poured on both homes. There is not a home in this world that has not been affected by the dysfunctional breakdown of the first home in Eden. Every home experiences problems. Whether you consider yourself saint or sinner, poor or rich, high class or low class, every marriage and family will go through testing times. The winds of adversity blow on every relationship. The rain of discontent pours on every family. Even I, in my position as a Family Ministries director, recognise the fact that my family and my marriage are constantly under attack from many negative outside influences. I would be only fooling myself if I thought my Christian pedigree would exempt me from the problems that all relationships go through. Once you make a commitment to someone in a lifelong marital relationship, you will be targeted by the destroyer of all that is good, the enemy of God. No home, no family can escape the inevitable. There is hope, however, in that if you choose the right foundation, your home can experience the love of heaven instead of the sorrows of hell.

Only one foundation will stand the test of time. The man in the story who chose the wrong foundation found to his regret that he lost everything in the end. E. G. White states, "He who turns a deaf ear to the gospel builds on the shifting sand of self, upon his own efforts" (*Mount of Blessing*, p. 152). "He builds upon human theories and inventions" (*Desire of Ages*, p. 314). It is important that we choose that which will have long lasting influence and will prepare us for eternal life. As we build on the foundations we will surely succeed at this thing called marriage and family.

The Apostle Paul, in the well known and well loved passage of 1Corinthians 13, gives what is for me the best foundation for families. It will withstand anything that is hurled at it. It is:

- Love that is rich in the human resources you pour into it.
- Love that has a wealth of generosity between you as a couple (I don't just mean bunches of flowers and boxes of chocolates, but generosity of judgement).
- Love that is full of forgiving and thanksgiving.
- Love that is overflowing with concern and care.

These foundation values that Paul talks about are seen also in the life of Jesus—the very heart of Christian belief. These are the things which do make for a happy marriage and a happy home. This foundation can make a relationship rich and beautiful.

I have made many visits to the homes of families. Often, as you enter a house you can see that a fortune has been spent on it. It has all the latest and best household and audio visual equipment, beautiful furniture and interior design and décor. And yet, there's an edgy feel to the place. Brittle, uncomfortable, it's a house, but not a home. In other houses, where the furnishings are not so nice—the sofa's worn, the wood isn't as polished, and it's a bit untidy—you get the feeling that the people there have built up something between them. Please don't get me wrong. I am not saying that nice houses cannot be nice homes. In every home there should be a nice tone, a warm atmosphere, a rich beauty in there somewhere between all the family members.

My wish, my hope, my prayer is that your marriage and your home will be surely and soundly based on good foundations. I pray that the relationship between each husband and wife will be of such a strong love and secure love that whatever the future years will bring, you will be an example of what a good and happy marriage can be and will create a home that the children will be glad to call home and others will be delighted to visit.

Let's tell the world that no matter how old the tips, how old the information, for a good marriage, a good family, a good home—it all depends on the right foundation.

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Dating: Making the Right Choice

by Mary & Jonathan Barrett

Pastors

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Trans-European Division

Why God? Why should we involve God in our dating, in our choice of a marriage partner? Why should we turn to Christian principles to help us find the man or woman of our dreams when we have so many writers and movies constantly serving up pointers about the perfect relationship? Go to any video store and you will uncover a wealth of advice on making the right choice when dating.

- Kate Hudson tells us *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*. Supposedly all you have to do is to reverse the procedure and you will find a guy or a girl in ten days.
- In *Runaway Bride*, Julia Roberts teaches you that as soon as you know which way you like your eggs cooked for breakfast, you will know whom to marry.
- Watch *What Women Want* and Mel Gibson reveals that if you want to develop a relationship with someone, it is best if you don't want to know about everything that is going on in their minds.
- You could live a lie like J. Lo in *Maid in Manhattan*. Pretend to be something that you are not and you will have someone fall in love with you. And not only that, he will be rich, handsome and powerful.
- From *My Best Friend's Wedding* you learn that if you are going to fall in love with your best friend, you'd better make that decision quickly before someone else comes along.
- In *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* you learn that all you have to do is remove your spectacles, visit the hairdresser and shop at the right fashion store. As soon as Mr. Right sees the new you, he will fall head over heels in love with you.

With all this advice around us, why should we listen to God's principles? Because God is interested in our happiness. He longs for your happiness as no one else does. He wants you to be happy in your dating and ultimately in your choice of a marriage partner.

Seeking God's Guidance in Partner Selection

It was God, not man, who said in Genesis 2:18, "It is not good that the man should be alone." That says something profound about how interested God is in our need of someone to share our lives with. The original word for "not good" actually means "not good, this aloneness of man." God was saying it was not good for Adam to feel alone, isolated, as if something was missing or incomplete in his life. So God did something about it. A deep sleep, an operation on Adam that left no scars, and Adam was no longer alone. His companion was created from his rib (Genesis 2:21-22). Adam never

had to seek out Eve; God custom-built her for him. God was the one who brought them together. Just as God was interested enough in Adam's aloneness to do something about it, God is interested in taking an active part in providing you with the companion with whom you long to share your life.

Another Bible account tells us that God is interested in our choice of marriage partner. The Genesis 24 story of a long-distance courtship may be one of the most romantic stories in the Bible. Hollywood could have made a movie out of it. The story begins with Abraham, who was determined to find a bride for his son Isaac. In those days, it was the responsibility of a father to find a suitable partner for his son or daughter. Picture the scene: Abraham, old and frail, sends his trusted servant to find a bride for Isaac. The servant travels in the heat of the day, at times, stumbling in the searing hot sand that gives way beneath his feet. In the bitter cold of the night, he shivers, trying to sleep under a blanket woven with wool. His only companions are ten camels, loaded with supplies for the journey and treasures for the wife to be. For one month he travelled to the distant land of Haran to search for the perfect wife for his master's son.

Finally, arriving in the town, he plunks himself down by the side of the village well. Tired and weary, looking at the multitude of women of all ages and sizes strolling around that town, perhaps he wondered, "How do I make the right choice?" Maybe that is what motivated him to do something you will never find in a Hollywood movie—he talked to God. He asked God to lead him to the perfect wife for Isaac (Genesis 24:14). What we love about this story is that God was so eager to answer the prayer that, as soon as the servant said "Amen," the beautiful Rebekah appeared.

That's an amazing God isn't it? A simple request: "God lead me to find the right partner" and God was there immediately. God really is interested in our happiness.

Rebekah did indeed become Isaac's wife. In the custom of a good old love story the Bible says, "She became his wife, and he loved her."

This is the first recorded prayer for God to guide in selecting a marriage partner. We believe that just as God provided a wife for Adam and a wife for Isaac, He is longing to answer our requests that He guide us to the right partner to share our lives.

Now if you turn the pages of the Bible you will find there is no particular section that carries a checklist of the do's and don'ts in making a right choice when dating. However, God does say, "I will guide you in every aspect of your life." "I [the Lord] will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you" (Psalm 32:8, AMP). Elsewhere He promises to give wisdom in making choices. "If any of you is deficient in wisdom, let him ask of the giving God (who gives) to everyone liberally and ungrudgingly . . . and it will be given him" (James 1:5 AMP).

The wisdom that God speaks of here is very different from our wisdom. Wisdom, as spoken of in the Bible, means seeing with discernment, being able to see below the surface of things. It also includes the ability to look at self, others and situations with a broader, more godly perspective. God will give us His wisdom and His guidance in dating if we ask for it.

Wisdom in Longer Courtship

In matters relating to dating and partner selection wisdom is needed, but we don't always act wisely. As dating couples, we make mistakes that could be avoided. One mistake that is often made is the decision to marry too quickly.

That certainly wasn't the case with Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebekah: "So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her" (Genesis 29:20). That was a long courtship and the love between them was lasting.

Study on long courtship. One study we read found a strong correlation between long courtships and satisfying marriages and a strong correlation between short courtships and heartbreaking marriages. It is far better to be going out together and relating to each other for at least a year—preferably more, before you even consider marriage.

Without at least this much experience you just don't know each other well enough. Some couples decide to get married without having been through any kind of tragedy or really stressful event together. They just don't know each other in the broad range of life experience. They've never negotiated a compromise over some deeply held value. They've never resolved conflict with each other. They haven't worked out financial differences. They haven't walked in each other's relational or vocational worlds. Some have not worshipped together or served or prayed together enough to know if they are going to be spiritually compatible. So allow plenty of time for going out together and getting to really know each other before you think seriously about marriage.

By the way, you cannot speed up the process of getting to know each other by living together. Living together really is another subject, but all the studies we have seen indicate that couples who live together are much more likely to have a whole variety of problems. The divorce rate for such couples is as high as 75%.

Robert Moeller has observed that the concept of a trial marriage is a contradiction in terms, "By definition marriage is an exclusive, lifetime, permanent commitment. How can something temporary, non-binding and open-ended be considered a test of something that's just the opposite" (Strobel, 1997, p. 147). Spend time together, but live in your own place before you consider marriage.

Things to Think About

Your age. Do you know what the best age is to get married? There is evidence to show, in western societies at least, that it is sometime after the age of 25. The ideal seems to be 28 or over. So, if anyone asks you why you are not married yet, just tell them you are waiting for the ideal age!

Psychological development experts say that until we reach the age of 25 we are still involved in sorting out what is going on inside of us. We are still involved in:

- *Identification work* – who am I?
- *Individuation work* – who am I separate from my parents? How do I really gain that independence from them and live my own life?

- *Core values work* – what do I believe? What is important to me in life? Do I have the courage to really hang on to what is important to me?
- *Competency work* – what am I good at? What kind of career am I going to develop?

Also at this time young adults are going through spiritual formation work. Until the age of 25, many of us are still questioning: Do I believe in God? Do I believe Jesus is who He said He was? Do I believe it enough to arrange my life around the truths about God?

Wisdom tells us that, with all that going on inside of us, it is rather complicated to make such an important decision as “whom shall I marry?” It has been said that marrying young is like shooting at a moving target from a spinning shooting platform. Obviously that is not a wise move.

The lowest divorce rates are for men and women who wait until they are 28 years old or older to marry. The highest divorce rates are amongst those who marry in their teenage years or early twenties. Bear that in mind when you feel in a rush to get married.

Someone once said that marriage is like twirling a baton, turning handstands or eating with chopsticks. It looks easy until you try it. So we would advise that you slow down and give yourself a chance to know what is important to you as an individual and what is important to you in a marriage partner before you enter marriage hastily.

Don’t be too eager. Another mistake people make is that one or both individuals are too eager to get married. It’s like they get marriage fever. It sweeps over them. Often they don’t really know why, they just get carried away. Maybe they think marriage will end their aloneness, or heal their brokenness or ensure their happiness, or guarantee blissfulness. Some people convince themselves that marriage will make all of the trouble and the travails and the deficits of their lives disappear. Usually, nothing could be further from the truth.

If you’re really unhappy as a single person, a walk down the wedding aisle probably won’t solve that problem. It will likely add to the problem. So, if you believe marriage will solve all your problems, think again. Don’t be over-eager.

Think about your expectations. When choosing a husband or wife, make sure that you take time out to discuss the expectations that you have of one another. Subconsciously we always think that we are going to live just like Mum and Dad and that things will happen just as they did at home. Listen to Jonathan and Mary’s story, as told by Mary:

“One of the things that caused controversy in our marriage in the early days was time. Jonathan comes from a family which is very time-oriented. I come from a family where time doesn’t bother us.

In Jonathan’s family, when his mother said lunch was at 12:30 p.m., lunch was at 12:30 p.m! In fact, I remember going to their home and watching as the family got ready for lunch. It was like watching a military operation, carried out with military precision. By 12:25 p.m., all serving dishes were placed on an immaculately laid table; by 12:26 p.m., serviettes were shaken and placed on laps; by 12:27 p.m., all lids were removed from the casserole dishes; by

12:28 p.m., all plates were served; by 12:29 p.m. all cutlery was poised for action and by 12:30 p.m., all were taking their first mouthful. It came as a shock to me, when we were first married, that Jonathan would sit at the table at 12:30 p.m. expecting lunch to be ready, and it was an even bigger shock to him to discover that it wasn't!"

It is a good idea to talk about things like that before you are married. While you are dating, look at other people's marriages and say, "You know the Browns. Well, I wouldn't like that kind of marriage. I wouldn't want all that travelling. I wouldn't want to have all the busyness. But the Smiths, yes. Now that is the kind of marriage that I would want. They still have fun together; they seem to enjoy one another's company."

Consider how you are going to resolve your differences and develop the skills for this before marriage. A humorous story illustrates what is too often the case: A lawyer and a psychologist were making small talk at a party. The lawyer said, "You and your wife get along very well. Do you ever have differences of opinion?" "Definitely," said the psychologist. "Very often, but we get over them quickly." "How do you do that?" asked the lawyer. "Simple," said the psychologist. "I never tell her about them." If you are not honest about dealing with your differences before you are married, you will be struggling with this for a long time in marriage.

Look around; find some good marriages and find out what makes them tick! Talk about the expectations you have of one another as a part of your dating.

Three Essentials in Choosing the Right Partner

We've spoken of some mistakes people make. Let's turn to the positive and think about three essentials to consider in choosing the right partner.

Spiritual compatibility. The Bible clearly teaches the principle of being equally matched. "Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?" (Amos 3:3). Paul writes to Christians, "Don't become partners with those who reject God. It is important that you connect with someone who feels the same way you do about God" (2 Corinthians 6:14, TM).

When Christian singles hear this biblical teaching, sometimes they don't like it. Why? Well, for one thing, it shrinks the playing field. It reduces the number of possible marriage candidates. Their reaction may be, "Hang on, was God having a bad day? I happen to like this person who's not a Christian, and how come I can't marry them?" However, if you reflect on it thoughtfully, you can begin to understand the reasoning behind it.

Research suggests that marriages tend to be more satisfying among those who share deep commonalities. What is deeper than a person's spirituality? What goes deeper into a person's heart and core identification than their love for God and their sense of God's love for them? They respond to it; they open up their heart and say, "This changes everything. Christ loves me. He's forgiven my sin. I'm going to live in heaven with Him." You start to live that way in your life.

If you and your partner don't share a mutual love for bungee jumping, shopping in Harrods or collecting rare butterflies, that's one thing. But it's another thing when God is at the very centre of your life and pleasing Him, walking with Him, honouring and serving and proclaiming His goodness

and love is foundational to who you are. When that cannot be shared with your life partner, it is going to be hard.

We have known many church people who married outside the faith. We always sense an ache in the heart of the partner who is the believer. There is spiritual loneliness that their non-believing partner can never understand. There are obvious practical difficulties too; the one who doesn't share your love for God will not understand why you want to give your time and your money to God. But more than that, they just won't be able to understand your heart, what makes you the way you are. The spiritual separation can result in emotional separation since the emotional life and spiritual life are so closely linked.

Character compatibility. This question of character compatibility is vitally important—do you really relate well with each other? Do you like one another? Can you trust one another? If you are not compatible in character, marriage between you will likely be troubled.

If one partner is honest and the other one is not completely honest—that can spell problems. If one partner is responsible with commitments and the other one isn't, that can cause tensions. If one is wise about money and the other one is foolish, that can cause a serious rift in a relationship. If one is serious about sexual fidelity and the other one is not, the very life of your relationship will be in jeopardy.

These are not minor matters, but huge ones that can break up your marriage. Character compatibility determines whether trust can be built in a marriage. You really can't afford to compromise on this.

Emotional health compatibility. This is the mutual understanding of each other's backgrounds that leads to confidence that your future together will not be threatened by secrets and complications from the past.

Imagine this: it's Valentine's Day and the atmosphere in the restaurant is romantic and lovely. There are flowers, soft lights and a mutual attraction. The person across the table from you looks irresistible in the candle light. The reality is that person grew up in a fallible family with imperfect parents. They had less than ideal siblings and probably a few strange relatives. Most extended families have those! Further, you can bet that the heartthrob, into whose eyes you are gazing, didn't make it this far in life without facing some troubles and difficulties along the way. The question is: Do you know what kind of hits they took? Do you know how much damage was done to their emotional health? How are they handling that? Have they recovered? Are they growing strong at the moment, or are they sinking down? Is their life in balance or are they unsteady?

If you are going to buy a house, you will undoubtedly want a survey inspection and a report on its condition. What has happened to it over the years? Has there been flooding? Is the wood sound? Are the foundations good? Sometimes we think it would be good if potential mates carried such a survey so that the other partner could check out the full history. We think it's only fair to be able to look at the other's record—the trauma and the damage done, as well as the repairs and progress that have occurred. This is why premarriage guidance counsel is so important.

What has happened to someone is only half their story. The other half is how have they dealt with it! Are they open about their issues? Have they had help in coping with them? If they are open about issues, willing to talk and wanting to face them, then in marriage they will likely be able to deal with whatever issues may arise.

Mary's Decision: A Tale of Two Men

So be wise; use these pointers as measuring posts in your relationships. Ask God to guide you, to help you make one of the most important decisions of your life. Making the final decision about a marriage partner may not always be easy. Let's hear a bit more of Jonathan and Mary's story:

Jonathan and I first met each other at church. He started to attend the church that I had been going to for three years. We just had enough time to realise that we liked one another, when Jonathan moved. He planned on studying for the ministry. Working away gave him the chance of earning money to finance college. I remained at home, living with my parents and four sisters.

We began to write to one another. That was the real beginning of our relationship. At first we wrote short notes, then letters, then longer letters. In the beginning the letters came every two weeks, then every week, then every other day. Our affection for one another got stronger with each piece of correspondence and so did the muscles of the men delivering our mail!

About four months after the letter writing began, Jonathan planned to come and see me. He was going to spend the weekend with me and my family. Our relationship had gone past the friendship stage, so we were really excited about seeing one another that weekend. So Jonathan caught a ride to my home.

Unbeknown to Jonathan, however, I had also been writing to Hans, a young man who lived in Holland. In all innocence, I just had written to encourage him and to be friendly. Evidently, as Hans read my letters, he had concluded I was the woman of his dreams. He decided to pay me a surprise visit. He hitchhiked all the way from Holland to my address in England to spend the weekend with me. Two hours after Jonathan got there, Hans arrived from Holland!

I spent the weekend with two men who were convinced that I was the woman of their dreams. That experience is forever etched in my memory and in Jonathan's too! At the end of the weekend, I knew two things—I had to stop writing letters and make a choice. Was it going to be Jonathan from England or Hans from Holland? Jonathan won, "Hans" down!

That choice was not difficult to make. Jonathan and I knew enough about one another to know that we both have similar values. It was also an easy decision to make because from the age of seventeen or eighteen I had been asking God to make clear to me when the time came who was the right person for me. I asked God to give me wisdom and guidance in making the right decision. Twenty-five years later, I can say, I believe God helped me to make the right choice!"

Never Alone Whether Single or Married

Some who are listening today have already taken that step into marriage and it is working out well for you. Praise God! For some, it may not have worked out so well and you have been through the pains of stressed relationships, separation or perhaps even a divorce. Others of you may have not married. To not marry may be by your choice or it may not.

We started this presentation by quoting Genesis, where we are told that God said it isn't good that a man or woman be alone. Having a married partner for life can and does bring a great deal of happiness. However, being single or coming to terms with a broken relationship doesn't mean that you have to live with "aleness." God will provide for you too—through special friendships, caring communities, and a relationship with Him. He longs for each of us to have a relationship with Him—whether we are single or married—so that we will hear Him say, "I will be here for you; you will never be alone."

Today we encourage you to cultivate that relationship with God in all aspects of your life, especially in dating!

Reference

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Parenting for Growth

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Supplementary Material & Children's Activities

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For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12).

When a desperate, used and accused woman was thrown at Jesus' feet by some "church leaders" who were trying to entrap Him, the Saviour looked at her. What did He see? He could have seen the sins with which she had been involved. He could have just seen past her to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees who were trying to provoke an incident. He could have looked at the letter of the law and seen her as condemned. Instead, He focused on the spirit of the law. He saw a woman who could be rescued by that spirit. He chose to see in her a child of God with huge growth potential.

Jesus knew what every Christian parent should know—that every child is God's child. Every child is worth His sacrifice. Every child is called into God's kingdom of glory (1 Thessalonians 2:11).

Throughout the gospels, you find Jesus seeing potential in people about whom no one else bothered. When everybody else was busy locking out Zacchaeus, Jesus invited him in—into His kingdom with dramatic effects.

Where did Jesus find His disciples? He found them amongst the dropouts of the Jewish educational system—the ones who did not quite make the grade, the ones who weren't picked up by one of the big name Rabbis. Why? Not because He couldn't get anyone else, but because Jesus came to demonstrate something different—that all individuals count, that God sees value even in dropouts.

Children's Deepest Need

A world in which image seems to be everything puts enormous pressure on our children—pressure to succeed, pressure to "get an education," pressure to behave, pressure to look thin or athletic, pressure to wear the right fashion labels. The chances of perceived failure are high these days with such image-based criteria. The likelihood of not measuring up is greater than ever.

In large areas of our world, it would seem that children have never had it so good. There are more opportunities, more money, and more things. Nevertheless, surveys show that even though they

know they ought to feel happy, they don't. If you ask them, they will say that they think they are happy, yet there are high proportions of loneliness that are manifested in self-harm, behavioural problems and suicide.

To be really seen by parents. Why? Well, all the opportunities, things and toys in the world cannot replace the feeling of being seen, really seen, by someone who really cares. And of course the people by whom children really want to be seen are their parents. Everyone seems to know that, yet family patterns are such that it is easier said than done. Both parents often work; both often come home exhausted. Home chores are waiting; the TV or games console are such easy alternatives to relating to one's children.

Recently, we had a family evening at our house. We didn't do anything fancy—had dinner, lit candles, read a story, played a game. The point was just to be together. All of a sudden, our six year-old son, the middle child of three with a sister on each side said suddenly, “This is the best evening I have ever had in my life.” Tears came to my eyes as I thought about how simple this was and yet how seldom we manage it with our packed schedules. We live in Norway and want for nothing, except maybe time together to be a family. I thought of Revelation 3:17, “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”

What my boy wants, what every boy and girl wants and needs the most, is to be noticed, seen, most importantly by their parents. What is most important is that our children are valued for who they are unconditionally and nurtured in an environment where they are able to flourish and grow into the persons they were created to be.

Jesus understood this. He understood the power of a close relationship. He understood the power of standing in another's shoes. Lives were changed as a result. Grieving people found joy, lost people found a direction, and “no-hopers” found self respect.

Parenting Principles from Paul

The apostle Paul was another who understood this principle of grace. We don't really know much about Paul's personal life, whether he was married or had children. It would have been unusual for a member of the Sanhedrin to not have a wife. There is speculation about whether his wife left him when he became a Christian. Whatever the case, he seems to have understood much of what it means to be a father and of what children need. It could be that he learnt it through his own experience of grace with Jesus. Whether or not Paul himself had children, it is to him that we turn now for three important parenting principles that foster social and spiritual growth in all people, but perhaps especially in children.

In 1 Thessalonians Paul compares the way he has related to the church to the way in which a good parent relates to his or her children. “For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12). It is a simple verse, in a way, but oh so deep! It is a summary of how Jesus treated people over and over again. There is a process

outlined in this verse that is the key to growing people! This is the kingdom of God as it should work in families and in churches. Let's have a closer look:

Encouragement. The first attitude Paul displays in this father-like way of his is *encouragement*. We often think encouragement is shouting from the side of a football field, "Come on! You can do it!" or offering some kind and uplifting words before an exam, "You'll do fine. You've worked hard, so all you can do now is to give your best."

Some parents aren't very good at encouragement. Maybe they grew up in homes where there was not much that was positive and so they find themselves "encouraging" their children by picking up on failures and bypassing the positives. "Oh, why did you do that? You know you can do better." "Most of these grades look fine, but what happened in maths?" As parents, we need to be careful that our encouragement is not just poorly disguised criticism.

There is a sense, however, in which encouragement is not so much about what you say, but rather more about who you are and what you do. At a recent seminar I attended, Dr. Daniel Duda explained that in the original biblical languages, the concept of encouragement had much more to do with listening than with talking. As I thought about that, I realised how true it is. What can be more encouraging than feeling that someone has listened to you, that you have been understood?

As children learn to talk, there is a phase in which they know what they want to say, but they can't always form or express the words in a way that adults, even parents, can understand. As our children went through this phase, I remember how demoralised, discouraged and frustrated they got when they said something that we didn't understand. Sometimes they cried; sometimes they got angry and stormed off. The feeling of not being understood is one of utmost discouraging feelings. Although we tend to hide discouraged feelings as we get older, they are still there. I found myself looking at my frustrated one-year old and thinking, "I know how you feel."

Conversely, the greatest encouragement is being understood. Sometimes words aren't necessary at all. Just taking your child in your arms when you know they have taken a knock—that is encouragement. That is going to empower them to keep on to "fight another day" as we say.

Comfort. The second quality Paul demonstrated to the Thessalonians, as a father does for his children, is *comfort*. Have you ever been comforted by somebody who just does not understand? The intentions are good and yet it feels hollow somehow. Paul links understanding and encouragement as they should be linked in family life. He points out that encouragement is an important part of the parenting process. Listening is perhaps the most important aspect of encouragement. Only through listening, truly listening, can you understand. It is only when you understand that you can truly comfort. Comforting is about travelling with a person in their challenges, joys and pain.

There are times in parenting when the need to show disapproval for misbehaviour seems to get in the way of showing comfort. Comfort, however, is not about approval but about acceptance. When you think about it, approval is really about you as a parent, whereas acceptance is about your child. Approval is about your judgement of somebody else's behaviour or worth whereas acceptance is focused on the other person's intrinsic value as a human being.

Which way is God's way? God's attitude toward us does not depend on our performance. It is because of that we can grow in grace. As parents, we need to do the same for our children. Our children's growth, indeed their whole experience of God, depends on it. A child who is accepted is safe and secure and will likely grow up with a sense of worth and responsibility. Children are bombarded by messages to the contrary, but parents are still the number one influence on them. We have a chance to show them the truth that they are unique and wonderful human beings with huge potential for God's kingdom. We do that first by encouraging and listening, and then by comforting, accepting, empathising and showing that we have understood.

Exhortation. The third aspect of parenting as presented by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:12 is *exhortation*. This is the bit of the process that we are usually too eager to do. Typically, we are quite impatient. We see something wrong in our children's lives or something that worries us and we want to jump in and fix it. We want to give advice and get it all sorted out as quickly as possible. It pains us to see our children struggling, so it is oh, so tempting to hop over the first two steps—encouragement and comfort—and go straight to exhortation. We assume that we know what is going on, that we understand and we go in roughshod, like the proverbial “bull in a china shop.”

We have a tendency to do that with one another in the church as well. Often we can't wait to get to the exhortation part, to lay it on the line for people. We forget that, if somebody is going to change, they have to be ready to change. Do you think that Zacchaeus would have changed if Jesus had looked up in the tree and said, “Hey, you naughty little man, I know what you are like and I think you need to do something about it!” No, Zacchaeus would probably have experienced that in the same way as he had the condemnation of people over many long years. It took a demonstration of understanding and an afternoon of listening from Jesus before Zacchaeus was ready to change. It was the same with the woman caught in adultery and the Samaritan woman by the well—exhortation always came after encouragement and comfort.

So it must be in parenting. Push things along too quickly and change does not really happen because our children have not been helped to understand the problem or to own the solution. Yes, we have a responsibility to “urge” them to “live lives worthy of God.” But to live a valuable (worthy) life, one needs to feel valued. To be able to stretch towards that goal, a child has to feel accepted—even in failure. These are the foundations for growth.

We have a responsibility to make sure our children know they are called into God's kingdom. The attractiveness of that kingdom must be presented by parents and grandparents, uncles and aunts, and friends. It's way of life modelled by them before our young. The beauty of that kingdom, of course, is the grace, patience and love of God. It is a kingdom focused on the needs of the “other” through the principle of servanthood. Jesus modelled this His whole life, perhaps most vividly when He washed the feet of Peter, who would deny Him soon afterwards, and Judas who had already betrayed Him. He still loved; He still hoped; He still accepted, even though only one of them responded and grew as a result.

Can we be as loving, hopeful and accepting as parents? Surely there is a time for exhortation, for urging. Exhortation and teaching are an important part of our responsibility as parents (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). But as Jesus demonstrated and Paul taught so eloquently, we may well find that our exhortations fall on deaf ears if we do not first listen and understand, encourage and comfort.

Conclusion

As I look back on my life, I realise that I grew most spiritually and emotionally at those moments when I experienced grace, real grace, from real people who listened and understood, who accepted me even when I did not accept myself. It was through those spiritual giants in my life that I experienced the grace of Jesus first hand. That changed my life. I want my children to experience the same in our home. I want that for the children of our church, don't you?

“For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (1 Thess. 2:11-12).

May God guide us as parents as we put into practice the principles He has given us.

Supplementary Material

The following extra material may be used in conjunction with the sermon “Parenting for Growth.”

Scripture Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:10-12

Ellen G. White Quotations

From the chapter “Home Influences” in *The Ministry of Healing*:

“But, fathers, do not discourage your children. Combine affection with authority, kindness and sympathy with firm restraint. Give some of your leisure hours to your children; become acquainted with them associate with them in their work and in their sports, and win their confidence. Cultivate friendship with them... In this way you will be a strong influence for good” (*Ministry of Healing*, p. 391).

“Home should be a place where cheerfulness, courtesy, and love abide; and where these graces dwell, there will abide happiness and peace. Troubles may invade, but these are the lot of humanity. Let patience, gratitude, and love keep sunshine in the heart, though the day may be ever so cloudy. In such homes angels of God abide” (*Ministry of Healing*, p. 393).

“No barrier of coldness and reserve should be allowed to arise between parents and children. Let parents become acquainted with their children, seeking to understand their tastes and dispositions, entering into their feelings, and drawing out what is in their hearts” (*Ministry of Healing*, p. 394).

“Parents, let your children see that you love them and will do all in your power to make them happy. If you do so, your necessary restrictions will have far greater weight in their young minds” (*Ministry of Healing*, p. 394).

Involving Children and Families

Can children be involved in Divine Service? We think so. The following activities can be used in conjunction with the sermon, with the aim of getting the whole family involved with the worship service. Some of these activities may replace the traditional children's story.

Encouragement sermonette. Invite the children in the congregation to come to the front. When they are seated, talk to them about encouragement. Use illustrations from your life and experience with which they can relate. Incorporate the following points:

- What does encouragement mean?
- What are ways we can encourage one another?
 - We can do things.
 - We can say encouraging words.
- It is important to encourage others.
- When we encourage people:
 - We build them up.
 - We show them we care.
 - It makes people feel valued.
- Who can encourage?
 - We can all encourage others!

Encouragement cards. Provide the children with an experience in giving encouragement. You will need: blank cards (or cards made with the design in Figure 1), pencils, and flowers (optional). Say: *“Being part of the church, God has called us to encourage one another. This builds us up as a church family and creates bonds between us as people. Often the adults get told to encourage you children, but now I would like you children to encourage one of the adults here at church. I have made some cards for you to give to someone. Write your name on the card and give it to someone whom you are happy to see at church or would like to encourage today.”*

Other opportunities for encouragement cards include those who are sick, those the children especially appreciate (a Sabbath School teacher, Pathfinder leader, etc.). In addition, you could provide flowers so that each child could give a flower along with the card.

Children's activity on comfort. For this exercise, the parents sit together with their children and are given a few minutes to talk over the following questions* with them:

- What does it mean to comfort?
- Can you remember a time you were comforted?
- How did it feel to be comforted?

Encourage parents to listen and affirm the children throughout their chat together.

*These questions, if not used during the service, could also be printed on a piece of paper and handed out at the end of the service for the families to talk about together at home.

*I think you are amazing
and God agrees!*

With love

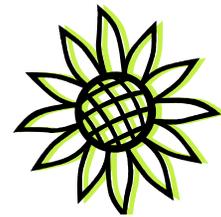


Figure 1

Show Jesus to the Children

by Anne-May Müller
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Trans-European Division

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” And he took the children in his arms put his hands on them and blessed them (Mark 10:13-16).

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).

I have seen artists try to recreate the scene from Mark 10 that we have just read. They make it look quiet, comfortable, peaceful and full of happiness. I think that is how it was—after awhile. But not at first. In the Bible text we read that Jesus rebuked His disciples because they rebuked the children. Jesus got angry, “indignant” as it says in this translation, because of what the disciples did to the children. Maybe the disciples thought the children were too noisy, or maybe they had whispered too loud during the sermon, or maybe they had dropped the box with crayons on the church floor, or their legs just couldn’t be still any longer because they could not reach the floor from the too high seats. Or perhaps they were hungry and grumpy because it was far beyond the usual time for their lunch or their afternoon nap.

I do not know just what the situation was, but I am sure the disciples did what they thought was the right thing to do. That, however, did not sit well with Jesus. In His presence there is room for everybody—even the children. It is then that He says those famous words, “Let the little children come to me.” Notice that there are no conditions. He did not say, “Let the little children come to me, if they can sit still.” Or “Let the little children come to me, if their clothes are tidy.” Or “Let the little children come to me if they can be quiet while I am talking.” No, He just said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”

Jesus let the children come. So should we let them come to Him? He adds next a challenge to us—that we must not hinder them, or stand in their way of getting to Him. In our day there is a lot of emphasis given to just how a message is communicated, that is to say, the “spin” that is being put on it. If Jesus had had a good spin-doctor for a communication advisor, He would no doubt have been advised to modify His message. “Do not” is not a popular expression; it signals you have done something wrong. That can create negative vibrations and make us feel guilty. We do not like to hear “do not do that.” But Jesus says plainly, “Do not hinder them.” It is a clear statement. We are not allowed to hinder them to get close to Jesus!

How then can we avoid getting in their way? I have two suggestions: Show them Jesus in the church and show them Jesus in your life at home.

Show Children Jesus in the Church

If we do not take our children to church, we actually hinder them from getting to know Jesus through the fellowship of others. Of course, a child can learn about Jesus in other places besides church, but to keep a child out of Sabbath school and the worship of the church is to exclude him or her from the possibilities of learning about Him that are there.

Maybe you do not want to push your child to get to know Jesus or are reluctant to introduce your child at a young age to Jesus and Christianity. Perhaps you think that children should be allowed to choose for themselves when they are older. If for those reasons you do not bring your child to church, you have actually made the choice for him. How is he or she going to choose to love Jesus when they are sixteen, if they have never been introduced to Him? How will they connect with His church if they have not found Him there? What do you think that teenager will choose? Studies show that children often make big decisions about their lifelong values at an early age.¹ The values on which a child will build his life are often chosen before they reach the teenage years. How important then that parents make a conscious choice to attend church with their children. Without that intentionality on Sabbath, especially if their personal relationship with God is weak, it is just so easy to slip away. In time, a decision not to choose has become a choice for the opposite.

I have found that it is not very difficult for a child to believe. A child usually has no difficulty in believing in Jesus as a dear friend even though they cannot see Him. Their prayers come from their hearts and are often an expression of what they are thinking and feeling at the moment.

I still remember one Sabbath afternoon when my 3-year-old son was standing in our garden, looking through the leaves of our old apple tree and yelling at the top of his lungs, “Hey, Jesus, how are you? Do you want to play?” I am absolutely sure that Jesus was smiling from ear to ear as He looked down on my son and immediately sent twenty angels down to hug him and assure him that He is longing to play with him. Jesus is looking forward so much to seeing our son at His place in heaven where one day they may just climb some huge apple trees together. Imagine if I had hindered our son and said, “You can’t talk to Jesus that way. You have to kneel and close your eyes when you pray.” Or, “You have to start with ‘Dear heavenly Father’.” No—Jesus heard that prayer. It came from a child. It is a privilege to experience that kind of faith growing in a child. To me it is a reminder of how important it is that I do not hinder them from getting good Christian experiences at church.

In reality, it is a challenge to keep children from being hindered in knowing Jesus at church. If they are going to learn to love Jesus in church, we must make opportunities where it is possible for that to happen. If we do not want to hinder them, we have to take the words of Jesus very intentionally to our hearts. “Let the children come here to the church, so we can teach them about Jesus.”

¹ See www.barna.org for studies on a variety of areas concerning faith and children/youth.

When I look back, I remember my childhood churches as very “child-friendly.” There were good and stable children’s Sabbath Schools. When I was 11-years-old, we moved to a very isolated town which had a church. The next nearest church was 2000 km. distant! That church was small, but it had a warm and welcoming atmosphere. There was only one other child of my age in the church, a boy, and he was also in my school, in the same class with me. How important do you think it was for that church to have a Sabbath School class for us two? Actually, I do not know how important it was to the church, but it was clearly important for at least ONE person in the church, the one who committed herself to be our teacher EVERY Sabbath for the whole three years we lived there! What kind of impression do you think that made on me? How do you think that shaped my view of the church? Was I important? Or unimportant? Was it essential that we learned about Jesus in church? Or was that no big deal?

As years passed, I became a teenager—a teenager who knew that in that church there was room for me. I could develop my faith and ask my own questions. I knew that I could go to that church and learn about Jesus. Because that lone teacher bothered to go to the trouble to teach us week after week, even though there were only the two of us in her class, I knew that children were important.

How are things in our church today? Do the children know that it is important to us that they learn to know Jesus? Do they know that we want them to come to Him? Do we create the framework where they can develop their faith? Are they important for our fellowship? Or do we put hindrances in their way? Is it important for us that there is a good and well-functioning Sabbath School for the children, so their faith foundation is firmly laid? Is it important that they sense that they are also part of the worship? Do we dare to involve them in the work of the church and give them age-appropriate responsibilities? Do we dare to show them that it is really, really important for us that they get to know Jesus as their best Friend, just as He is ours?

If we want to give meaning to the words of Jesus at home and at church, then perhaps we can put it this way: It is the parents’ responsibility to bring the children to church and the church’s responsibility to make sure that they stay in church.

Show Children Jesus at Home

In the personal lives we lead at home we must also take up the responsibility to show the children Jesus. If the studies are right in saying that children make their decisions about following Jesus when they are around 11 years of age, then this raises some questions for us. What do they have to build that decision on? Doctrines? 28 Fundamental Beliefs? No. If you are a child at this stage, what you have is your own experience. You like some people and you like the way some people do things. In other words, children like the values they have seen other people live by. Children learn in a lot of different ways, but the most powerful way they learn is by seeing what other people do. Especially is this true of young children.

I am not proud to tell you this next story, but it illustrates my point. Our youngest son, who is now two-years-old, has watched his older brothers and his parents use the computer many times. He has seen us in front of it more often than we should be, I think, for it sometimes takes away from family time. One morning, he came to me with a big smile and sparkling eyes saying, “Puter,

mummy.” He clearly was proud of himself and wanted me to notice that he had turned on the “puter” all by himself and was watching the movie “Winnie the Pooh.” I had never told him how to operate the computer, but he had seen it done so many times he knew just how it worked.

What do we show our children? Do we show them that Jesus is essential in our lives? In our families? Or do we show them that Jesus is just another thing we did not have time for today? These are painful questions for me to ask and even more painful for me to answer.

Let me share an illustration with you which I once heard a preacher use. Imagine that you have to bring the Olympic torch the final way into the stadium at the opening ceremony of the Games. You are a good runner, fast and determined—that is why you were chosen. You have decided to run really fast, but halfway to your destination a wind comes and blows out the torch. You look confused at the torch and then at your watch—you are making good time today and so you continue toward the goal. When you reach the arena everybody is standing and waiting for you. You have made good time and you expect the applause and praise of the entire crowd. But instead, all is quiet. Nobody is clapping. Instead, everybody asks, “Where is the flame?”

You forgot that the goal was not to run fast but to get the fire to its destination!

Where is your fire? Are you watching over it? Are you taking care of the flame? Are you making sure that you have something to pass on to your children, or are you so busy running that the torch is blown out? What good is it if church members and parents are burnt out? From whom then shall the children inherit the faith? Where should they go to get their torches lit if ours are not burning?

It is no secret that families are under intense pressure today. We have a lot of things we want to work for and standards we want to uphold. In my life, the days pass so quickly they just seem to disappear—filled with things that just must be done. There is not much space or time to recharge, to have quiet time with God. I often feel weary and burdened. When it comes time to rest, I am disturbed by an inner voice that troubles me with all the things I “ought” to have done, but have not found the time for them.

It is not only children whom Jesus calls to come to Him. He calls to everyone, “Come to me.”

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).

It is a heavy burden to be your children’s example and the one responsible for helping them to know Jesus as their personal Friend. But it’s also fantastic to be able to give that burden to Jesus and know that in Him, you can find rest.

Backpack Burdens—An Illustration

[Note: The following illustration will be most effective if you use your own life as an example. Otherwise, you can use the author’s illustration; it is reality and not at all made-up! Use a backpack

*and a pile of stones. Put the stones on the platform before the worship begins. Get one of the older children or a teenager to put on the backpack and come to the front to help you with this illustration. Be careful the backpack does not get too heavy for your youthful volunteer! * = Put one stone in the backpack. ☒ = Remove one stone from the backpack.]*

This backpack illustrates my week. It represents the things that have been heavy for me, the burdens I have carried. Though you cannot see it, I am wearing this backpack as I meet you here in church this Sabbath morning. You also have a backpack with you. Like mine, it contains the things that have burdened you this week. Let's examine a typical week more closely:

- Monday morning: The milk in our refrigerator is sour.*
- Monday afternoon: My sister-in-law is involved in a serious car accident, but is miraculously alive with no physical injuries.*
- Monday evening: I am gone for a work-related meeting and am not back home until after the children are asleep.*
- Tuesday: I am extremely busy at work.* I get an annoying comment from a colleague.* I receive an angry e-mail from another person.* I forget an appointment.* I am late in picking up my children from the nursery and school.*
- Tuesday evening: At home there are piles of laundry all over the house waiting to be put away.*
- Wednesday: One of the children needs to be taken to the ear specialist.*
- Wednesday evening: There is a meeting in the children's school that I must attend.*
- Thursday: We celebrate my son's birthday in the nursery and I have to bake the cake.* My sermon for the coming Sabbath is not finished yet.*
- Thursday evening: One child is sick and vomits in his bed.* Later, he vomits again—in my bed! *
- Friday: The "Friday-cleaning" is out of reach; we open all the doors and windows and hope that the largest fluff and lint will crawl out itself. . . *
- Friday evening: My conscience is tortured that the family worship time consisted only of a hurried bedtime story and a quick prayer.*

On Sabbath morning this heavy load is on my back as I arrive at Sabbath School and divine worship. That is when you meet me. You are also carrying your backpack with a week's worth of stones like mine. And you and I might be carrying some additional burdens like:

- Worries for aging parents who need a level of care you cannot provide but who do not want to move to an assisted living facility.*
- A daughter who has come home with a piercing in her nose.*
- Your daughter's boyfriend, the one young man you hoped would be her "Prince Charming," is a jerk with some very bad character traits.*
- You forgot a friend's birthday.*
- You did not get the promotion at work that you had hoped for.*
- Your children or grandchildren did not visit, or call or write you this week.*
- You are waiting for the results of a medical test.*
- You are concerned that you may not be able to afford the house or the apartment into which you had hoped to move.*

And we could go on and on.

So, you and I arrive at church on Sabbath morning. When we get there, we may be confronted by some things that put additional stones in our backpack like:

- The parking lot is full and you have to walk quite a distance to the church.*
- A stern-looking deacon gives you “the look” because you are several minutes late.*
- The children’s Sabbath school has been cancelled because the leader did not come to church, so you have to plan something at the last minute for your children.*
- The person in the row in front of you fusses and casts a disgusted look at you because your children dropped their crayons on the floor.*
- The children ask, “When is the children’s story coming?” but for some reason that worship service feature is omitted.*
- Someone is occupying “your” chair or pew.*
- You forgot your own hymnal and there are no song books in your pew.*

Does anyone want to carry this backpack a week for me? It is just too heavy to carry. It is to you and to me that Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Paul reminds us that we should “carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

“Carry each other’s burdens,” Paul says.

Think how it would be if you and I came to church and were met by a smile that conveyed:

- “How nice that you came to church today!” ☒ [☒= *remove a stone from the backpack*]
- “Let me take the children to their Sabbath schools.” ☒
- “I have some food at home; would you come with us to eat after church?” ☒
- “How has your week been?” ☒
- “I prayed for you this week.” ☒
- “Can I take you home in my car after church, so you don’t have to ride in the bus?” ☒
- “I am not doing anything this afternoon; is there something I could do to help with the youth group meeting?” ☒
- “I would like to help by cleaning the church from time to time.” ☒

In this way, little by little—showing we care, smiling at each other, hugging, offering kind words or an outstretched hand—we take stones out of each other’s backpacks. These are ways we quite literally carry each other’s burdens. These acts of kindness show to our children, and to all others, that Jesus’ love transforms hearts. We show that Jesus has done something special inside us when He has become our best Friend.

Conclusion

Jesus tells us that the children should come to Him. He forbids us to hinder them. At the same time He gives us adults the assurance that we can come to Him too, with all our worries, cares, burdens, guilt and troubled consciences. If we are to help the children come to Him, it is necessary for us first to experience Him as a loving Savior and to enjoy the rest that His grace brings to our burdened hearts.

When our homes become places where the children experience the love of Jesus put into practice, when they sense that time with Jesus in prayer, in Bible study, in family worship and church attendance matters to us adults, then we parents have responded to the command of Jesus about letting the children come to Him and not hindering them.

When the church becomes a place where there is room for our children to grow and experience the love of Jesus in practice, then we show we have taken seriously His command to let the children come to Him without standing in the way to hinder them.

When home and church work together to lead the children to a loving relationship with Jesus, then His blessings will pour down on us.

God has given us—as parents, but also as church members—a great responsibility by entrusting us with these little ones, His children. May we receive His love, patience, strength and grace to live up to that responsibility!

Anne-May Müller is the mother of four young boys and works as part-time Family Ministries Director of the Danish Union.

SoulMates

Reaching Out to Married Couples

by Karen and Bernie Holford
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*SoulMates*¹ events are for any married couple who enjoy going out together and want to deepen the friendship aspect of their relationship. *SoulMates* events enrich marriages through relaxed, non-threatening, fun-filled experiences.

Events typically occur on a Saturday evening after Sabbath or on Sunday and include a special dinner, presentations, games, discussion and fun. A private dining room of a local hotel with sufficient space for couples to be able to move freely about the room is preferred, though the program could also take place in a church hall or other meeting room where the environment can be made attractive and relaxing, and where there are sufficient catering facilities. *SoulMates* events have good outreach potential—they provide an opportunity for Adventist husbands and wives to invite their non-Adventist spouse or other non-Adventist couple friends to a time of social fellowship.

Overview of the *SoulMates* Programme

The following program outline is provided for leaders. It could also be used as a basis for the printed evening programmes given to the guests.

- 7:00 p.m. Arrival; guests are welcomed as they arrive
Couples enjoy quizzes and an ice-breaker question at their dinner tables
- 7:20 p.m. Welcome and introduction to the evening - Host Couple
- 7:30 p.m. Blessing offered on the meal – Host Couple
Dinner
- 8:15 p.m. Two mini-presentations by two different couples
- 8:40 p.m. Dessert
Prizes for quiz winners
Balloon game
- 9:00 p.m. Discussion and questions
- 9:20 p.m. Couples plan future friendship times
- 9:50 p.m. Closing remarks; blessing – Host Couple
- 10:00 p.m. Departure

¹ *SoulMates* was developed as a joint project of the Family Ministries and Women's Ministries Departments of the South England Conference.

***SoulMates* Event Planning Calendar**

• *Six months ahead*

- Establish a committee to plan and manage the event. This may be the Family Ministries committee, a sub-group of the FM committee, or a special committee selected by the church board.
- Create a budget. Costs may be borne by a special appropriation from the church (as an outreach event, evangelism funds may be available) or as part of the Family Ministries' regular budget. Income options might include: (1) charging participating couples an admission charge or a charge only for the meal or (2) finding sponsors in the church or among local businesses who will underwrite the event in whole or in part in exchange for advertising.
- Select a facility. If using a hotel, you may wish to obtain several price quotations so as to negotiate the best price for the event.
- Present the *SoulMates* event budget to the church board for approval. (Note: In churches using an annual budget plan, the event budget may need to be submitted earlier.)

• *Four months ahead*

- Select a host couple responsible to emcee the event.
- Select two couples who can each give a brief ten-minute presentation about fun and friendship in their own relationship. Encourage them to develop lively, humorous and brief presentations with visual aids if possible.
- Select additional people responsible for the following tasks:
 - Advertising the event through posters, mailings, e-mails, church website, etc. You may wish to offer a special premium to couples who register early (gift book or other gift). You may wish to publish the dinner menu and invite applicants to respond if they have special dietary needs.
 - Purchasing the items needed for props and as gifts to the couples.
 - Processing applications. Applications should be processed and receipted as they come in and tickets sent to participants with information letters and receipts. Persons responsible for advertising should receive weekly updates on registrations so that the need for additional advertising can be assessed.
 - Assisting with the public address system and the recorded music at the event.
- Recruit volunteers for child care who will offer their services so that couples with young children can attend. Child-care volunteers should be child-safety checked, i.e., carefully screened and background-checked.

• *Two weeks ahead*

- Programmes to be printed.
- Place cards to be created for each person.
- Ice-breaker questions to be printed ready for each place-setting. Use questions like:
 - *What are some of the funniest things that have happened to you as a couple?*
 - *Tell each other one of your funny couple memories, then choose a funny memory from your couple life to share with the others at your table if you wish.*

- Table seating plans to be arranged and printed.
 - Quiz sheets (Handout #1 *How Do I Love Thee?*; Handout #2 *How Do I Love Thee Answer Sheet*) to be copied and prepared—one per couple.
 - Date planning sheets (Handout # 3A, 3B *Date Planner*) copied—one per person.
 - Special prizes to be purchased and wrapped. (Special prizes are for quiz winners, longest married couple and the most recently married couple.)
 - Purchase 6 balloons (heart-shaped are preferred if available, or use good quality round balloons that do not burst easily).
 - Purchase 6 different gifts that would encourage a couple to have fun together, such as a book of marriage cartoons or fun dates for couples, a game, vouchers for restaurants or attractions, etc. Purchase 6 gift bags for these prizes.
 - Take-home bags filled and ready to give to participant couples (see below for suggested gift bag contents).
 - Choose appropriate gift bags decorated with hearts and/or love messages suitable for the occasion. (These, together with decorations on the theme of friendship, love and romance, are often available around Valentine’s Day.)
 - Include a variety of items in the gift bags, then top the filled bags with shredded or lightly crumpled tissue:
 - “Putting the Tingle Back into Togetherness.” The text is included with these program helps. Adapt as necessary for your setting, then format and print as an attractive leaflet.
 - Tea-lights or candles (heart-shaped tea-lights are preferred if available).
 - Heart-shaped chocolates and/or love heart sweets (message candies).
 - Bible verse cards (find pre-printed cards with verses about love on them, or create your own).
 - Love coupons. Provide some samples such as: *“This coupon good for a night of intimate pillow talk;” “Redeemable for a relaxing afternoon in a quiet park (by the water, etc.). Picnic and romantic companionship provided;” “This coupon entitles the holder to one candlelight dinner (with the issuer of the coupon) at the most romantic restaurant in town.”* Include appropriately decorated blank cards so couples can prepare and issue their own coupons.
 - Pots of bubbles (small containers of soap-bubble blowing liquid) to blow.
 - Fun things suitable for men. You might purchase a few sets of men’s cologne samplers and put one of the small sample bottles in each of the bags. Other ideas: A special mug for his hot-drink, a key-chain with space for his wife’s photo, etc.)
 - Advertising for any future or local marriage enriching event or retreat.
 - Discount vouchers and any flyers/leaflets advertising fun activities for couples in your area.
- *One week ahead*
 - Make sure the individual responsible for the public address system and background music has made appropriate arrangements:

- For public address/amplification system.
 - For CD player and suitable soft music selections.
 - Make sure any supplies, handouts, etc. needed for the evening are available and ready to use.
- *Event night – before couples arrive*
- Arrive with set-up team well before published start time.
 - Check table-seating arrangements.
 - Lay place cards and ice-breaker questions on the tables.
 - Put one programme per couple on the table.
 - Put take-home bags in a secure place until you are ready to hand them out.
 - Prepare the balloon game using 6 heart-shaped balloons. Before inflating the balloons, write each of the numbers 1- 6 on 6 separate pieces of paper. Insert one number into each balloon. Then inflate the balloons and tie them closed. Place the 6 different prizes in 6 different gift bags with different numbered gift tags, corresponding to the numbers inside the balloons.
 - Display prizes for quizzes on a table, together with the prepared balloons.
 - Check that public address/amplification system and background music are in order.
 - Do last-minute briefing of host couples and presenters making sure they have all the facilities information available to pass on to participants.

Detailed Evening Programme for Hosts and Presenters

- 7:00 p.m. Welcome guests individually as they arrive. Provide them with necessary information about the facility (coat room, toilets/restrooms, water fountain, etc.). Inform them of your plan for the quizzes and icebreakers at their tables. Give each couple a set of quizzes and a pen, so they can begin whenever they wish.
- 7:20 p.m. Host couple formally opens the *SoulMates* event, acquaints couples with the goals and expectations of the evening, and introduces speakers.
- 7:30 p.m. Host couple offers a blessing on the meal.
Dinner is served.
After dinner, the host couple announces a special prize for the couple who has been married the longest. A little later, a prize for the most recently wed couple is announced.
- 8:10 p.m. Score the quizzes. Quizzes may be collected and scored by the host couple during the presentations, or answer sheets could be distributed for couples to score their own. For additional fun, have each couple mark another couple's quiz papers.
- 8:15 p.m. First presenter couple makes their 10-minute presentation.
- 8:30 p.m. Second presenter couple presents for ten minutes.
- 8:40 p.m. Dessert is served.
Announce quiz prize winners.
- 8:50 p.m. Play the balloon game.*
- 9:00 p.m. Allow time for general discussion, feedback and questions.

- 9:20 p.m. Introduce the date-planning sheets. Explain how to complete the sheet and allow time for couples to plan future dates together.
- 9:50 p.m. Host couple closes the evening with a concluding thought and a blessing.

* *Balloon game.* Invite couples to leave their tables and go to an open area of the room. Toss the six balloons into the air. The object of the game at this stage is to playfully bat the balloons about among the couples, doing so gently, but without letting any of them touch the ground for at least 1 minute. (Note: If batting isn't safe because there are unprotected candles on the tables, couples could toss the balloons back and forth across the room to each other.)

After a successful minute (or a few tries to reach the one-minute mark), tell couples to catch the balloons. Individual couples with balloons then have to place the balloons between their two bodies. The object is for a couple to hug each other tightly and squeeze their balloon until the balloon pops. (Note: The stronger the balloons, the more challenging this will be!) Once the balloon has popped, the couple retrieve the numbered paper originally inside the balloon and claim their prize.

Sample Text for *SoulMates* Advertising Flyer

We are planning a special event for married couples on (date) at (place/venue). You are invited! Come and enjoy a special time with your mate! Bring your couple friends with you and enjoy the evening together!

The evening will include dinner, some mini-presentations on fun in marriage and several fun activities. Pre-selected married couples will be sharing different ways that they have developed their friendship over the years and how they have tried to cope with the challenge of spending quality time together. Practical suggestions will be blended with laughter, games, and time for couples to plan some fun times of their own.

There will be plenty of surprises and even a bag of treats to take away!

We believe it is God's plan for married couples to be best friends. Such friendship helps couples through the challenges of life and safeguards marriage.

Come and join us for this special evening to enrich your marriage. Please return your application form to (name and address) by (date) with your cheque for the full amount payable to (name of account). Check the designated boxes if you wish to take advantage of our volunteer baby-sitter service, our financial assistance for this program for those with special circumstances, or have specific dietary needs.

Sample
Application Form for *SoulMates*
Dinner and Discussion
Hotel Name and Address
Date: 7:00-10:00 p.m.

Please give the names you wish to have on your place cards:

Surname/last name.....

Man's first name.....

Woman's first name.....

Home address.....

.....Postal code

Home telephone Mobile.....

E-mail address

Church attending (if applicable).....

Date of your wedding Years married

Check boxes below if you would like more information on:

- Volunteer baby-sitter service.
- Financial assistance for this program.
- Special dietary needs.

Admission by ticket only - Ticket price: *XX* per couple

Payment by cheque made payable to: '*XXX*'

Return forms and payment to:

Named Person

Address: Telephone: E-mail:

Please apply by *date*.

Putting the Tingle Back into Togetherness! Fun and Friendship for Over-Worked Couples

When both of you live busy lives, it's sometimes hard to find the time to do special things together as a couple. Time together though is one of the best ways to safeguard your marriage. With just a little effort, you can begin to make time to rediscover each other as friends and playmates!

Decide to forego a TV program and to talk together instead. Share your dreams and hopes, and then talk about what would be necessary to make those dreams come true. Laugh together about the funny things that happen each day, share a joke, read funny stories from the Internet together, or watch a good sitcom. Laughter is healing and refreshing and helps to carry us through the irritations and hurts of life.

With a little time and thought you can begin to put some of the fun of dating back into your marriage:

- Think about the things you did together for fun before you were married.
- Think about the things that you always wanted to do, but never had the time or the opportunity to try.
- Write a list of ten places you'd like to go, or things you'd like to do on a date together. Swap lists with each other and see what you've each written. Take turns choosing a date idea from your spouse's list. Keep adding new ideas to the lists.
- Do all you can to make the dating occasion enjoyable, even if it's not the sort of thing you'd normally do. Focus on your spouse's enjoyment and find little ways to add delight and surprises to the experience, such as secretly buying him or her a special souvenir that they said they liked, or finding a new place to eat lunch, or meeting them with a bunch of flowers.
- At the end of each date, make sure you know when and where the next date will be. Looking forward to something is half the fun!
- Have a list of fun things to do at home too, for those times when you don't feel like going out, or when you can't get a babysitter.

Ideas for creative dates (and some good laughs)

- Pick up a book of local walks. Choose a walk where you've never been before.
- Take a day course together and learn how to make stained glass, watercolour paintings, willow baskets, fix car engines, or whatever.
- Allow each person the same budget to find a wearable outfit from charity/goodwill shops. Wear your newly-purchased outfits when you go out to lunch together, choosing a restaurant appropriate to your clothes.
- Eat each course of a meal in a different café or restaurant.
- Meet in a park with a packed lunch to share and pretend you've never met before. Feed the ducks together and sit on the swings.
- Go to a place where there are street entertainers and enjoy watching their antics.

- Try a new kind of restaurant that you've never tried before such as Thai, Cantonese, Tuscany, Vegetarian, etc.
- Go to a spa and enjoy having a sauna and Jacuzzi together.
- Visit a card shop and read the funny cards together, then each choose a card you'd like to give the other person. You can either read them in the shop and leave them there or buy them and take them home.
- Find a boat to hire for an hour or two. Take a picnic with you and a book of love poetry, or a humorous book about marriage.
- Take a blanket to the top of a hill one evening; lie on your backs looking at the stars. Take a book of constellations with you so you can try to find them in the sky. Take a flask of hot chocolate or soup to share together. You might even see some shooting stars!
- Learn to ice-skate together, try go-karting, or buy a simple kite and try flying it together.
- Find a free concert to attend or special evenings at museums.
- Visit a cathedral together and ask for the children's guide to the building. These often give lots of unusual facts about the building and interesting details to look for. Stay for evensong, for a peaceful and ethereal experience. Enjoy a meal in the cathedral café, or in a near-by restaurant.

Ideas for evenings in:

- Choose a menu together and cook a meal for two at home. Try cooking an Indian meal and serve it wearing an improvised sari, or a Japanese meal, to eat sitting on floor cushions around a low table. Find some music to suit the culture and enjoy the evening. If cooking's too much for you, order a takeaway.
- Compile a list of videos you'd both like to see together, so you know which ones to hire when you have the opportunity. Don't forget the popcorn!
- Play your favourite childhood board-games.
- Surf the Internet together for ideas for your next outing or holiday.
- Find or buy some crayons and drawing paper and have a go at drawing each other's portrait.
- Buy some child's modelling clay and try to sculpt a model of each other's head.
- Find an old piece of furniture that needs a face-lift and remodel it together, or buy some unfinished wood furniture and give it a personalised touch together. Sign and date your creation.
- Share five special memories you each have about your relationship and five special hopes or plans for the future.
- Borrow a book about massage from the library and learn how to give each other a massage with some of the fragrant aromatherapy oils you can buy.
- Find a modern Bible and read the Song of Solomon to each other. You may be surprised at what you find!
- Make a scrapbook of memorabilia of your fun times together. Jot notes of ideas for more fun times together in a note-book so that you're never short of new ways to have fun!

How Do I Love Thee? Let Me Count the Ways . . .

Match the different ways to say “I love you” to the language to which they belong by putting the letter from the second column after the language in the first column. Try saying some of these to each other! Can you say “I love you” in another language besides these?

1. Danish	A. S' agapo
2. Esperanto	B. Ik hou van jou
3. Gaelic	C. Nakupenda
4. Greek	D. Ja cie Kocham
5. Italian	E. Mai taunu pyar karda
6. Kiswahili	F. Te iu besc
7. Mohawk	G. Ch'an Rak Khun
8. Ndebele	H. Jeg elsker dig
9. Dutch	I. 'Rwy'n dy garu di
10. Polish	J. Ta gra agam ort
11. Punjabi	K. Ich lebe dich
12. Romanian	L. Ti amo
13. Slovak	M. Tora dost daram
14. Sri Lankan	N. Mama Oyata Arderyi
15. Thai	O. Niyakutanda
16. Welsh	P. Mi amass vin
17. Yiddish	Q. Techihhila
18. Vietnamese	R. Lubim ta
19. Sioux	S. Konoronhkwa
20. Persian	T. Toi yeu em

How Do I Love Thee? Answer Sheet

Danish	H. Jeg elsker dig
Esperanto	P. Mi amass vin
Gaelic	J. Ta gra agam ort
Greek	A. S' agapo
Italian	L. Ti amo
Kiswahili	C. Nakupenda
Mohawk	S. Konoronhkwa
Ndebele	O. Niyakutanda
Dutch	B. Ik hou van jou
Polish	D. Ja cie Kocham
Punjabi	E. Mai taunu pyar karda
Romanian	F. Te iu besc
Slovak	R. Lubim ta
Sri Lankan	N. Mama Oyata Arderyi
Thai	G. Ch'an Rak Khun
Welsh	I. 'Rwy'n dy garu di
Yiddish	K. Ich lebe dich
Vietnamese	T. Toi yeu em
Sioux	Q. Techihhila
Persian	M. Tora Dost dalam

Date Planner

List some things that make a date fun, romantic and exciting for you.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

List types of dates that would be fun to do with your spouse. Write down as many ideas as you can, then swap lists with your partner.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Plan several special dates together. Take turns, each of you using ideas from the other's list. The activities on the list of your partner may not always seem to be your idea of fun, but given that your partner chose them, they might be more fun than you think! Remember, your spouse will be choosing something from your list also!

Husband's choices from wife's list (1) _____; (2) _____

Wife's choices from husband's list (1) _____; (2) _____

Continue planning by narrowing the list to two of these. Assign one to each partner for planning.

Husband's date to plan _____

Wife's date to plan _____

Now, turn the page over and begin planning your fun . . . !!

Date Planner (Continued)

Take a few moments to plan the date you have been given to co-ordinate.

- When will it be?
- Where will you go?
- What will you do?
- Will it be a surprise, or will you tell your partner in advance which activity you have chosen?
- What will you do for meals, etc.?
- What transportation will you need?
- What arrangements need to be made ahead of time?
 - Tickets booked
 - Directions needed
 - Tables reserved
 - Other advance arrangements _____
- What will the dress code be?
- What information does your spouse need to know in advance?
- What else might make the date extra special, fun or amazing?
- What little gift could you give your partner as a treat on the date?
- What will you do if your plans don't quite work out?
- What else might you need to think about?

Now go and have some fun!!

Love Connects

A Day Retreat for Married Couples

by Karen and Bernie Holford
Family Ministries Department
South England Conference
British Union, Trans-European Division

Love Connects – An Overview

“Love Connects” is a spiritual day-retreat for married couples. The focus is on the couple’s relationship with God and with each other. The retreat will help them explore ministry as a couple that will share God’s love with their community in a practical way. *Love Connects* is built on the belief that ministering together can be a vital way of strengthening a married couple’s relationship with each other and with God. It empowers them to look outward and to witness in their own community in ways that fit with their unique blend of gifts. It enables them to fulfil the call Jesus gave us to reach people in a wide variety of unique contexts.

Leadership of Love Connects

The likelihood of a successful retreat will be increased if this event is led by one or more married couples. The presentations are intended to be simple and short, leaving as much time as possible for the couples to connect with God and with each other. As part of their personal preparation, leaders themselves should do all the activities prior to the day-retreat. It would also be helpful if the leader couples met together for their own day of prayer for themselves and their presentations and to pray for the Holy Spirit to prepare the hearts of the couples who will attend.

Worship and Praise Songs

Praise and worship songs will add much to the spiritual impact of the day’s program. Prepare song sheets, hymn-books or PowerPoint presentations of the song lyrics. Choose familiar songs around the theme of God’s love for us, e.g., “The Power of His Love” (Hillsongs). Carefully choose the worship leader and plan appropriate accompaniment for this time of singing and worshipful praise.

Love Connects Program Outline

- Session 1: Introduction – Setting the Context of Love
- Session 2: Love – Experiencing God’s Connection to Us
- Session 3: Love – How Jesus Made Connections
- Lunch break
- Session 4: Love – Connecting Us in Marriage

- Session 5: Love – Connecting Us with Others
- Session 6: Love – Sharing Communion Together
- Banquet to close (optional)

Session 1: Introduction - Setting the Context of Love

Presentation Helps

Welcome. We're glad you're here, coming together as couples committed to loving God and each other and committed to sharing God's love with a hurting world. We hope that through this seminar you will come to appreciate more of God's love for each of you, more of God's love between you as a couple and that you will discover fresh ways to share God's love with your families, churches and communities

Setting the context. At the heart of all our relationships is God's love for us. We love because He first loved us and because He has powerfully connected us to Himself through the greatest love-gift ever—the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We want to experience more of the power of God's love between us as a couple as we lovingly connect together. We want to find ways to minister God's love to others through our loving connection with them.

Prayer of releasing and receiving. We may have come here with all kinds of thoughts in our minds. We may have the issues of the week tumbling around in our thoughts. We may have concerns for our children and the people who are caring for them. We may have ongoing concerns that have been with us for months, about relationships, health, finances, or other challenges. But here we are, for a spiritual retreat, in a sacred space which is a special gift from God in our over-busy lives.

We invite you to enter into a different kind of prayer with us, called a “palms up, palms down” prayer. As we hold our hands palms down, it symbolizes the way we can release our issues, concerns, worries, fears and burdens into God's loving care. As we hold our hands palms up, this symbolizes the way we can receive God's peace, love and joy, which we invite Him to pour into our lives to fill the places where our worries were.

[Attendees pray silently with thoughts guided by the prayer leader. The following prayer is a suggestion that can be adapted to suit the prayer leader and the context.]

“Father God, we want to thank You for Your love for us. It's so big that it is all around us, as well as inside each of our hearts. We have come here today to experience more of Your love for each of us, more of Your love between us and more of Your love that we can share with others. We will spend a few quiet moments wrapped in Your love and letting it soak into our hearts.

(Pause)

“But we have come with so many concerns and issues crowding our minds and filling up the space in our thoughts. We turn our hands palms down, symbolizing our desire to let go of these worries and concerns. You know the secret fears in our hearts. We know that Your perfect love casts out fear, and we ask You to soothe away our fears with Your love. We bring our burdens to You and trust You to take care of them for us. Some of the things that worry us are hard to release, even to Your care. Please help us to trust You more and drop these worries into Your loving hands. We will spend a few moments identifying the concerns that fill our hands and release them one by one into Your care.

(Pause)

“Thank you Father for the loving way You hold our concerns. Thank you that we can leave these heavy things in Your hands and we can rest from carrying them so tightly, trusting You to deal with them in Your loving way. We will now reflect for a few moments on our gratitude for Your love.

(Pause)

“At last we turn our hands, palms up, ready to receive Your loving gifts. Now that our hands are empty, please fill them with Your peace—the reassurance that You will take all of our worries and fears and transform them into hopes and joys. We will take a few moments experiencing the peace that Your love brings to our hearts.

(Pause)

“We open up our hands to receive Your joy in the place of our tears, and take a few moments to experience the happiness that Your love brings to our hearts.

(Pause)

“Our palms are outstretched to receive your beauty in return for our ashes and Your comforting love in return for our distress.

(Pause)

“Father God, throughout our time together, help us to know what we need to release to You, and what we need to receive from You so that we can enter more fully into the experience of Your love for us and for each other.

Thank you for Your love, through the gift of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.”

Experiencing God’s love in our lives. We know that God loves us all the time, but there are moments in any relationship where the love sparkles more brightly and it is experienced in a more intense or vivid way. Choose one of those sparkling moments from your relationship with God during the last week and share it with each other.

[Leaders briefly share their stories of special times when they experienced God's love during the previous week.]

You may have experienced God's love as you walked out in a crisp autumn morning with the frost and the colours of the leaves and the sparkle of the sun rise. You may have experienced God's love when something that you often struggle with came together smoothly and perfectly. Or maybe you experienced God's love in a smile or a hug, or someone going out of their way to help you. Or maybe there was a moment of appreciation or affirmation that was especially significant.

Reflect on that moment. Fully enter into that experience of God's love for you and immerse yourself in the experience. How did it feel? Which aspects of God's multifaceted love were you experiencing most vividly? Then tell your spouse about your special experience of God's love.

Couple sharing time. *[Allow 5-7 minutes for couples to talk together. Play some suitable instrumental praise music in the background. Invite brief feedback from the group. Ask how they experienced sharing these stories of God's love together.]*

Session 2: Love - Experiencing God's Connection to Us

Resources Needed

- A copy of *Father's Love Letter* DVD or video. (Visit www.fathersloveletter.com for details of how to obtain this video. Watch it several times as you plan for the retreat.)
- A computer or DVD player, projection equipment, sound amplifier and speakers, etc. to play the DVD so that it can be seen and heard clearly.
- A copy of the words of *Father's Love Letter* (available from the website) for each participant.
- A copy of *My Love Letter to God* (Handout #1) for each person, preferably copied/printed onto a good quality textured paper.
- Pens

Presentation Helps

Prayer. *[Open with a prayer inviting God to reveal His love for each person in a way that will transform their relationship with Him.]*

Introduction of *Father's Love Letter*. *[Tell the group how *Father's Love Letter* has touched your life. Invite the couples to listen to the words and hear them as a personal letter from God. Ask them to identify the aspect of God's love that is touching their heart most at this moment.]*

Show Father's Love Letter. [*Pause briefly at the end of the video presentation. Invite couples to reflect on what they have heard and seen. Sometimes it is helpful to view this short video twice, so that the participants can more fully absorb the beauty of the message.*]

Couple activity. [*Hand out a photocopy of the words of Father's Love Letter to each person present. If some participants speak English as a second language, you might like to offer them a copy of the words in their favourite language. (Check www.fathersloveletter.com for words and available languages.)*]

Invite the couples to read Father's Love Letter quietly on their own and to choose a verse or line which is especially significant to each of them personally.

Invite them to tell each other which sentences are most significant to them right now, and how God used the "letter" to inspire them.

Invite the group to share a few responses to the words and the experience.]

Activity – "My Love Letter to God." [*Distribute Handout #1 with the outline for writing a love letter to God. Play reflective background music. Allow at least 10 minutes for each person to write a love letter to God.¹ Let them know that they don't have to fill in every space—the printed words are just invitations to guide the thoughts of the writer. Invite couples to swap the letters that they have written and to read them silently. Or they can read their letters aloud to each other. After they have read each other's love letters to God, give them a few minutes to talk together about what they wrote and why. Let the reflective music continue during this time.*]

Invite anyone who wishes to do so tell the group how this activity brought them closer to God.]

Time of blessing. [*Invite couples to bless each other. Suggest the following simple blessing if they are not sure what to say.*]

May God bless you, (name of spouse), with a richer experience of His extravagant love, now and always. Amen.

¹ **Note to presenters.** Some individuals may struggle with reading or writing disorders or otherwise prefer to speak rather than write. If possible, have available one or more small hand-held voice recorders so they can speak their messages rather than writing them. Offer this alternative in such a way that anyone can use the recorder without embarrassment.

Session 3: Love - How Jesus Made Connections

Resources Needed

- One copy for each person of the small group Bible study *Love Connects – How Jesus Made Connections* (Handout #2).
- Bibles – one per person
- Pens
- One copy per person of *Couple Prayer Ideas* (Handout #3).

Presentation Helps

Introduction. [*Start the session with a short prayer. Sing a song about Jesus' love (optional). Read 1 Corinthians 13 from one of your favourite translations.*]

Small group study. [*Divide the group into small groups of 3-4 couples and give each group a copy of Handout #2 Love Connects – How Jesus Made Connections.*

Allow the groups 30 minutes to work through the Bible study. Invite them to prepare something to share with the larger group on each love characteristic they explored.

Call the groups back together to share their presentations and reflections.]

“Couple Prayer Ideas” handout. [*Distribute to each person Handout #3 Couple Prayer Ideas. Invite them to try one of the prayer activities with their spouse as the session closes.*]

Session 4: Love – Connecting Us in Marriage

Resources Needed

- A quantity of small, red, heart-shaped confetti
- An umbrella
- A funnel
- Instructions for writing love letters to each other (Handouts 4A, 4B)
- Quality writing paper and pens

Presentation Helps

A story of God's love. [*Tell a real-life story from your own marriage of how God's love for you inspired you to find a new or deeper way to love your spouse.*]

How do we live God's “1 Corinthians 13” love in our marriages? [*Talk warmly and light-heartedly about the real challenge of continuing to love another imperfect human being. Tell a story of how your spouse has loved and accepted you, even when you had made a mistake.*]

What changes, even radical changes, might we need to make in our lifestyle and habits to make space for our important relationships? It can be useful to compare the way we love each other with the pattern of 1 Corinthians 13 love. This should not discourage us, but help us to see the next steps to take. How patient am I? How could I be more patient? How is my spouse patient with me and how can I appreciate the efforts they are making to be patient with me?

We may get stuck and find it very hard to love in the 1 Corinthians 13 way—which is quite normal! If so, we can reflect on God’s patience towards us and learn from Him what it means to love each other patiently, kindly, and forgivingly. Growing into His love is a process.

Illustration. [*For this illustration you need an umbrella, a funnel, and confetti.*]

God’s love is raining down on you all the time because He is pure love. [*Sprinkle a little heart-shaped confetti on your spouse.*]

Sometimes, by our hard-heartedness, it is as if we are holding an umbrella over our spouse to prevent them from experiencing God’s love. [*Open the umbrella over your spouse and sprinkle confetti onto the umbrella, showing how it interferes with the way God’s “love” can touch our spouse.*]

But God calls us to be funnels, opening our arms wide to catch as much of God’s love as we can, and to focus it onto our spouse. [*Use the funnel and pour more confetti through it, showing how the funnel concentrates God’s “love” confetti onto your spouse.*]

How can we be funnels of God’s love for our spouse? [*In the presentation that follows, your own experience of repentance and receiving forgiveness can be very powerful.*]

Pray and talk to God about His love for your spouse. Ask Him to help you understand how His heart, for your husband or wife, was hurt by your action toward your spouse. Confess your sin to God and ask Him for a heart of flesh, a heart of compassion for your spouse.

Know that Jesus would have died for that one hurt if that was the only sin in eternity. Ask your spouse to tell you how your wrong action affected them. Be prepared to listen to their pain and sadness. Admit you were wrong. Say, “I was wrong when I did that. I am sorry that I hurt you. I don’t want to hurt you that way again. With God’s help I want to change.”

Don’t demand forgiveness. Confess your sins and leave the rest to the Holy Spirit. Forgiveness is a process, not always an instant response.

Couple activity – writing a love letter to each other. [*Give each person a copy of the instructions for writing a love letter to their spouse (Handouts 4A, 4B) and a sheet of quality paper and a pen. Separate the husbands and wives as they write and give them half an hour to write a love letter to each other. After 30 minutes, invite them to come together and read their letters to each other.*]

Close this session by providing refreshments (special drinks, pieces of tropical fruit, chocolates, etc.) so couples can give treats to each other as they read through and reflect on their letters together.]

Session 5: Love – Connecting Us with Others

Resources Needed

- Copies for each participant of *Sharing God’s Love with Others –Our Audit* (Handout #5A) and *Sharing God’s Love with Others – Working Together* (Handout #5B)
- Pens
- A married couple with a shared ministry who will give their testimony during the session (see “Testimony from a Couple” below)
- Flip-chart and markers

Presentation Helps

Prayer. *[Begin the session by praying for the couples present. Thank God for His love for them and the way He has gifted them with spiritual gifts, talents, education, experience and passions, etc. Pray that the Holy Spirit will inspire the couples and help them to discover fresh ways in which they can work together to share God’s love with others.]*

Introduction. Love was put in our hearts by God for us to share with others. A happily married couple who work together in a ministry that blesses others is one of the greatest witnesses—to their children, their wider family, their church and their community. Love is not self-seeking and inward looking, but looks outward to see who else needs to experience God’s love.

Testimony from a couple. *[Introduce the team ministry couple. Invite them to tell their story. Interview them to discover how they chose this ministry, how they manage working as a team, and the challenges and the joys they have experienced together. In what ways did their ministry bless their own marriage?]*

Some ideas for ministering together as a couple. Your ministry can be as simple as having the church youth group over for an evening several times a year, providing Sabbath hospitality for visitors, teaching a Sabbath School class together, or providing a gardening ministry for the senior or disabled people in your community.

Finding our shared ministry. *[Encourage the group to share their responses to the following question while you write their answers on a flip-chart.]*

How do we find our place in God’s plan? *[Answers might include “pray,” “study,” “explore,” “talk together,” “try things out,” “listen to wise and spiritual mentors,” etc.]*

Worksheets - “Sharing God’s Love with Others.” *[Review with the couples the worksheets Sharing God’s Love with Others – An Audit (Handout #5A); Sharing God’s Love with Others – Working Together (Handout #5B). Explain how to complete the various parts on “spiritual giftedness,” “our skills and talents,” etc. Pray a prayer of blessing on the couples as they separate to complete their worksheets. Ask God to guide them as they discover how He wants to bless others through their couple team ministry. Allow couples approximately 15 minutes to fill in their worksheets individually and then bring them back together to spend time talking together and praying about what they have discovered.]*

Discussing the possibilities of a shared ministry. *[Allow the couples 30 minutes to pray and talk together. Let them know that discovering their unique couple ministry is likely to be an ongoing process. God may call them as a couple to different team ministries throughout their life together, and may also call each of them to their own unique personal ministries. The important thing is to remain open to where God wants them to minister together, and to be ready to stop, start or modify a ministry as God guides them.]*

Feedback to the group. *[Invite each couple to tell the group of at least one ministry where they would like to serve together. You might like to suggest to the couple some creative ways to report to the group their thoughts about their team ministry activity, e.g., using a mime or preparing a poster. (Make sure that appropriate supplies are available for them to use to make this creative report.)]*

Closing prayer. *[If a closing communion service is planned, inform the couples of the plans at this time, including the plans for couple foot-washing.*

Invite the couples to hold hands as you pray that God will bless and guide them in their team ministry together.]

Session 6: Couple Communion Service

Creating a special time of communion for the couples brings the spiritual day-retreat to an inspiring conclusion. A couple communion service can be done in many different ways to suit your context. This program outline is offered to guide your planning.

Resources Needed

- Foot-washing supplies (bowls, warm water, towels, containers for used towels and water)
- Moisturizing cream for couple-foot-washing (optional)
- Sheets of blank paper (for alternative “foot-washing”)
- One portion of unleavened communion bread per couple (using a heart-shaped cookie cutter, cut the rolled dough into hearts; bake in the usual way)
- Grape juice
- One stemmed glass per couple
- Words for any songs that may be used, either song sheets, hymn-books or PowerPoints

- Bibles for Scripture reading
- CD player and appropriate instrumental praise music and possible song of commitment
- Copy of *A Love Letter from God to a Married Couple* (Handout #6).
- Suitable decorations for the communion room – candles, flowers, etc.
- Gift-wrapped couple devotional book for each couple as a parting gift (optional)

Presentation Helps

Introduction. [*Set a spiritual context that summarizes the themes of the day.*]

Prayer. [*Pray a short prayer inviting the Holy Spirit to bless the couples as they minister God's love to each other and to those around them.*]

Song/hymn. [*Sing a devotional song/hymn such as "How Deep the Father's Love for Us" by Stuart Townend that speaks of the sacrificial love of God expressed through Jesus Christ.*]

Scripture readings. [*Choose husband-wife teams to read the following scriptures.*]

- Psalm 103:1-14
- Ephesians 3:14-21

Couple foot-washing. [*Often the person whose feet we most need to wash are those of our spouse. If you wish to have a couple foot-washing, it is important to use a room large enough to give each of the couples appropriate space to talk and perform this act with appropriate privacy. The use of a moisturizing cream for couples to massage into each other's feet if they wish can be a nice addition to the regular foot-washing.*]

A "foot-washing" alternative. [*If there are no facilities for couple foot-washing, then you could try the following alternative. Give each person a sheet of white paper. Invite them to think of one thing they do that they would like to stop doing because they know it is hurting their spouse. Instruct them not to write on the paper, but to fold, tear, or shape the paper in any way they wish to represent and communicate the action(s) that came to their thoughts. Give a few moments for couples to share their papers with each other. Pray a "releasing" prayer as a group. The couples will dispose of their papers before receiving the communion emblems (see below). Destroy the collected papers after the service. Since they are blank, they do not contain confidential information, so they can be placed in paper recycling bins, shredded, or burned as deemed appropriate.*]

Receiving the emblems. [*Invite a pastor or elder to bless the bread and the grape juice. Play devotional background music. Invite the couples to come forward to one of the serving tables and to throw their paper shapes into a dry foot-washing bowl placed beside the table. When they reach the table together invite them to hold hands as one of the lead couples prays a brief prayer of blessing on each couple. The lead couples can lay hands on the participant couples if they wish and pray for their team ministry and their shared witness to the world.*]

The “lead” wife hands the receiving wife a generous glass of grape juice and the “lead” husband hands the receiving husband a heart-shaped piece of unleavened bread. The couple return to their seats and serve each other, sharing their bread and grape juice. As they wait for the other couples to be blessed, they are encouraged to pray for each other, or to tell each other of times when they experienced God’s grace and love.]

Closing song. *[Choose a song such as Steven Curtis Chapman’s “I Will Be Here.” Give the couples an attractive copy of the words to read as you play the CD. You might also like to create a PowerPoint presentation of words and pictures to illustrate the song. Alternatively, choose a song of commitment to God and to each other such as “Side by Side We Stand.”]*

Benediction. *[Close with the prayer in Handout #6 A Love Letter from God to a Married Couple, an imagined love letter from God to the couples.]*

Gift. *[Give each couple a wrapped gift, such as an inspiring couple devotional book (optional).]*

Banquet. *[A special celebratory meal can provide a beautiful conclusion to the day-retreat. Whether you have a simple agape feast of breads, fruits, nuts and simple spreads, or a three-course meal, you might like to invite some of the couples to tell the whole group a story or testimony of something wonderful God has done for them during their life together.]*

Feedback. *[Invite feedback about the day-retreat so you can modify it on another occasion to suit the needs of your context.]*

Follow-up. *[At about six months after the day-retreat, you might arrange a pot-luck supper for couples and invite them to share reports of their ministries. Use “show-and-tell” style, with photographs or other materials they have to share. Encourage couples to pray for each other’s ministries and to network and support each other’s projects in every way they can.]*

My Love Letter to God

An exercise to respond to an awareness of God's personal love for me.

Dear Father God,

[Write some sentences of praise and adoration for the gift of His love.]

[Write about some of the differences that His love has made in your life.]

[Thank Him for the effect His love has had on your life.]

[Thank Him for the effect of His love, lived through you, on your spouse.]

[Ask Him to help you develop one specific aspect of His love that you would like your spouse to experience more fully through you.]

[Thank Him for reading your love letter to Him and for hearing the response of your heart to His love.]

Amen.

Handout #1 *My Love Letter to God*

Love Connects - How Jesus Made Connections

A Small Group Bible Study

♥ Think of a time in Jesus' interaction with others when He demonstrated these 1 Corinthians 13 aspects of love in action. [*Today, you don't have to explore all of these characteristics in your small group – just focus on two or three of the following characteristics of a loving relationship. Save the others for a couple devotional time with your spouse.*]

Patience
Kindness
Unselfishness
Courteousness
Humility
Forgiveness
Protection
Hopefulness
Appreciation

♥ When did Jesus specifically show this characteristic in His relationship with others? [*Find and read the Bible story of this event.*]

♥ What did He do and/or say that helped you to identify this characteristic of love?

♥ How might those around Him have experienced His love in this moment/event?

♥ Take some time to put yourself in the position of the person with whom Jesus was interacting at this time. How would you have experienced His love?

♥ How might the experience of Jesus' love for you have changed your life?

♥ How might this kind of love be expressed in the context of a marriage relationship?

♥ If you were to take a photograph of something in the 21st century that would depict this kind of love in some way, what would be in the picture?

♥ Be ready to spend a few moments sharing your thoughts with the bigger group.

Couple Prayer Ideas

Because prayer is a very private and personal experience, praying together as a couple can be very challenging. Working out a way to share praying together can feel strange to begin with. However, it is worth persisting in this as prayer can truly bind us together in God's love. It invites us into a special place of intimacy with each other and with Him.

Importance of the Holy Spirit. God's Holy Spirit helps us to know what to pray for and how to pray together. Be open to listening to how the Spirit wants to work with both of you, to develop your spiritual intimacy with each other and with God.

Importance of praise. Praise is so central to our relationship with God. It changes our perspectives on God and on our lives and experiences. Praising God together is one of the easiest places to start to strengthen our spiritual connection with each other.

If your spouse doesn't feel ready to pray with you yet. ♥ Show them gentle kindness; it is the Holy Spirit's job to prompt, not ours to push. ♥ Prayer is a way of showing concern for others. Ask your spouse what they would most like you to pray for. Pray aloud only what they have requested. ♥ When you pray together, ask God to help you to be humble so that your behaviour cannot be interpreted as spiritual superiority. ♥ Avoid behaviour which might leave your spouse feeling discouraged, as this can distance you from each other and from God. Remember that the aim is for spiritual closeness and intimacy.

Confession. ♥ Practice praying prayers of confession privately until you feel ready to share together. ♥ If your offence has been against your spouse, then praying for forgiveness from God in their presence may contribute to their healing experience. ♥ Be careful that your prayers are not used to hurt each other. Be aware of the importance of praying humbly, so as not to spiritually "intimidate" the other person. ♥ There may also be a place for confessing to each other and before God the wrongs we have done to others. Praying together about this helps keep us accountable to each other for working with God to find new ways to relate to others.

Questions to think about and talk about together. ♥ What are my concerns about praying together? ♥ What might be my spouse's concerns about praying together? ♥ What might help make it easier for me to pray with my spouse? ♥ What might make it easier for my spouse to pray with me? ♥ How might God use prayer to help us grow closer to Him and to each other?

Silent hands prayer. This is one of the simplest of all prayers. ♥ Talk for a few minutes about each of your prayer concerns, praises and thanks. ♥ Then hold hands and silently pray for the other person. ♥ Squeeze hands after a few moments and say "amen" together. It can feel so good to know that someone else is praying for us.

Sentence prayers. Prayer is often best when it is simple. We can feel guilty if our minds drift during other people's long prayers! ♥ Try praying alternate sentences. The husband prays one sentence followed by the wife praying the next sentence. ♥ You might like to be guided by the ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thankfulness and Supplication) model of prayer, praying one

or two sentences in turn for each section of your prayer together. As you get used to the idea, you can increase the amount of sentences you pray under each section.

Prayer book. Keep a journal of thankfulness to God. ♥ At the end of each day think of everything you want to thank God for and write it in a small diary. ♥ In the morning, write down together the concerns you each have for the day that you would like the other person to consider in their prayers for you.

Prayer notice-board. ♥ Use a pin board or magnet board (even a fridge door will do!) and create a prayer notice-board, with a collage of prayer requests, praising thoughts, thanks, cards, photos, texts, answers to prayer, and any other clippings. ♥ If you like being creative, make a beautiful scrapbook of your prayer-life together.

Conversational prayers. These are like sentence prayers where you pray a few sentences at a time and then stop and let the other person pray. Try to follow each other's ideas and link your prayers together as if you were having a conversation with each other and with God.

Prayer cards. Buy some index cards in four different colours to represent aspects of prayer, e.g. Yellow – Praise; Blue – Confession; Green – Thanks; Pink – Prayer requests. ♥ Take a few cards each and write different sentence prayers according to the colour-coded theme of the card. ♥ Lay them out together on the floor in rows of different colours and then take turns reading the cards aloud as you pray together. ♥ Alternatively, lay them out and read them silently together whilst holding hands. ♥ Or shuffle the cards and deal them into two piles. Take a pile each and arrange them into a prayer sequence. Read each prayer aloud to each other.

Blessings on each other. ♥ Pray a simple blessing on each other when you part, when you meet again, when you get up from bed and go to bed. ♥ Create your own words and traditions for doing this, such as kissing each other on the forehead or hand before you say the words. ♥ Create a special blessing gesture or signal so that you can secretly bless each other in public or show that you are praying for each other. ♥ Explore Numbers 6:25, 26; 2 Corinthians 13:14; and 1 Thessalonians 5:23.

Pray for specific requests. Try and be as specific as possible when you pray for each other, and rejoice together when prayers are answered, even if the answers were not what you were expecting or hoping for. It can be helpful to take a broad and eternal perspective on answers to prayer and to keep in mind that God works all kinds of things that look very messy to us into His beautiful plans.

Prayer reminders. Carry a small item with you that reminds you to pray for each other when you are apart, such as a button, a piece of ribbon, or other small, significant or symbolic item.

Prayer times. ♥ Pray for each other at a certain time of the day every day, by setting an alarm on your watch, mobile phone, or electronic diary. ♥ Perhaps you could text or e-mail each

other your prayers or even try praying together online using an instant text communication service.

Prayer “consequences.” ♥ Write out your prayers on two pieces of paper and swap them between you, adding a sentence at a time and folding over the top of the page so that it cannot be seen until the prayer has been completed. ♥ Take it in turns to choose different prayer themes, special requests, or sentence starters. For example, the wife might suggest that the prayer starts with praising God for His love. Each partner would then write, “Dear Father in heaven,” followed by a sentence praising God for His love. They would then fold the top of the paper down to cover their first sentence and swap papers. The next portion of the prayer would be suggested by the husband, and each of them would write a different response on their paper, fold it down again, and swap papers. The wife would suggest a different prayer focus for the next part of the prayer, and so on. When the prayers have been completed, the papers can be unfolded and read out loud as you pray together.

Daily prayer “menus.” Instead of praying for your entire prayer request list every day, it might be helpful to group your prayer request lists in some way and pray for one category at a time. In this way you develop a prayer “menu,” praying for your family members one day, colleagues and work issues the next day, overseas issues and workers the next day, local church and community issues another day, and so on.

A Love Letter to My Husband

This love letter takes the ideas of the popular ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication) prayer and adapts them to sharing loving thoughts with a marriage partner. The following questions and ideas are a sample of some of the things you might like to write about, but feel free to write what is most meaningful to you and what would enable him to feel very much loved.

If you prefer to speak rather than write, feel free to do so. Maybe you could use this outline to help you jot some brief notes so that you remember to say everything you want to say to your husband.

Adoration

- Write a few sentences of appreciation.
- What do you most appreciate about your husband?
- What does he do that makes your life more enjoyable, easier or interesting?
- What do you appreciate about his physical appearance?
- What do you appreciate about his spirituality?

Confession

- What one thing would you genuinely want to apologise to him for, in a non-defensive and honest manner?
- How can you let him know that you realise how much this action has hurt him?
- What do you plan to change so that you won't hurt him again, in this way, in the future?
- How will your relationship with God and your husband help you to avoid making the same mistake again?

Thanksgiving

- What things in your relationship are you most thankful for? See if you can list at least five.

Supplication

- Write a short prayer, from you to God, for your husband.
- What prayer requests would he like you to pray on his behalf?

Et Cetera

- What else would you like to say to your husband about the love that God has put in your heart for him?

What next?

- Sign and date the letter.
- Be ready to read your letter to your husband.
- Thank him for his letter to you.
- Keep the letters to read again in the future.

A Love Letter to My Wife

This love letter takes the ideas of the popular ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication) prayer and adapts them to sharing loving thoughts with a marriage partner. The following questions and ideas are a sample of some of the things you might like to write about, but feel free to write what is most meaningful to you and what would enable her to feel very much loved. Use a separate piece of paper to incorporate the ideas below into a letter. If you prefer to speak rather than write, feel free to do so. Maybe you could use this outline to help you jot some brief notes so that you remember to say everything you want to say to your wife.

Adoration

- Write a few sentences of appreciation.
- What do you most appreciate about your wife?
- What does she do that makes your life more enjoyable, easier or interesting?
- What do you appreciate about her physical appearance?
- What do you appreciate about her spirituality?

Confession

- What one thing would you genuinely want to apologise to her for, in a non-defensive and honest manner?
- How can you let her know that you realise how much this action has hurt her?
- What do you plan to change so that you won't hurt her again, in this way, in the future?
- How will your relationship with God and your wife help you to avoid making the same mistake again?

Thanksgiving

- What things in your relationship are you most thankful for? See if you can list at least five.

Supplication

- Write a short prayer, from you to God, for your wife.
- What prayer requests would she like you to pray on her behalf?

Et Cetera

- What else would you like to say to your wife about the love that God has put in your heart for her?

What next?

- Sign and date the letter.
- Be ready to read your letter to your wife.
- Thank her for her letter to you.
- Keep the letters to read again in the future.

Sharing God’s Love with Others Our Audit

Take some time to make an “audit” of the gifts, skills, interests and ministry-passions that you think God has given to you and your spouse. Each partner uses their own copy to fill out the columns for “Myself” and “My Spouse.” Discuss and compare your notes following the *Working Together* instructions on the next page.

Myself	My Spouse
Our spiritual gifts - 1 Cor. 12:1-31 •Offering wise counsel •Clear understanding •Faith •Ministering to the sick •Preaching •Discernment •Communication • Evangelism •Teaching •Helping others •Organising events	
Our talents – ways in which God has gifted us from birth •Music •Art •Writing •Drama •Fixing things •Creativity •Making friends easily •Other talents	
Our skills and education – skills we have acquired and learnt •Teaching •Plumbing •Driving •Conducting a choir •Presentation skills •Counselling •Cooking •Parenting •Other skills	
Ministry areas we are passionate about • Working with teens •Elderly •Children •Music groups •Married couples •The sick •Prisoners •Individuals with special needs •Community outreach •Hospitality •Other ministry areas	

Sharing God's Love with Others Working Together

The goal of this exercise is to discover how God could use the love He has given to your marriage as part of His mission plan for sharing the good news of His love with the world. By the end of this exercise we hope you will find something that God has uniquely equipped you to do together. It may be big or it may be small. It should be something you will enjoy doing together and it needs to be something that expresses God's love to your target group in a practical way. Pray that God will guide this process as you work together with Him to explore His mission plan for your marriage.

- ♥ Swap your *Our Audit* worksheets and look at what your spouse has written.
- ♥ Compare the sheets and see where you have agreed and where there are differences.
- ♥ God is calling you both to a shared ministry that will also share His love with others. What ministry do you think that might be? Perhaps you are already involved in a shared ministry, such as leading a small group, or teaching a Sabbath School class or leading a Sabbath School division. What have you learned from the audit that might enhance that shared ministry?
- ♥ On a separate sheet of paper write down some ideas about how you could use your unique blend of gifts, talents and skills for a ministry to one of your identified target groups.
- ♥ Plan to do something small in your chosen shared ministry area within the next three months. What will you do? And when will you do it? Write it below.

- ♥ Write a mission statement for your “couple team ministry” that focuses on how you will both work together to share God's love with others. Work out your mission statement on spare paper and then write your final mission statement here:

- ♥ Prayerfully dedicate yourselves to this ministry.
- ♥ Be prepared to present your vision in a simple or creative way to the rest of the group.

Handout #5B *Sharing God's Love with Others – Working Together* © Karen and Bernie Holford.
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A Love Letter from God to a Married Couple*

To the two of you,

You have been married for a while now and I just wanted to write and say how happy I am that you have committed yourselves to each other in love.

I expect you have discovered by now that marriage is not necessarily an easy option in life. You will have had your fair share of disagreements, but I hope that you have also had many amazing moments of closeness.

When I gave you the gift of marriage I had four main things in mind.

Firstly, I wanted you to be able to experience the incredible closeness and oneness that I share with My Son and My Holy Spirit. We are three Persons, different from each other, yet We are One. I wanted you to be able to experience the power and passion of My love for you both and for the whole world through the power and passion of your love for each other. Love each other in ways that I would show love for you if I were in your home, being willing to serve each other, and seeking each other's happiness. Strive for closeness as friends, lovers and spiritual companions. It can be hard work; it will hurt at times, but it will be worth all the effort.

Secondly, I knew that life on earth would hold many challenges and struggles and that it would be easier and happier when you could share those with someone who cares for you intensely. You are both very different from each other and sometimes this drives you crazy! But I gave each of you different talents, different ideas, different ways of communicating and thinking about things, so that you would have more resources, skills, and abilities that would enhance your life together. I wanted you to support each other, mutually, in your family and in your ministry.

Thirdly, I want the best for each of you. I want you to grow, develop and mature as Christians. A loving and committed relationship can help you both to grow in your ability to be patient, kind, and unselfish, even considering ways to meet each other's needs before the other has even noticed that they have a need! I want you to learn how to forgive each other and accept each other, just as I forgive and accept you. It's a high goal, I know, and it won't happen overnight, but I want to journey with you as you

make these discoveries and as you develop your spiritual maturity through your intimacy with each other.

Fourthly, I need you to be witnesses of My love for you and the difference My love has made in your relationship and your lives. If you have children, they need to experience the love I have for them through the ways you show love to them. This world is hurting and hungry for love. As you both grow in My love for you, I need you to share this love with others. I want them to see that a Christian marriage is a positive experience. Find a ministry where you can serve others together, making sure that you always protect the special relationship you have with each other.

Commitment to another imperfect human being is not an easy choice. Believe Me, I know! I have been committed to billions of human beings for thousands of years!

I just want you both to know that My love is here for you all the time. When you don't know how to love each other, or forgive each other, or comfort each other, or support each other, just come to Me and let's work on it together. Marriage is, after all, My idea, and My gift to you, and if it's not working as well as it could, bring it to Me, work with me, and let's look for some miracles together.

Now, as ever, all My love, always,

Your Father God.

**In this letter we have used our creative imagination to express some of God's loving intentions for our married relationships.*

Our Children, Our Responsibility, Our Time

Being a Christian Parent Today

by Carina Lillbäck-Larsson
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Overview of the Seminar

This seminar targets those parents who wish to create families built on Christian values found in the Bible. The aim of the seminar is twofold: to raise the subject of parents as responsible for conveying Christian faith to their children and to present an opportunity to discuss the challenges parents of today meet when faced with distributing their time.

The seminar includes thoughts and reflections presented by the seminar leader, an opportunity for discussion in small groups of 4-5 people, and practical applications.

Introduction

Most parents today live hectic lives. Work and activities easily fill each day and family members are apart much of the time. Work is necessary to secure the family income. The mortgage on the house and car must be paid, and the desire to give our children the very best, including material things, rapidly empties the bank account. The children attend preschool or school, but on top of that parents often feel their children should have the possibility to develop in a variety of areas, like music or athletics. After busy days, when the family does get back home again, everyone needs to be fed, the laundry washed, the floors vacuumed and so on. At last, the long sought-for vacation time finally arrives. Asked what your plans are, your answer will probably be a long list of activities.

We keep saying that our days are full and we don't have enough time. Yet we have become experts in creating labour-saving devices and doing everything faster and faster. This is an interesting contradiction. Cars are faster now, so we can travel long distances more quickly. Computers make "instant mailing" possible; instant communication has become commonplace. We no longer need to heat water on a stove; we cram our laundry into a machine that does the job for us. Yet still we seem to have less time than ever before.

If you are a parent, you likely identify with these situations just described. When it comes to the issue of time, this seminar might be a challenge for you, but I hope it is a challenge you will take on!

In the first part of the seminar, we will look at what the Bible says about parents having the main responsibility for conveying their faith to their children. In the second part, we will look at that information in the light of what we already have concluded, i.e., our constant lack of time. Then we will look at the relation between the two.

Part 1

Our Responsibility

George Barna is a renowned and respected author and director of the Barna Research Group, a full service marketing research company in Ventura, California. Barna and his team specialize in research for Christian ministries. In his book *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* he has, among other things, looked at how the responsibility between church and family is divided. To get a clear picture of the situation he contacted a number of congregations in the USA. In chapter five he writes:

Parents across the nation admit that one of the greatest benefits they receive from attending a church is having the community of faith assume responsibility for the spiritual development of their children. Knowing that there are trained professionals and other willing individuals who will provide spiritual guidance to their children is a source of security and comfort for most churchgoing adults” (Barna, 2003, p. 77).

He continues: “Our national surveys have shown that while more than 4 out of 5 parents (85 percent) believe that they have the primary responsibility for the moral and spiritual development of their children, more than two out of three of them abdicate that responsibility to their church” (Barna, 2003, pp. 77-78).

Parents seem aware they have the main responsibility for the spiritual development of their children, but still often tend to abdicate this responsibility to the church. Barna’s conclusion is that since parents do realize their main role in this, they do what they think is best, namely, to leave this responsibility in the hands of those whom they find more capable for the task. Then they try to stay out of the way. But looking at what the Bible says about this shows us that this is not the way God intended it to be. Handing over the main responsibility for our children’s spiritual growth to the church is totally unbiblical.

The Bible on children’s spiritual growth. Let us look at some Scripture passages that talk about the spiritual growth of children:

- Deuteronomy 4:10 – “Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they . . . may teach them to their children.”
- Deuteronomy 6:6-7, NKJV – “These words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children.”
- Deuteronomy 32:46 – “Command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law.”

- Joshua 24:15, NKJV – “As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

The biblical message is loud and clear. These passages all show the same thing: when the message of God is to be passed on from generation to generation God wants it to mainly take place between parent and child. As Christian parents we are told to pass on the message of faith to our children. The psalm writer Asaph wrote these words of wisdom:

- Psalm 78:5-6 – “He commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them . . . and they in turn would tell their children.”

The Bible tells us that it is God’s wish that His will, His laws and His words are shared and that His name is glorified. God wants children to know about Him and He wants this teaching to take place first and foremost within the family. The teaching about God should be a part of the every-day life the family shares. The Bible challenges us to teach and rear our children so that God’s Word becomes a part of who they are. George Barna expresses it this way: “After all, God never told His followers to take over the world through force or intelligence. He simply told us to have children and then raise them to honor God in all they do” (Barna, 2003, p. 18).

Small group discussion. [*Form small groups of 4-5 people and discuss the question: How does this responsibility make you feel?*]

Follow-up. [*Ask the small groups to report on their discussion and to share their thoughts and feelings.*]

To discover the biblical counsel regarding our responsibility for the spiritual instruction of our children can be sobering. At one recent parents’ meeting in a congregation in Sweden, the parents and Sabbath school teachers reflected on Barna’s research, found it really interesting and strongly agreed with it. When the issue of the biblical approach to parents’ responsibilities came up however, the room went silent. They discussed this same question: “How does this responsibility make you feel?” Some of their responses were: They felt insufficient, overwhelmed, ignorant and frustrated. So if you feel this way, you are not alone. Maybe this is how many of us feel when faced with this responsibility.

As we continue with the next part of our seminar, let us continue to reflect on this large responsibility toward our children and endeavour to find the ways and the time to perform this task.

Part 2 Our Time

Activity/exercise. [*Ask five volunteers to be seated on five chairs in the front, facing the group. Make sure they do not have access to any watches of any kind. Tell these five that they have to try to estimate how long two minutes are. As the group leader, you start the clock. When the volunteers think that time is up, they have to stand up. The object of the exercise is to come as close to two minutes as possible.*]

Debriefing. [*Debrief the volunteers. Did you feel group pressure? When the first person stood up, did any of you start thinking that maybe you should too? Maybe your heart rate increased and you started questioning your ability to estimate when the two minutes were up?*]

Group pressure to conform to group values. This exercise is interesting to me for it highlights what group pressure often does to people. If we see that people around us do things in a certain manner, we often start wondering if we shouldn't be doing it their way instead of our own . . . ?

Some of you might have read or heard about the New York Times bestseller *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom. It is a true story about a former student (Mitch) who, after many years, contacts his old teacher (Morrie) again. By now Morrie is suffering from ALS, a neurological disease that slowly but surely leads to death. They begin meeting, generally every Tuesday. Together they discuss life and death and everything in between in a very honest and straightforward way. This is some of what Mitch Albom writes about their eighth Tuesday session.

When people die, you always hear the expression “You can't take it with you.” Morrie seemed to know that a long time ago.

“We've got a form of brainwashing going on in our country,” Morrie sighed. “Do you know how they brainwash people? They repeat something over and over. And that's what we do in this country. Owning things is good. More money is good. More property is good. More commercialism is good. *More is good. More is good.* We repeat it—and have it repeated to us—over and over until nobody bothers to even think otherwise. The average person is so fogged up by all this, he has no perspective on what's really important anymore” (Albom, 1997, pp. 124, 125.)

We live in a world that puts a strong emphasis on money and materialism. The message “*More is good*” is repeated all through society. Group pressure keeps building; we are torn between what we see people around us emphasising and what we believe deep inside to be important. Our time is spent trying to “get more” instead of focusing on our inner values, the beliefs that really matter in life.

If we were to ask ourselves what we value the most, I believe many of us would have two lists of answers. On the first list, we would put those things that intellectually we find important. Those are the things we know deep down we ought to both value and prioritize. We know what “ought to be” on that list. Maybe it contains things such as “God,” “family,” “being with friends,” and so forth.

[*Use a flip-chart, a chalk board or a white board to list what the group finds important.*]

On the other list, we have our every day life and everything we prioritize on a day to day basis. This second list includes all that we allow to fill our schedules. Probably it is influenced by this world's group pressure and what many societies now repeat over and over: “More is good” and the

pressure we feel to conform—to not be too different. For many people, the first and second lists don't look the same.

Our perception of time. The second reason I find the time exercise interesting is because time is such a difficult issue to fathom. Perhaps our volunteers experienced that time was running both rapidly and slowly at the same time. Maybe time was hard to estimate; maybe they began to feel unsure as to how long a second really was. Time is something very relative. We can alter our perception of it depending on how we choose to approach it.

How we perceive this interesting phenomenon of time varies from person to person and from situation to situation. I think this is one of the reasons why it's possible to have the ability to do things faster than ever before and yet at the same time feel that there's never enough time. Whether this is true or not, I believe most of us parents today wish we had at least a little more time on our hands. If only there were a few more hours to the day . . . Maybe then we would have managed to do a little more of what we should do and want to do.

Part 3

Our Responsibility and Our Time: Being a Christian Parent Today

We are now going to pull together the two parts: the biblical responsibility of parents and our constant feeling of lack of time that we so often experience.

Larry Fowler is a minister and author who challenges us to look at our perceived lack of time in a different way. His book *Rock-Solid Kids* (2004) talks about the importance of educating our children and giving them knowledge of the Bible. He writes: "Parents, take seriously your responsibility to teach God's Word to our children." He continues by dividing our mission into two parts:

1. Model obedience to God's Word yourself. It's just too important to leave to others. Your own attitude toward God's word cannot be hidden from your children. They will know how you act, and that will be far more influential than what you say (p. 51).
2. Put teaching God's Word first! It is never an issue of *time*. It is always an issue of *value* - and Scripture tells us that teaching our children God's Word must receive the highest value of all. If you put teaching God's Word first, you will find that there will be time left for other things (p. 51).

Small group discussion. [*Return to the small groups of 4-5 people and discuss Fowler's statement: "It is never an issue of time. It is always an issue of value." Do you agree? Why or why not?*]

In Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus talks about the things with which we fill our days. He watched people around Him and found that all their time was spent on getting food and drink and nice clothes to wear. All this frustrated Him. You can almost hear the frustration in His voice. Why do you worry so much about all of this? Why do you spend so much time on these earthly things? God knows that you need them and He is more than willing to provide them for you if you just let Him. God will see

to it that you get what you need for the day. After letting us know that this is God's responsibility, Jesus concludes His remarks by giving us OUR job description: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6:33).

Our job is to put God first on our list of things we value and then let that guide us in our priorities.

How? "Model obedience to God's Word yourself." That was the first challenge Larry Fowler gave us as Christian parents. If we want to put God on top of our list of things we value, and if we really want to take our responsibility as Christian parents, we must make practical every-day choices that show we're serious about it. We need to organize our lives and our time in ways that show that God is important to us, intellectually as well as practically.

It is an old truth that children do as we do, not as we say. If our list of values never turns into action in our lives, our children will never take our words seriously. It is crucial that we put aside time to do what God has asked us—to seek His kingdom first.

Large group discussion. *[Make a list on a flip-chart, black board or white board of the large group responses to the question: What kind of activities would seeking God's kingdom refer to?]*

"Put teaching God's Word first!" That is the second challenge on Larry Fowler's list. If we intellectually grasp that the spiritual development of our children is primarily our responsibility as parents, it follows that we must take appropriate practical action, i.e., to spend time and energy to make it a reality in our lives. We need to go back to those two lists of our values—our "intellectual" values and also the "actual" values, the things that take up our time, the things we actually put as our priorities on a day-to-day basis.

Our struggle, our biggest challenge, is to get these two lists to coincide as much as possible. We need to put the focus on aligning our inner values with our external life. How we spend our time reflects our true values.

Assignments. *[Make copies and distribute to each participant the handout "Our Children, Our Responsibility, Our Time – Assignments." They could also be prepared on a PowerPoint slide or written on your flip-chart, chalkboard, or white board.]*

As we come to the close of this seminar, we are giving you a handout to take home. There are four assignments written on this handout. The aim of these assignments is to give you the opportunity to take these thoughts that we've shared today one step further. The assignments will help you decide whether these ideas will actually result in change in your life and if so, how that can be done.

1. The first assignment is to write down a list of your inner values, things that you think are really important.

2. The second assignment is to write down the things that take your every-day time.

3. The third assignment will be to compare these two lists. Look at them closely and think about whether your inner values are reflected in the way you spend your time.

4. If these two lists are very different, the fourth assignment will be to pray and think about what it might be in your life that needs to change in order for you to carry out your responsibility as a Christian parent. As you make changes, start small with one or two things that you want to change. Taking on too much will be overwhelming and you might end up being discouraged instead of uplifted.

Conclusion

I really pray that each of us will let God take this place and time in our lives and in our families' lives. I fully believe Jesus' promise that if we seek His kingdom and His righteousness first, the rest will be given to us.

In the beginning of this seminar, we mentioned that some of the thoughts conveyed here today might be challenging to some. Perhaps you are wondering if the changes that need to be done are realistic. Maybe you wonder about whether it's really possible to get theory and practise to go together in real life. Maybe you feel like letting out a big sigh because this is just another burden to bear. If this is what you might be feeling, please know that this is not the aim of this seminar. The aim is to get us to think about our mission and our responsibility as Christian parents and to think about how this should affect the way we spend our time.

I believe that there might be some who may have mixed feelings about this responsibility and their ability to find the time to do this. Let us end this seminar with two promises:

Our responsibility is not to do it all and to perform with perfection but to be available and diligent in our personal spiritual growth of our children. God will do the rest, sometimes through us and sometimes in spite of us (Barna, 2003. p. 75).

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (Jesus – Matt. 11:28).

We as parents do have the main responsibility of raising our children to be children of God. We are the ones who have been given this mission to pass on our faith to the next generation. But the good news, the most wonderful news, is that this is not something we need to carry alone. We have a God who will walk beside us in all our struggles to find the time we need to fulfill this job we've been given. And when this burden gets heavy and our inner values don't turn into practice as much as we'd like, we have One to whom we can go. Jesus has promised that if we come to Him with our burdens He will give us rest.

Prayer. [*Conclude the seminar with prayer. Adapt this prayer as necessary to make it your own heartfelt benediction on the seminar.*]

Heavenly Father, we pray that You will create in us a wish to take on the responsibility You have given us as parents. We pray that You will show us all the blessings that will come upon us when taking on this challenge. We also pray that You will be there in our struggles with making our two lists become one. Thank you, Lord, for being there for us. Thank you for carrying both our children and our struggles when we don't have the strength to do so ourselves. Thank you for Your grace and Your amazing love for us. Amen.

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Passing Spiritual Values to Children

A Study of Bible Parents & Caregivers

by Lotte Rechter
Children's Ministries Director
Danish Union of Churches
Trans-European Division

This single-session parenting seminar addresses the important issue of passing spiritual values to children by posing the question, "Who was responsible for teaching the children spiritual values in biblical times?" The program provides an opportunity to study the Scripture accounts of several parents/caregivers and the children/youth in their households: Abraham, Moses, Mordecai, Mary, Lois and Eunice and to reflect on the biblical principles thus discovered in making practical decisions for families today.

Participants will focus on the central role of the home in passing on authentic spiritual values, have a clearer understanding of their own responsibility with their children, and feel committed to undertaking this high calling to transmit the heritage of faith to the next generation.

Part A

Bible Study - Bible Parents and Caregivers

Handouts/PowerPoints. [*Prepare handouts with the Bible characters, texts and questions for participants. Alternatively, you could put the texts and questions on PowerPoint slides.*]

Small group assignment #1. [*Make small groups of approximately 8 people. Invite them to read the Bible texts and discuss the attached questions for each Bible household of parents/caregivers and children. Set a time limit of approximately 20 minutes. You may decide to assign each group the whole list of Bible characters and questions or you might divide the characters and questions among several groups.*]

Abraham

- What was the significance of Abraham's construction of an altar in Bethel? (Gen. 12:8)
- Why was this important here and elsewhere to Abraham? To his household? To the community? (Gen. 12:7; 13:18)
- How do you think Abraham's spiritual values influenced the development of his son Isaac's spiritual values? (Gen. 26:24-25)

Moses

- How did the faith of Moses' parents influence his life? (Heb. 11:23-27; Deut. 34:10-12)

- Why do you think parents are so important in the counsel of Moses about passing on spiritual values? (Deut. 6:4-9)
- What does Moses envision as the responsibility of parents?

Mordecai

- Why did Mordecai encourage Esther to join the beauty-contest? (Esther 2:5-11)
- Where did Esther go for spiritual guidance? (Esther 4)

Mary

- What do you think Mary did to help Jesus grow spiritually? (Luke 2:52: cf. Matt. 4:4-10)

Lois and Eunice

- Who were these women and what influence did they have on Timothy? (2 Tim. 3:14-17)
- Why do you think the apostle Paul called attention to the home life of Timothy?

Part B

Reflection – Passing on our Spiritual Heritage

Handouts/PowerPoints. [*Prepare handouts with the discussion questions for each participant or put the questions on PowerPoint slides.*]

Small group assignment #2. [*Against the backdrop of their Bible study of parents/caregivers and their children/youth, invite the groups to continue with the second assignment of the session—to discuss the following question, bearing in mind their children and the church's children. Allow approximately 15 minutes for this discussion. Groups will be asked to present their main ideas and conclusions to the whole group.*]

Discussion questions.

- What is it we want to pass on to our children?
- What values are important to impress on them?
- Why do we want to do it?
- How can we do it the best way?
- Why can we not pass on to them something we do not have ourselves?

Reporting. [*Allow each group 3-4 minutes to present their main ideas and conclusions to the whole group.*]

Summary. [*Affirm the groups for their work together. Briefly summarize the main points and principles you and the participants have discerned in the study of the Bible characters and their approach to passing on their spiritual values to their children.*]

End with a short appeal for the parents and the church to take seriously the responsibility of being spiritual guides for the children. Share God's promises to supply all their needs in Christ Jesus and to never leave them nor forsake them in their crucial task. Read the following Bible promise from Isa. 55:10-11.]

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:10-11).

Closing. *[End with a prayer (even better—let the groups pray together) for the parents and their children.]*

Building Friendships

by Heather Haworth
Children's, Family & Women's Ministries Director
British Union Conference
Trans-European Division

Start with an activity:

- Use several “bricks” that you have prepared from cardboard boxes such as empty cereal packets. For older children, write on the bricks the words *love, trust, understanding, honour, respect* and *commitment*. Explain in simple language what the words mean.
- Younger children can build a tower with the bricks. When they have finished, let them push it over. Make sure all have a turn. Ask, “Was it easier to build up or to knock down?” When they have answered, explain that tearing down is always easier, but that it takes time and care to build a good strong tower.

Continue with the story:

I want to tell you a story about how we build up friendships and how they can collapse just like the tower you built.

Mary and her family moved into a new house. Mary was happy to find a boy named Dan, who lived next door, to be her friend. Dan was just her age. He invited her to the Pathfinder fun day at church. She had not realised that going to church with a friend like Dan could make her so happy.

One day their friendship nearly ended. It happened like this. Mary had a birthday party. Her school friends and Dan came to it. As they arrived, Mary received their presents and cards. She had fun opening the packages and looking at the birthday cards. Each one gave her a store-bought card, bright and shiny.

But she didn't enjoy Dan's card. It was made from plain paper. He had drawn a picture of a

flower on it and the words “Happy Birthday” in his messy writing. Looking at it alongside the others, she simply grunted, “Thanks.”

After the party, Mary and her mummy looked at all her cards. They put them out on the table so she could enjoy looking at them for a few days. When Mummy saw Mary throw Dan's card away, she asked, “Why are you doing that?”

“Oh, it's just a messy bit of paper,” pouted Mary. “Dan didn't bother to buy me a shiny card like everyone else.”

Mummy put Mary on her lap and asked her a few questions. “Did anyone else think of *making* you a card like Dan did? Did your other friends spend time doing such a colourful picture? Did you notice that only Dan put some “kisses” next to his name?”

Mary sat still for a few minutes thinking about how unfair she had been toward Dan. She had said nasty things about him that really were not true. She felt really bad about how she had not said a nice “thank you” to him.

“Oh Mummy, I was wrong,” responded Mary. “I am going around to Dan's house to tell him that his card is the most special one I had received.”

Do you think Dan was happy when Mary thanked him? I can tell you he really was.

Just as it takes time to build a tower, the Bible tells us (Hebrews 10:24) to take time to build friendships with others. When we are selfish

or unwilling to say “thank you,” it is like tearing a tower down. As Mary learned, it is easy to misunderstand and criticise what people do.

Sometimes that happens in our families too. But when we apologize for the wrong things we do, when we say “thank you” for the good

things people do for us, we build up our friendships with people just like we built the tower.

Let us now ask Jesus to help us say nice things to one another just like Mary learnt to do with her friend Dan.

I Want to Do Something for God – Together With You!

by Carina Lillbäck-Larsson
Children's Ministry Director
Swedish Union Conference
Trans-European Division

The aim of this story is to show children and their parents that doing things together can be much more fun than doing them all by yourself. It also challenges children to say to their parents: "I want to do something for God—together with you!" Bring things to illustrate what you can do in a kitchen: pots, lids, spoons, and an apron.

Once upon a time, there was a boy. I'll call him Stefan. Stefan was 7-years-old and lived with his mum and dad and his little sister in an apartment house. Now Stefan's life was good—he had clothes, he was sure his bed was the most comfortable bed on the whole planet, and he had plenty of things and friends to play with. His parents were fairly normal parents; most of the time they were kind, though once in a while Stefan thought they were a bit unfair. Yet he still loved them both with all his heart. Sometimes, though, he couldn't understand what his mother was thinking.

Stefan's mum did most of the cooking in his family. She made him breakfast in the morning, gave him fruit to take to school, made him sandwiches when he came home, and made supper for him and the whole family in the evening. Since Stefan was growing fast, he was constantly hungry. Mother had to cook a lot for her hungry boy and the rest of the family to have enough. She stood by the stove day out and day in.

One day, Stefan had an idea. He had watched his mother cooking and it all looked quite exciting—all those pots and pans simmering with deliciously smelling food, all those bags with colourful ingredients and spices. He noticed too that she seemed rather tired.

"I'm going to offer Mum my help!" Stefan thought to himself. So he turned to his mother, excited with his wonderful idea: "Mum, can I help you?"

Unexpectedly, mother replied, "No, not now," and continued peeling potatoes. Disappointed, puzzled and confused, Stefan walked away. This was one of those times when he couldn't understand what his mother was thinking. He knew she was tired, but when he had offered to help, she said 'no.' Why?

(Ask the children why they think the mother said 'no' to Stefan's offer.)

There might be several reasons why mother said 'no,' just as you have mentioned. I think that grown-ups say 'no' to children sometimes because some of the chores, like cooking on the stove, are dangerous for children to do. Sometimes the jobs can really only be done by adults, as much as children would like to help. But sometimes we grown-ups might not even know why we say 'no.' That's why I'd like you children to help me with something.

You know Jesus once said, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). That means that when we help someone who needs help, we show Jesus (who is God) that we love Him.

There are a lot of people who need help, we all know that!

So this is what I'd like you to do: Think of something you can help someone with. Maybe it's helping around the house, or helping a friend or a neighbour. I'd like you to tell your parents or the adults you live with that it is fun

when you and they do things together! Say, "I'd like to do something for God—together with you!" Then tell them what you'd like to help with. I'm sure your mum and dad will be happy that you want to do that. They may not be able to do it right away, but I'm sure they'll plan time to do something for God—together with you!

Babies Bring Families to Church

An interview with Mick Smart
Pastor
London, England
Trans-European Division

Interviewer: *Why do you value baby dedication so much?*

Pastor Smart: We use the “Blessing of Children” as a form of outreach into the community. Over a number of years in the Swindon church we have made friends in the community. We let people know that we are available for them, that we see them as part of God’s family and that He is interested in them and their families. They now know that we are happy to do blessings for their children even if the parents are not married and do not go to church. People know we are not judgemental and really care about them as a family.

Interviewer: *When someone requests the Baby Blessing how do you respond?*

Pastor Smart: When someone from the community asks for their child to be blessed, I go to meet them at their home and explain what the Baby Blessing means. We let them know that we usually do the blessing as part of the divine worship service at church. If that is not possible, then we offer to have the blessing at the church on Sabbath afternoon. We will even have the service in their home so we can have that special time with their family. I also invite them to choose a favourite Bible reading or hymn if they would like to do so.

Interviewer: *Do most of the blessings take place at church?*

Pastor Smart: Usually they do, during the Sabbath morning second service.

Interviewer: *How many usually attend?*

Pastor Smart: We have often had twenty or more people come to the church who would normally never come inside the building.

Interviewer: *What else goes on during their time at church?*

Pastor Smart: The basic service includes:

- Welcome
- Explanation of the Blessing
- Scripture relating to the service
- Hymn (preferably chosen by the family)
- Children’s story
- Collection/offering

- A message on God's love for the child and the family and how God makes a difference in our lives
- Prayer of blessing with all family members and friends invited to the front
- Presentation of the Baby Blessing certificate
- Special musical selection for the child and family
- Closing hymn
- Benediction
- Introduction of family to the children's Sabbath School leader
- A fellowship lunch with opportunity for the church to build relationships with the guest family

Interviewer: *The Baby Blessing is part of your outreach ministry. How successful has it been in bringing people to Jesus and the church?*

Pastor Smart: We have made many contacts this way. Some send their children to Sabbath School; others attend our Easter or Christmas services. Most of all, we are building bridges into our community. People hear about a God who cares about them. They discover our church as a community of people interested in them. They find that we're there for them whenever they need help, not just when they want to celebrate their baby's birth.

Family Camps

Reaching People for Jesus!

by Karen Holford
Family Ministries Director
Southern England Conference
Trans-European Division

Family camps, now commonly conducted by many Family Ministries directors around the world as part of their annual ministry program, are often underestimated as opportunities for outreach to family and friends. Family camps can be a time of decision-making by non-Adventist spouses, children, teens and adults to follow Jesus and be baptized. Over many years of working with family camps, we have seen not-yet-Christian family members come to know the Lord through the experiences they have at camp. Baptisms of children, teens and adults are wonderful moments and provide the added blessing of witnessing to not-yet-Christian family members who are enjoying the camp.

There are a variety of ways to run family camps, of course, depending on resources available, the venue, the facilities, the length of the camp, and the number of families attending. Every camp, however, can be structured to maximize the potential for families to make friends. This friendship factor is most important in strengthening fellow believers and winning new people for Jesus. It is crucial to make family camp a “grace-place,” where people feel welcome and loved, even though they may be at different stages in their faith development and may exhibit different standards of conduct in their lives.

In order to enhance a camp’s outreach and witnessing potential, there are several things we have found important to consider during the planning phase. We offer them here as suggestions from which camp directors can pick and choose ideas that are appealing and practical in their unique context.

Family Camp Planning Group

Consider a Family Camp Planning Group. This group can help you as the Family Ministries Director to plan camp programs and may even be able to provide support for you or your camp leader during the camp. This group can consist of:

- The FM department director.
- Individuals who have previously attended a family camp.
- Individuals new to the family camp concept who will likely bring fresh ideas and perspectives.
- Individuals from families with not-yet-Christian family members, who will often have a special sensitivity to the needs of this important group.

Prayer for Family Camp

The most significant ingredient of a spiritually successful camp is prayer. Pray as you plan the camp, as you recruit helpers, and as you receive each application. Pray that the Holy Spirit will fill the camp and move on the hearts of all those who will come. Pray for the safety of the campers and pray that everyone who attends will be drawn closer to Jesus.

Advertising

Advertising for the camp gets the word out in the form of posters, adverts in church papers, letters to previous camp attendees, and via the Family Ministries website or the website of the mission, conference or union. People will be encouraged to attend and to invite their family and friends to join them for a family camp holiday when advertising of camp events is accurate and appealing and when families perceive the program as “family friendly.”

Include a list of guidelines/rules with the application form so that expectations of campers are made clear—no smoking, drugs or alcohol are allowed on site, etc. Have families sign on their application forms indicating their intent and the intent of those they bring to camp to comply with family camp rules. In this way there will be no confusion or misunderstandings about standards once campers arrive.

Processing Applications and Anticipating Needs

From the time of the first enquiry via phone, e-mail, letter or other communication, people should be made to feel welcome to attend the camp.

- Respond quickly to any questions or requests for forms and information.
- Be friendly, warm, hospitable and willing to be flexible if families have special needs or requests.
- Send receipts for camp payments and confirmation of accommodation as quickly as possible. Many families and parents need to book time off work months in advance, so it is important that their bookings and receipts are handled promptly.
- If family campers are planning to bring not-yet-Christian friends and family members, welcome them. Share standards of behaviour at the camp in a way that solicits cooperation. If someone is worried that their family member/friend will want to smoke, you can offer alternatives, such as the possibility for them to smoke off site and away from the view of other campers. These issues can be tricky to manage, so it is important to set clear guidelines and anticipate challenges ahead of time.

Circulating Pre-camp Information

It may be helpful to send out a pre-camp information pack. This builds confidence in the camp and helps to set a welcoming and considerate context. The pack may contain some of the following items:

- Welcoming letters and information from the camp directors, worship leaders and activity leaders.
- Map and travel directions.

- A list of what to bring.
- A list of campers. To help people connect with each other, provide photos with a short description of interests; include gender and age of children.
- Camp program/daily schedule.
- Details of any activities for which families may need to do some pre-camp preparation, such as special clothing/shoes that may be needed, sports equipment, talent night, children's program plans, gifts and cards for "Secret Families" (see below), etc.
- Travel game ideas (optional).

Family Name Labels

Provide name labels that clearly identify each family's accommodation. Prepared name labels give families a sense of welcome and belonging. They also help people to find each other easily as well as to take the first step in connecting to others—learning each other's names.

- Colourful name labels for each family unit, room, trailer, tent, or cabin can be made quite easily on a computer, printed out and laminated.
- Labels can be recycled, i.e., saved and used in future years if and when the same families return to the next family camp. Alternatively, you may give them to families as souvenirs.

Welcome Packs

Each family unit can be given a welcome pack of useful information and supplies as soon as they arrive at the camp. If the camp has permanent living units, the packs can be left in the campers' tent, caravan/camper trailer, cabin, or room. Families will sense that you have anticipated their needs and prepared for them and will feel more welcome and special. The welcome pack could include the following:

- An attractive "welcome to camp" card (a customized computer-printed card made using a simple greeting card graphics program).
- A list of families' mobile/cell phone numbers so that they can contact each other, especially in emergencies (get approval to circulate numbers beforehand).
- Information about meal arrangements, meal times, what to bring to meals, washing-up arrangements, etc.
- Leaflets about local tourist attractions, local map, etc.
- Pencils and Bible puzzle sheets for the children to use in their free time.
- Samples of Christian family-type magazines, or other Christian family information, such as a list of useful websites.
- A carton of fruit juice, some cereal bars or packets of biscuits/cookies in case families arrive after meals.

Mealtimes

Making friends is a vital part of a successful camp, especially to reaching out to the not-yet-Christians. Mealtimes are natural opportunities for building friendships; the more friendship connections families make, the greater interest people will have in on-going fellowship throughout the year with one another, including church attendance. Friendships increase the likelihood that families will attend future family camps.

- Arrange tables to encourage families to eat and chat with other families.
- Special activity placemats can help families interact happily with other families at their dinner table while waiting for meals. You can create such placemats incorporating simple crossword puzzles, secret code messages, dot-to-dot drawings, etc. copied from children's magazines. Books such as *I Spy Sticker Book* (Scholastic, 2000) and *I Spy Super Challenger* (Cartwheel Books, 2007) by Jean Marzolo or the *Look Alikes* series by Joan Steiner (Little, Brown Young Readers, 2003) provide double-page spreads that could be color-copied or dismantled and plastic laminated on thick card stock suitable for use as a placemat. Place a different picture on each table at a mealtime to encourage families to work together to find the different items or complete the placemat activities.
- Make colorful laminated cards with different conversation starters or funny things to do to encourage families to interact with each other.
- Place a container of crayons and some children's Bible worksheets or colouring pages on each table for the children to use.

Grace Box (Thanks before Meals)

A grace-box is an attractively decorated box (a shoe-box makes an excellent size) with a long slit in the top. Create a grace-box with a removable lid and place slips of paper and pencils within it. Children write their own hand-written mealtime grace-prayers, sign their name and deposit their grace-prayer in the box. At each family camp meal a different grace is selected from the box. The one who draws the prayer hands it to the writer who then reads the grace before the meal, keeps the grace they wrote (so it's not accidentally used twice), and chooses a small treat, such as a sweet, a dried fruit bar, a tiny toy, balloon, sticker, etc. The grace box will encourage children to come to meals early and to be involved in writing grace-prayers. It may also be less threatening for not-yet-Christians when children say the prayers before meals.

Local Treasure Hunt

Plan a treasure hunt walk. (A *treasure hunt* requires participants to follow directions, heed certain clues and be observant in order to discover "hidden treasures" or find landmarks the trail-designer has pre-selected.) Before campers arrive, have one of the Family Camp planning team members walk around the area or perhaps visit the closest town to map out a "treasure hunt." Compile a list of things that participants must observe during the walk. Clues can be intriguing, puzzling, or require careful observation, or teach something of the history and culture of the area. It could be beneficial for this walk to familiarize campers with local essentials such as telephones, grocery stores, pharmacies/chemists, banks, post offices, medical centres, cafes, playgrounds, etc. This will help to orientate the families to the local area so they can find their way around later.

- Print out the list of clues, making sure there are lots of things for the children to watch for—wild flowers, birds' nests, unusual rock formations or trees, etc. on their treasure hunt walk. You might want to hide in advance of the walk some literal "treasures" (sweets, trinkets, etc.) along the way for participants to find if they follow clues successfully.
- Give careful directions using markers the campers can follow (road signs, buildings, certain trees, certain number of steps to take, etc.).
- Give each family a photocopy of the question/direction sheet (clipped to a clipboard to make writing easier) and a pencil.

- You might like to have a place where families can pick up a cool drink along the way, by stationing a car with an ice-box full of juice cartons halfway along the route.
- Ending up at a play area can be a good idea, so children can run off extra steam and play together until everyone has completed the trail.

Secret Families

“Secret Families” is a popular activity at some family camps. It is like “secret friends,” only includes whole families in the activity. Each family is secretly given the name of another family attending the camp. The object is to give little gifts and cards to their secret family, either to individual family members (such as a small toy for a child) or to the whole family (such as a box of biscuits/cookies).

- If possible, assign families the name of their secret family before they arrive at camp, so that they can find and wrap their little gifts at home rather than having to do that at the camp. Make sure that families understand that they must not let their secret-family find out who they are.
- Print the details of their secret family on a card. Include the ages and gender of the children, and any special needs the family might have. Include clear instructions about how the Secret Families activity will run and the times when the Secret Families box will be opened and the gifts will be distributed.
- Keep a master list of the secret families for reference.
- Purchase a large plastic treasure chest, or similar lidded box in which families can place their gifts for distribution.
- If you have a very large camp, you may need to be creative about the gift distribution in order to cope with the larger quantities of gifts. Gifts can be given out at the end of a group meeting, or during meals.
- Encourage secret families to do helpful things for each other during the camp (secretively, of course), and to pray for each other.
- During the last evening of the camp, create a fun activity where each family tries to guess who their secret family has been. Choose a family at random and see if they can guess who had their name. When they have correctly guessed the family who had their name and who gave gifts to them, then the family they identified will next try to guess who secretly had their name, and so on.

Worship Activities

Some family camp participants prefer to have all activities multi-generational; some prefer a mix of multi-generational programming and age-group programming. If facilities and staff are available to have separate worship settings for different age groups, worship can be better tailored to the specific needs of young children, juniors, teens and adults with age specific songs, presentations and activities.

- Separating adults and youth permits different worship/study options for the adults, such as Christian family-building seminars, a creative and interactive group especially for newcomers to Christianity, and deeper Bible study/discussion groups or sermons.

- Adult craft, sport and special interest groups may also be offered as alternative activities at larger camps and this can help not-yet-Christians attend activities where they feel comfortable and can build friendships.

Planning All-age/Multi-generational Worship Programs

For camps where there is only one main meeting area and all-age or multi-generational programming is more of a necessity, or where leadership has decided to focus specifically on this mode of programming, special care will need to be taken in shaping the program to be inclusive of all groups and to address the needs of whole families. Some worship themes lend themselves to a wide range of possibilities for all age groups. Not-yet-Christians may feel more comfortable at worship times when the activities are designed to appeal to the whole family.

- Choose an over-arching worship theme for the whole camp program that has wide appeal and flexibility, such as the days of creation, the story of Noah's ark, Bible heroes, the parables of Jesus, friends of Jesus, our wonderful bodies, etc. Divide the theme into separate components according to the number of worship programs during the camp. Be sure that each of the worship times has a clear theme or focus of its own. Identify the main thought you wish to convey.
- Select an easy-to-learn theme song that will have general appeal. If possible, work with a song leader or music team. After a time of singing, continue with a short prayer and an interest-catching activity that focuses on the chosen theme. This interest-catching activity at each worship session needs to attract the attention of the campers, especially the curiosity of the children. It could be a brief drama, a family musical group, musicians using unusual instruments, etc. It should be brief and contain an element of surprise, humour or otherwise stimulate interest. Congregations usually respond positively to activities that involve children in some way.
- The activity of an all-age service needs to change every 5-7 minutes. Consider the needs of visual and active learners as well as those who learn by hearing. Be mindful of the needs of little children and teens as well as grown-ups.
- After the interest-catcher, continue with your main story or teaching session. Think about how you can make this as lively and creative as possible, utilizing the space available and involving people to the best advantage to convey the message.
- You could also include mini-quizzes, family craft activities, creative family prayer times, and different ways to learn the Bible verse for the day. [For more ideas to help you plan the worships you could explore and develop the ideas in such books as *100 Quick and Easy Worship Ideas for Kids* by Karen Holford (Pacific Press, 2004) and *100 Creative Prayer Ideas for Kids—and Grown Ups Too* by Karen Holford (Pacific Press, 2003)].
- It can be helpful to have a worship box or folder for each family at the camp. Label the box with their family name. Put blank paper, marker pens, glue-sticks and safety scissors in each box. After the completion of a program, add the items they will need for the next worship program—craft items, photocopied sheets, or an occasional treat or surprise.
- Keep the worship programs happy, grace-filled, focused on Jesus' love, and positive. In multi-generational programs, children can be challenging. Be accepting of their presence. Use an amplification system to over-ride any commotion they may cause. Find ways to maintain clear boundaries with the children, being firm yet kind with any words of restraint that are

said. A positive, loving tone helps all worshippers, including those who are not-yet-Christians to feel safe and uplifted.

- If it is desirable to plan an alternate activity for teens, try challenging them to get involved with the worship theme. In one family camp, during a series of worships on the story of creation, teens were invited to create an animal from the natural resources on the camp site and to display their creation to all by the end of the worship time. On another occasion, they were asked to write down any questions they had about creation, then to work in groups to compile answers to the questions or to make a booklet of ideas for ways in which Christians can take better care of God's creation.
- As an alternative to the usual church service, one family camp had a series of activity stations set up where families could experience Bible stories, especially stories about Jesus, in new and exciting ways. For example, people sat—one at a time—on a wooden bench with blindfolds on. While a narrator read the story of Jesus stilling the storm, they were sprayed gently with water and a couple of strong men tilted back and forth the bench on which they were seated, mimicking the storm. At a seaside family camp, a group was invited to consider the story of creation and sculpt a man out of beach sand, recalling God's forming of Adam. These alternative worship services provided an exciting variation that inspired the campers and provided a non-threatening experience for the not-yet-Christians unfamiliar with church.

Pastoral Care of Campers

Caring for the spiritual needs of all the campers is a key part of creating a camp with maximum outreach potential. At smaller camps, it may be possible for one pastoral worker to minister to the several families who are present. Spiritual responsibilities of such a pastoral worker include befriending families, supporting them, and spending time with them (eating a meal with the family, visiting them in their accommodation, praying with them, joining them on a sports team, etc.).

At larger camps, it may be necessary to have two or more staff members whose only responsibility is to offer pastoral care to the campers. They organize daily worship and provide spiritual inspiration for the camp staff. Behind the scenes, these people pray specifically for all the campers, especially for the not-yet-Christians.

If a baptism or communion service is planned during the camp, find creative ways to help everyone understand what is happening and to be involved in the service. Family camps provide an excellent opportunity to do something different, such as holding the foot-washing service on a beach or worshipping outdoors.

Family-building Activities

A family camp always needs a variety of activities to help families build friendships. If possible, discover the skills of the not-yet-Christian campers. Involve them in a responsible role at some time during the camp. Assess potential risks and ensure the safety of everyone during all activities. Here are a few ideas that can involve a broad spectrum of skills and abilities:

- Family Olympics or sports day. Create some fun and unusual contests to add to the usual range of races, etc.
- Camp concert. Invite as many families as possible to contribute a musical item or a sketch.

- Scavenger hunt. Give each family or group a list of nature objects to find and see who can collect everything on the list first.
 - Build a family shelter. Give each family or group a simple kit of strong twine and scissors and instruct them to build a hut in the woods. They are given one hour to build a structure that would keep them fairly dry if it rained. Serve picnic lunches to families in the huts and shelters they construct or have a barbecue in the commons area amid the family-built shelters.
 - Creativity game. Give each family a bag of paper scraps, baking foil, bathroom tissue, adhesive tape, etc, and invite them to make different things. For example, choose a wedding theme and have each group make the different components of a wedding—dress a girl as a bride, a boy as a groom, make a cake, a bouquet, church and car, etc, all out of the scraps you have given them, plus anything else they can find on the camp site.
 - Outdoor trips. Plan cycling trips, hikes, outings, or beach and water activities, depending on the area where you are camping.
 - Camp fires. Include songs, stories, dramas, etc. Try cooking a meal using the camp fire (baked potatoes, roasted corn, camp bread, wieners, hot chocolate, marshmallows, etc.).
 - Family film nights. These may be especially useful when outdoor activity is restricted. Christian films, such as the *Matthew* series, introduce Jesus to the not-yet-Christians and inspire all campers. (See www.christianitytoday.com to read reviews of family films and to download useful discussion guides for the films.)
- Award ceremonies. Smaller camps could feature an award ceremony, where every camper— young and old—receives a simple award for something special they have done during the camp—showing appreciation, helping everyone feel valued, working in clean-up, carrying firewood, etc.
- Game nights. Choose games that don't require participants to have special prior knowledge, so everyone has an equal chance. Give each group a practical task to perform together, such as creating a mime to a popular song, putting a jigsaw puzzle together, decorating a cake, making a kite that will fly, building the highest tower out of disposable cups and plates, etc.

Ideas for Closing Camp

Plan a special closing for the camp. Closing might involve:

- A brief time of “camp testimonies” during which families and individuals can tell the group how this camp has moved them spiritually or blessed them and their families.
- Giving a small gift to each family, such as a book, that will encourage them to get to know God as a family, or strengthen their relationships. [For example, *Jumpstart Connections* by Karen Holford with Karen & Ron Flowers (General Conference Ministerial Resource Center, 2006)]
- Expressing public thanks for the staff at the camp, as well as those who volunteered in different capacities, especially those who are not yet church members.
- Prayer fellowship. Prayer requests could be taken and prayers offered to bless each family according to their needs. Alternatively, families could be matched in pairs to share written prayer requests with each other in ways that will not embarrass the not-yet-Christian families.
- Have campers hold hands and sing a song such as *Side By Side We Stand*, followed by a short blessing/benediction.

Staying in Touch after Family Camp

Encourage campers to stay connected to each other, especially by praying for those with whom they formed friendships at camp.

- Campers may wish to share mobile phone numbers and e-mail addresses so that they can stay in contact and encourage each other.
- For smaller groups, it may be possible to send a personal letter of appreciation to each family beginning within a month of the camp and continuing periodically throughout the year.
- For more systematic follow-up for pastoral care, divide the camp families into groups (perhaps 10). Each month, contact all the families in one of the groups to see how they are doing and to ask if they have any special prayer requests. It may be easier for the not-yet-Christians to share their concerns and requests if they know that such a phone call is a regular camp follow-up activity.

Family Camp Reunion Days

Consider holding a family camp reunion day half-way through the year between camps.

- Choose a Sabbath and a suitable venue. Have a similar type of worship service and possibly the same worship leaders as were involved with the previous family camp.
- For lunch, share a pot-luck meal together, or invite families to bring a picnic.
- Plan a walk and/or nature activity for the afternoon and a social time for the evening.

Idea-Sharing

Camps vary across the world and it is helpful to share different ideas. If you have ideas for creative family camp activities, or inspiring testimonies of how camps have helped people to make a decision for Jesus, please send these to the General Conference Family Ministries Department.

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The Marriage Course

A Personal Report

By John and Delivon Francis
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In 2004, we attended a marriage conference in London that had a profound impact on our marriage and launched us into a special ministry for couples.

Sila and Nicky Lee, on staff at the Anglican parish of Holy Trinity Brompton and founders of *The Marriage Course*, facilitated our training in the use of their eight-session marriage-strengthening program. We found the course very encouraging and well-structured, considering the fact that some 100 couples attended. *The Marriage Course* addresses communication, conflict resolution, healing past hurts, recognizing each other's needs, making each other feel loved, in-law relationships, sex and how to have fun together. The Lees were dynamic speakers and we came away feeling empowered to take up the challenge to run similar courses in our church.

We conducted an eight-week marriage course in our local church and were able to adapt the materials to suit the needs of our congregation. We have also found segments of *The Marriage Course* video resources to be very useful during shorter marriage enrichment weekends for couples. Parts of the marriage course material were put to good use in a marriage weekend we conducted in Scotland at the invitation of our church there.

The emphasis in *The Marriage Course* on leading people to want to investigate the Bible further was something we appreciated. As we have adapted the material to fit our Seventh-day Adventist context, we have incorporated a biblical base and Spirit of Prophecy material as well to help people know more about God. As a result, we had a couple in one of our programs who decided they wanted Bible studies. We rejoice that they are now baptized members of our church.

We strongly believe that we as Seventh-day Adventists should be doing more to produce marriage strengthening materials like *The Marriage Course*. Helping build stronger marriages and families is so central to the heart-turning, rebuilding and restoring Elijah message in which we believe and helping people to have loving relationships is such a practical demonstration of the everlasting gospel message of the three angels of Revelation. The devil is unceasing in his attack on marriage and the home today and our job must be to help couples strengthen their relationship with God and each other, and enrich their family life.

We are committed to strengthening relationships in Christ. We seek every opportunity to do as much as we can to use the skills and concepts we have learned about marriage as an effective tool in witnessing for Christ.

Relating to Each Other in a Biblical Way

by Karen Holford
 Family Ministries Director
 Southern England Conference
 Trans-European Division

Every relationship we have is a two-way experience. Whatever we do or say to others will affect the way they relate to us. We also respond to each other in different ways, with different consequences.

Here are some Biblical guidelines for encouraging healthy relationships.

- **Love each other**

Love each another as I have loved you.
 John 15:12.
 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Romans 12:10.

When you would like to show love

You might ask ‘What can I do today to show you how much I love you?’ and then respond to the answer in the best way you can. Offer affection in a way that you know will be appreciated.

When you would like love to be shown to you

You might say, ‘I feel really loved by you when you...Please would you do that for me now?’ or ‘I feel in need of a hug right now. Please would you hold me?’

- **Have a thankful attitude to each other (Appreciation)**

I thank my God every time I remember you. Philippians 1:3.

When you want to show appreciation

You might say, ‘I really appreciate it when you do...’ ‘It means so much to me when you take the time to do...’ Or you might send a note of thanks or appreciation. Be as specific as you can be about what you appreciate.

- **Comfort each other**

Praise be to...the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. 2 Corinthians 1:3,4.
 Mourn with those who mourn. Romans 12:15

When you would like to show comfort

You might say, ‘I am so sad that you hurt so much. What would you find most comforting right now?’

When you would like comfort to be shown to you

You might say, ‘I feel so sad, but I would really like it if you could...hold me for a little while...stay with me...help me by...etc.’

- **Respect each other**

Honour one another above yourselves. Romans 12:10.

In humility consider others better than yourselves. Philippians 2:3.

Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. Galatians 5:26.

Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Philippians 2:4.

When you would like to show respect

You might say, ‘What would you like to do?’ ‘What do you think about this?’ ‘Your opinion is important to me.’ Avoid doing things that upset or offend the other person. Consider how your words and actions will affect those around you.

When you would like respect shown to you

You might say, ‘Would it be possible for me to tell you what I think about this?’ ‘I have an idea that may help you.’ ‘Please could you consider my perspective?’

- **Encourage each other**

Encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

Each of us should please his neighbour for his good, to build him up. Romans 15:2.

When you would like to show encouragement

You might say, ‘You are doing a great job! Don’t give up! Is there anything I can do to help you towards your goal?’

When you would like encouragement shown to you

You might say, ‘I’m feeling overwhelmed by this project at the moment, and I would really like it if you would be able to...’

- **Accept one another**

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. Romans 15:7.

When you would like to show acceptance

You might say, ‘I want you to know that I love you, whatever you do. Even when you feel as if you have made a mistake,

I’m still here for you, and I always will be.’

When you need acceptance

You might say, ‘I know I’m not perfect, but I just need to know that you still love me.’

- **Support each other**

Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. Galatians 6:2.

When you would like to show support

You might say, ‘What can I do to help you?’ You might offer to do one of their chores to give them extra time to do what they need to do.

When you would like support from others

You might say, ‘Please can you help me?’ or ‘I have a problem I think you can help me with.’

- **Be at peace with each other**

Live in harmony with one another. Romans 12:16

Live at peace with everyone. Romans 12:18.

When you want to live peacefully, learn to listen to each other, respect each other’s differences, and put other’s needs before your own. Take care to protect yourself from harmful conflicts.

- **Forgive each other**

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Colossians 3:13.

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other that you may be healed. James 5:16.

When you would like to show forgiveness

You might say, 'I want to be able to forgive you completely. It may not always be easy for me to do that, and I'm praying that God will help me to forgive you in the way He forgives me.'

When you would like forgiveness shown to you

You might say, 'I'm sorry that my words/my actions hurt you so much. I want to pray that God will help me not to hurt you like that again. I hope that you will feel able to forgive me when you are ready to do so.'

- **Be patient with each other**
Be patient with everyone. 1 Thessalonians 5:14.

When you would like to show patience

You can show patience by giving others plenty of time to do what they have to do and say what they have to say. Try not to rush them or take over what they are doing. You might say, 'It's alright, you just take the time you feel you need to have.'

When you would like patience shown to you

You might say, 'Please don't rush me. I just need a little extra time to understand/do this.'

- **Be kind to each other**
Always try to be kind to each other. 1 Thessalonians 5:15.
Be kind and compassionate to one another. Ephesians 4:32.
Let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. Galatians 6:10.

When you would like to show kindness

You might ask, 'What one thing could I do today to make your life easier,' and then do it. Find ways to surprise others with your love and thoughtfulness.

When you would like kindness shown to you

You might say, 'I would really appreciate it if you could find the time to do ... for me today.'

Adapted from Holford, K. (2004). *The Family Book*. (pp. 8-11). Alma Park, Grantham, England: The Stanborough Press Limited. Used by permission.

Building a Closer Relationship with Someone You Love

by Karen Holford
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Whether you want to build a closer relationship with a child, spouse or friend, these relationship-builders can help you to find ways to express your care for them in a meaningful way.

- Remember the other person, even when you are apart. Send messages to them in different ways, or find a tiny gift for the person you love that they will really appreciate. Carry their photo, or something special from them, with you.
- Enter into their emotional world with them and see things from their perspective. Be happy with them when they are happy and be sad when they are sad.
- Love them just the way they are, accepting them without expecting them to change, and offering your love and acceptance even when they make mistakes.
- Appreciate them, thanking them for the special things they do for you. Appreciate your relationship as well, and find ways to let them know how you value them, and how important the relationship is to you.
- Togetherness is vital in a healthy and growing relationship. Do the everyday things together, and spend enjoyable time together, too.
- Inspire and encourage them to reach their goals, especially when they are feeling overwhelmed or tired.
- Open yourself up and be vulnerable. Share your hopes, dreams and struggles, and encourage them to share theirs, as you listen attentively.
- Needs. Understand the things that they need in a relationship and know that these things may be different from the things you need in a relationship. Find ways to meet each others' needs.
- Support them when they are facing challenges. Take some of the burden from their shoulders, and be there for them at all times.
- Happiness comes from making the other person happy. Find new and creative ways to delight them.
- Inspire them with God's love, shown through you.
- Protect them from harm. Help them to feel safe from physical threats, keep their secrets, and avoid causing them extra stress or fear. Pray specifically for them whenever you can.

Adapted from Holford, K. (2004). *The Family Book*. (p. 12). Alma Park, Grantham, England: The Stanborough Press Limited. Used by permission.

Strengthening the Marriages of Family & Friends

by Karen Holford
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- Write letters of appreciation to couples who have inspired and strengthened your marriage, or design a card for this purpose on your computer. Encourage other couples to do the same.
- Celebrate the anniversaries of your family and friends in a special way. Hold a surprise party, send cards, and give marriage-building books. Show them that their marriage is important to you, too.
- Sign up for an e-mail service that offers weekly marriage strengthening tips and forward these ideas to family and friends at www.2-in-2-1.co.uk.
- Pass around an attractive blank book at a wedding reception and invite people to write their favourite marriage “date” ideas, and any tips they would like to share to strengthen the couple’s marriage.
- During wedding services, have a special moment of recommitment for the married couples who are attending.
- Invite other couples to come together for fun, either for a meal at your home, or a picnic, or to go bowling, etc. Many couples don’t take the time to have fun in their relationship, so this may encourage them to relax together.
- Invite couples around to watch a marriage strengthening video such as *The Story of Us*; *A Beautiful Mind*; *Family Man* and *Town and Country*. Create some discussion questions for the couples to take home and discuss together. Visit www.smartmarriages.com for an excellent discussion guide for *The Story of Us*. Give marriage strengthening books, videos and tapes as engagement, wedding, birth, anniversary and birthday gifts.
- Encourage married couples who are experiencing a long-distance relationship to visit www.longdistancecouples.com for creative ideas about strengthening a relationship where the husband and wife have to live apart because of work commitments, etc.
- Offer to provide babysitting, or have your friends’ children sleep at your home for the night, so that couples can go out together and have some time alone.

Reprinted from Holford, K. (2004). *The Family Book*. (p. 97). Alma Park, Grantham, England: The Stanborough Press Limited. Used by permission.

Families Finding Faith

by John Hattam

Warwick, England: Church Pastoral Aid Society, 2000. 48 pages

Reviewed by Augustus Lawrence

Pastor

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This book review is limited to the strategy used by the author in his *Families Finding Faith* (CPAS, 2000) which can be considered a “how to do book” on family evangelism.

One of the many issues that challenge those who do family evangelism is put simply by John Hattam, “How could families and not just children be reached for God?” This is a very important topic, not only for those interested in family evangelism, but for the church as a whole. Given his many years of experience in family evangelism, Hattam sets out to provide a clear and concise strategy for evangelising non-Christian families. He argues that the key to evangelising parents and not just their children is for the church to pay keen attention to becoming relational in its evangelism to families.

Hattam brings many years of experience and scholarship. The book is simple in style yet clear and effective in getting across the author’s purpose. The information he shares has begun a thought process regarding my own personal perspective and has begun to challenge me professionally.

John Hattam uses three main approaches to accomplish his aim of helping churches to pay attention to relational evangelism, what he considers the starting point for evangelising families. Firstly, he provides the biblical basis which gives a sound foundation and encouragement for evangelising from a “relational” perspective. The point is that taking the gospel to families begins with the churchgoer who is intentional about the call for action. The churchgoer becomes intentionally relational with the aim to connect with people and meet them through friendship. Says Hattam, “People become Christians through knowing people who are Christians.”

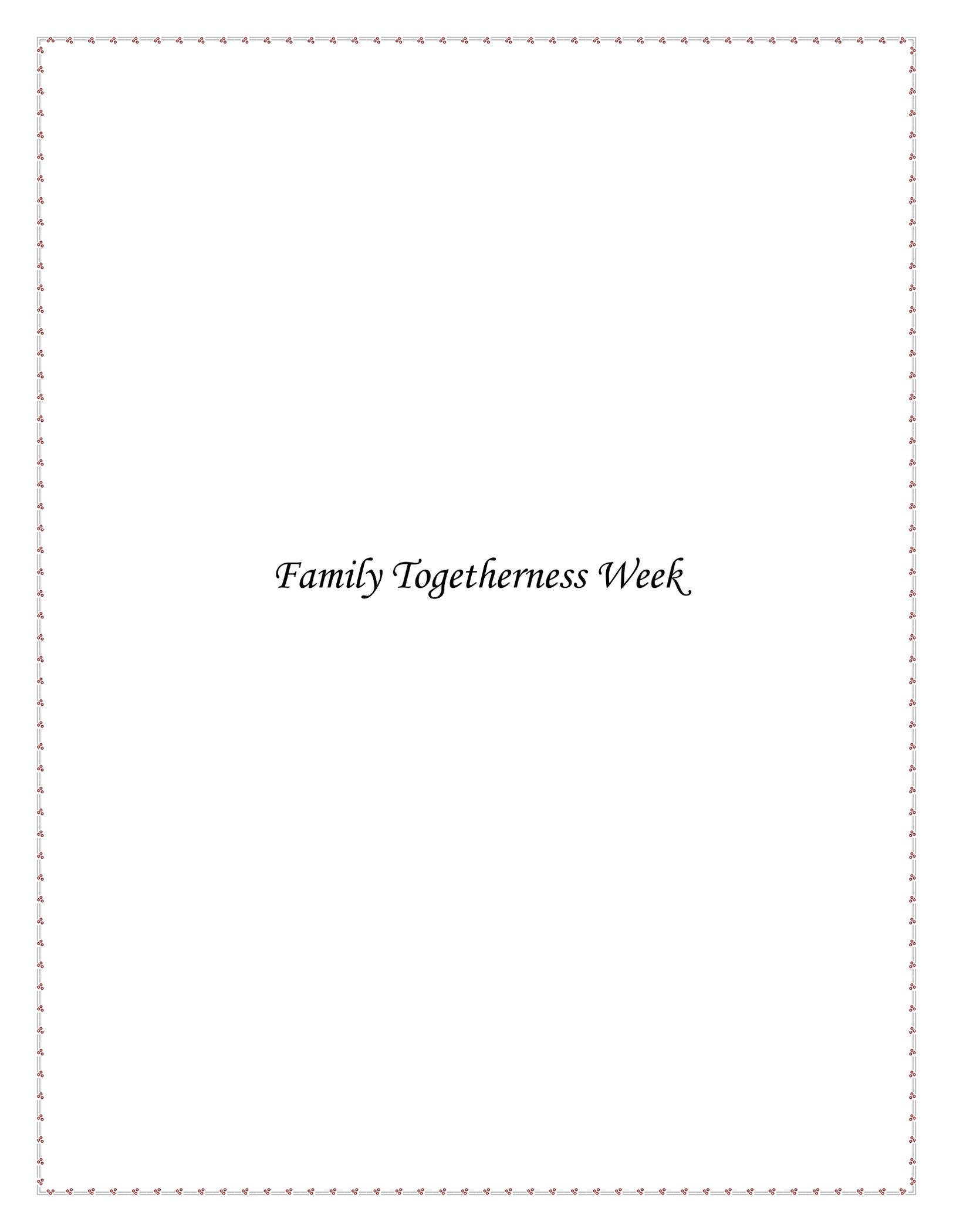
Hattam’s second approach is his “how to” concept. He gives clear, simple and rather effective ways of making relational evangelism with families work. For Hattam, Christians building relationships with non-Christians is the platform from which non-Christian families are led to find and discover Christ for themselves. For example, the group activity on how to make a start to reach families is effective because it begins with the people and challenges them to think relationally.

The third approach Hattam uses for relational evangelism is to give practical ideas which allow relationships to nurture and take root.

Even though this is a “how to do” book, the author forcefully and persuasively argues one vital conceptual point throughout: those who do family evangelism must give keen attention to relational evangelism if we want to be effective in evangelising families.

One of the strengths of the book is its simplicity and relevance to the issue of family evangelism in the context of families today. Another strength is the material is very easy to read. Chapters are short and concise. A weakness, in my view, is that Hattam does not give a clear explanation of what it actually means to be relational. Apart from his idea of connecting with families, being relational is to be understood by following the examples of Jesus. It is in the Gospels that Jesus shows what it actually means to be relational. There we see Jesus meeting people where they were. For example, in the encounter of Jesus and the woman at the well we are given one of many illustrations of how to be relational.

Families Finding Faith will undoubtedly be a powerful resource for those who are in the business of family evangelism. The author's call for attention to relational evangelism as the starting point for reaching families for God is something the church needs to take seriously.



Family Togetherness Week

From Broken to Built Again

by Miodrag Zivanovic
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More than two millennia ago, Mt. Carmel was a focal point of events in the history of Israel. What happened there would remain forever etched in the minds of God's people and provide a paradigm for revival and restoration. The Scripture says, "And he repaired the altar of the Lord that was broken down. Elijah took twelve stones . . . and built an altar" (1 Kings 18:30-32). God's servant Elijah took that which was broken and built it again. The altar of sacrifice foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ. Elijah took the stones of this altar, which had fallen into disrepute, and erected them again. In this way He presented afresh God's plan of redemption.

Today, as in Israel of old, there is the need to lift up Christ again in our homes and marriages. God is calling modern Elijahs—in New York, Paris, Sydney and other towns and cities like Hermon and Leptokari—to attend to this important work. He is calling us to the work of Elijah in our homes to take that which is now broken and build it again in His name.

Family Brokenness

Despite the dire prognosis of global warming, the worries over food shortages and the horrifying reports of the AIDS epidemic, these are of less importance than the downward spiral of family brokenness reflected clearly in the reports and statistics about marriage and family life. Family has always been the bulwark of society that enabled people to cope with disasters around them—warming them against the chill winds of turbulent change, supplying love and support in times of famine, war and shortages of every kind.

Marriage relationships are shaking, crumbling, falling. Like the ancient broken altar on Carmel, marriages lie shattered, their rocks strewn about. In some cases, the very foundational elements have been ground into powder, incapable of being rebuilt. Divorce, hurting hearts, and damaged emotions for which there exists no surgical repair—this is the reality of family brokenness around us.

Young people fall into crime at younger and younger ages. Where once perhaps there were toy guns, now real weapons are in their hands with a growing number of shooting tragedies resulting from these weapons being used against family members, fellow students and teachers. After Columbine, Virginia Technical University and Finland, where will the next massacre occur?

Perhaps we should not be surprised with all of this. So often the first experiences children have are not with their families in worship or in relationship-building, but in watching the shooting, the criminal minds and the so-called heroes of the TV screen placed at the focal point in the home.

The lips of parents are used, not for forming kisses and speaking tender, encouraging words to their children, but for smoking cigarettes. Children will grow all too quickly to imitate these gestures, and many of them will go beyond tobacco to use hard drugs.

Where is the family heading? What is its future? Have the issues of globalization become such a priority that we neglect the nearer territory of the home and family? Do we really think we can have prosperity and happiness in the world while ignoring happiness and prosperity in families? The brokenness in families is of such severity it would seem that someone wants everything of divine origin to be rooted out and demolished totally, not just spread about like the altar-rocks on Mt. Caramel.

Family: A Heavenly Project

The great Creator's creation project not only included the creation and decoration of the earth as an integral part of the universe, but also the creation of the marriage relationship. Think of it—alongside majestic Himalayas, tumbling Niagaras and immense oceans, God put the crown of His creation, the family. Wonderful! Magnificent! Angels must have celebrated then, even as we in our individual families celebrate now with a newly married couple.

God took great delight in creating the human family and considers their communion with each other, their togetherness, as important as His own relationship with human beings. The marriage covenant between the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, was the very first covenant—earlier than the covenant on Mount Sinai—and it bears God's signature right beside that of Eve and Adam.

Oh, God, how incomprehensible are Your secrets, Your intentions and Your deeds! The families You created are to be small beehives from which You want honey to be spread to give sweetness to life!

Heaven on Earth

Your companionship in the marriage relation should be close and tender, holy and elevated, breathing a spiritual power into your lives, that you may be everything to each other that God's word requires. When you reach the condition that the Lord desires you to reach, you will find heaven below and God in your life. . . . Heart will be bound to heart in the golden bonds of a love that is enduring. (*Adventist Home*, pp. 112, 113).

As we read the biblical account of creation, we see that the Creator separated some things and other things He brought together. The light was divided from the darkness (Gen. 1:4, KJV) and the waters of the firmament above were divided from the waters beneath (Gen. 1:7, KJV). However, when God created the unique and holy relationship of marriage, His intention as shown in Gen. 2:24 was for the man and woman to be “united” (NIV), “joined” (NKJV). Four millennia after creation, Jesus described marriage this way:

“Haven't you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be

united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matt. 19:4-6).

The importance of the marriage relationship to God can be discerned by the way God created the first couple. As we reflect on it, we cannot imagine a more sublime way that could have been used for this creation. In a manner different from that used to create male and female animals, God took a rib from the already created human being and created a partner. Thus we can see that He first "divided" the one, and then combined the two in marriage. He planned for them to always feel that they belong together.

God knows the eternal experience of togetherness—the togetherness of Father and Son (cf. John 17:21)—and He intends for marriage to be a reflection of this. As humans, we are surely not aware of all the secrets of the Divine relationship. However, through the experience of the marriage relationship, we can get a glimpse of the Divine relationship.

"Home should be made all that the word implies. It should be a little heaven upon earth . . . (*Adventist Home*, p. 15).

I think of family as the only place on this earth that can be used as a picture of the togetherness known in heaven. An intimate family, where God's love reigns supremely, where the sun of happiness always rises on new mornings, where the unique petals of loving affection are sprinkled fragrantly about—this is truly celestial. Throughout Scripture, marriage is frequently used as the metaphor to help us understand God's connection to us. So that it can truly be a good metaphor, God wants human marriage to be saturated with the love which is divine.

Are the chords of heaven heard in our homes? Only the harmony of family togetherness can produce the melody of happiness God is hoping the world will hear. There is no violin, even the great Stradivarius, which can produce a tune as perfect and beautiful as the melody of a united family, a Christian home where Jesus dwells from dawn to dusk and dusk to dawn. Who says that heaven is somewhere far above? Let us reach for an experience of togetherness as lofty as the togetherness known in the courts above and we will have a foretaste of heaven on earth right under our roofs.

Jacobs' Ladder

When Jacob followed the advice of his parents and went to Haran to take a wife, his mind and heart were no doubt occupied with all the thoughts and emotions of any man about to court an eligible, God-fearing young woman. Solomon once aptly described the feelings and actions of courtship as "the way of a man with a maiden" (Prov. 30:19). I like to think that, when Jacob had the dream of the ladder going into heaven, God was assuring him of His care in the matter of taking a wife, as well as protecting him from the wrath of Esau. Men today often dream beautiful dreams and think lofty, heavenly thoughts while they are courting or when they are first married, but then lose their heavenly vision once they are faced with the challenges of marriage and the management of a home.

Home will be what it was intended to be only when our faces are turned continually upwards toward heaven and while we are trying to have heaven under our roofs. No challenge to our

togetherness will be insurmountable, no blessing beyond our grasp if we have heaven in our hearts through Christ's presence there. Step by step, climbers have reached the highest spots on earth. Likewise, the spiritual goal of oneness in home and family is attainable if we sense that Jesus is the ladder that reaches from earth to heaven. By faith in Him, we with our spouses and families can journey there.

How many steps were on Jacob's ladder? In fact, I have no knowledge about that, but I want to mention some practical steps we can take—and every one of us can probably add others—to fulfill God's intention that our homes be little heavens on earth.

Take time. We routinely plan for time with friends and business associates. Are not our families at least as important as they? Some suggestions for planning time with family:

- Set aside some special time to spend with your spouse only.
- Plan for time with your children. Plan times when you do things all together; also plan some time alone with each of them.
- Cut back on work, or leisure time you spend in personal activities (e.g., Internet, video games), or time spent with personal friends, in order to free up enough time for your family.
- Schedule family time into your daily, weekly, monthly and yearly planning calendar.
- On certain occasions, you may be able to “double-up” on your time, i.e., fulfill more than one obligation at a time. You may, for example, take family with you to visit friends, or invite your friends to bring their families when they visit you, so that your two families have time together.

Learn from nature. Nature teaches us much about togetherness and the importance of connections. The individual heavenly bodies of the Milky Way all connect together to form a solid band stretching across the night sky. The floral petals glistening with dew in the morning sun join together to make the blossoms we love to smell and touch. Tiny snowflakes clump their soft shapes together to blanket the earth with whiteness, hiding the blemishes beneath. We can reflect on the Creator who connects and rejoice with our spouses and families that He who draws nature together to yield beautiful landscapes can make a lovely tapestry of our families too.

Work together. Some jobs in the family are best done by individuals. Where possible, though, consider cooperating on jobs. Working on tasks together, helping each other and feeling a sense of accomplishment at the end can build family ties.

Beautify each other's days. It takes more than sunshine to make a beautiful day. Thoughtful actions, words of appreciation, gestures of kindness can make a gloomy day sunny. Small surprises can turn dreariness into delight. Let us discover what brings pleasure to our dear ones and repeat these things.

Create changes for the better. We live in a world full of dynamic change. Changes that make life better are usually welcomed. When life changing events happen in your family, which are inevitable, look for ways to enhance the positive. Communicate together about the change and ways you can restore normalcy to life as soon as possible.

Develop together. Development on the job is usually necessary to maintain employment. Should we not develop the quality of our relationships as well? To do that, we must be open to evaluating and monitoring our relationships, confronting things that are inappropriate or ineffective, and eliminating things that disturb the family unity or keep the relationship from rising to a higher level. Schedule times to specifically talk about development. Discover each other's expectations, goals and aspirations.

Even when far away, stay close. Sometimes people are close, but very far away from each other emotionally. Others can be far away, but put real effort into maintaining emotional closeness. For those who love each other, there is no space that can separate them. Plan ways of bridging the distance between you when you must be separate from each other. Make separation times as brief and infrequent as possible. Budget financially for the expenses of communication and regular visits if the separation is extended.

The goals are uniting. Make a plan that incorporates goals for you, your spouse and yourselves as a married couple. Do the same to incorporate each individual's goals into a plan for the family. Plan for six months or a year at a time. Planning for goals and working together on goals bonds families together. Keep communication and listening lines open when differences of opinion and conflicts arise on the way to the goal. Let us commit ourselves to each other and to God to stay together not only in the time of success but in problems as well.

Be tolerant. Without the tolerance there is no unity. Do not only expect others to tolerate and understand you, exercise tolerance toward them too. As we are expecting others to make concessions for us, let us make concessions for them. Many enemies became allies only when they have learned to compromise and to collaborate together on solutions.

Discover what your spouse or your child likes. Do not forget, we are all different. Ask yourself, "What can I do for the one I love?" Your spouse and your children are the most important people in your life. Discover what they like. Love them as they would like to be loved, not as you would like to be loved.

Conclusion

Concluding his book and the Old Testament, prophet Malachi wrote: "...I will send you Elijah the prophet ... and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers . . ." (Mal. 4:5, 6, KJV). The time has come to close the last chapter on the broken down altar and to rebuild. God is sending Elijah, the message, the call. He is calling us to the work of Elijah in our homes to take that which is now broken and build it again in His name.

Perhaps we managed to function somewhat, even though old altars were broken and their rocks spread around. But the time has come for our families to acknowledge Jesus Christ as God's sacrifice in our behalf and to come together in Him to love, to serve, to be united as families. God wants to be present, close to us, and He will be when we unite around the rebuilt altar that celebrates the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of our family and of the world.

Reference

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Finding Friends

by Valda Reke

Director

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A year ago Marta and her family moved to a new neighbourhood. She liked everything – their new house, the pink flower wallpaper of her room and the little water fountain in the garden.

But for Marta something was missing. She didn't know anyone in her new church or her school. Marta's mommy and daddy tried very hard to cheer her up with games, story-reading time and fun. But when that was over, she felt lonely again.

Every night before going to bed, Marta and her Dad had "go-to-sleep-story-time" in front of the fireplace. One night Marta's dad told her a story he remembered his granny telling him when he was a little boy:

"Once upon a time there lived a little Bean. She was very small. She loved walking in nature; she enjoyed watching birds and flowers, and clouds in the sky. After her walks, she was very tired and wanted to talk to someone, but she had no friends. Little Bean did not know any other vegetable.

One day during her walks she met a little green Cucumber.

"Who are you?" she wanted to know.

"I am a Cucumber. Probably you are a Bean," the green Cucumber replied.

"Yes, I am. But how do you know who am I?" The little Bean was curious.

My Mom told me about all vegetables. As soon as I saw you, I recognized you," said the green Cucumber.

"Where are you going?" asked little Bean.

"I am going home? What about you?"

"I am looking for friends," the little Bean confessed.

"Do you want me to be your friend?" asked the green Cucumber.

"Yes, sure!" she responded happily.

From that day on, the little Bean and the green Cucumber met almost every day; they played together, shared their toys and talked about many things. Sometimes they visited each other at home and had family dinners together. The green Cucumber introduced the little Bean to his other friends, and soon she forgot the time she had felt lonely."

Marta was listening to Dad's story as carefully as she could. When the story was over, she was still sitting thoughtfully.

"Daddy, may I ask you something?"

"Yes, sweetie," said Dad. "What do you want to ask me?"

"Sometimes I feel like Little Bean," said Marta. "I have you and Mom, but I want some

kids to play with, not only when my cousins come to visit, but more often.”

“You know, I noticed last week in Sabbath School there was one girl sitting next to you. What is her name?” asked Dad.

“I know who you mean,” said Marta. “She is very nice to me, but I don’t know her name.”

“Next time we go to the church, we could invite her and her family to our house for lunch. Would you like that?” asked Dad.

“I don’t know,” Marta shrugged.

But in a few weeks, this family—Alice, her little brother Tom and their parents—were all guests at Marta’s house for lunch. They all had such an enjoyable time together. Both families

visited each other often after that and even took a trip to the zoo together. Like Little Bean, Marta soon had forgotten about being lonely.

Sometimes we all feel like Marta; we need someone to share our thoughts, toys and stories with. Jesus wants to comfort us whenever we feel sad or lonely, “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” He says to us. “Trust in God, trust also in Me” (John 14:1).

The same way as we trust our Heavenly Father and Jesus we can trust all our troubles and sad feelings to our Moms and Dads. They know how to comfort their children because they love and care for them. And they will likely be able to help us find some good friends.

The Dream that Changed Grandfather

by Bongani Ndlovu
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Some years ago in a farm there lived a boy with his grandparents. His name was Musa (Moo-sah). He was a very lonely boy because he was the only boy at his home. Musa had a neighbor friend, George, who was a year older than he. The two boys attended the same school and were good buddies. These boys loved playing games together, singing, going to church and working together. Their parents were proud of them. Musa's grandparents were not Christians, but they didn't mind that Musa went to church with his friend George.

The boys were part of a singing group comprised of other teenagers their age. Sometimes the singing group travelled to do programs outside their church. They were good singers and were invited to many events in churches and in the communities nearby. Christian and non-Christian crowds came to hear them.

As the boys grew older, they loved studying the Bible together. Musa went to George's home often to play and to listen to George's father tell stories. He was such a good storyteller and he loved children and young people. Musa learned a lot of things from George's dad. One day Musa asked if he could be baptized in the church where George and his family attended.

Musa's grandparents were not happy. They tried hard to discourage him but they could not. They liked George and all the good things he did, but they didn't like his religion. Musa's grandfather threatened to beat him up if he accepted this new religion,

but Musa was more determined than ever. Grandfather threatened to disown him—to put him out of his family—if he got baptized. But Musa believed it was God's will for him to be baptized and so he was.

Grandfather was angry! He said he would throw Musa out of the house. Musa was worried. What would he do? He nevertheless continued going to church with his friend George. Grandfather told Musa he was no longer his grandson and he had to leave their home. Musa didn't want to leave, but one night without telling anyone he left. For a few days he took refuge with another family in their neighborhood.

Musa decided he should go to town and look for a job where he would be able to take care of himself while attending church freely. The neighbor who had sheltered Musa told him good-bye and wished him well. Musa stopped at a shop and bought some bread and hoped to board the next bus to town without anyone he knew seeing him.

As he left the shop Musa met his grandmother who had been searching for him since he left home. Musa was afraid and wanted to hide, but he knew it was too late for him to hide from her. Grandmother had been afraid something bad had happened to Musa so she was very happy to see him. Grandmother pleaded with Musa to come back home with her, but Musa did not want to go, especially when he thought of all the things he had suffered because of his grandfather. His grandmother told him how worried grandfather was about his safety and

how sorry he was for the decisions he had made and how he had hurt Musa.

Grandmother told Musa that everybody in the family was busy looking for him. She also told him that the night he left, his grandfather had a terrible dream.

This is Grandfather's dream that Grandmother told Musa.

Musa and Grandfather were walking on a road when they suddenly saw a big snake coming straight at them. Grandfather and Musa ran away in different directions. The snake went after Musa and got him. The snake wrapped itself around Musa, crashing his ribs and swallowing him. When Grandfather saw what the snake had done he turned to charge the snake, but there in front of him appeared an old man who laughed at him and said, "Why worry? Isn't this what you wanted for your grandson? Isn't it good riddance? Ha! Ha! Ha-a-a-ah!!!" The old man continued to laugh until he disappeared. Musa's grandfather was confused and didn't know what to do. Grandpa started crying and hitting his head against the nearby trees.

Suddenly he woke up from his sleep only to discover he was just dreaming. Grandfather

was wet with sweat, puzzled and frightened. Grandfather couldn't sleep the rest of the night and in the morning he discovered that Musa had left home. Grandmother told Musa that they had been searching for him ever since.

After hearing about Grandfather's dream and knowing they had been worried and searching for him, Musa felt sorry for his grandparents, especially Grandfather.

Grandmother was happy since Musa agreed to come home with her. When Grandfather saw Musa he was very happy too. There was great joy and happiness that Musa was home safe. Grandfather apologized to Musa for the bad things he had said and done. He also gave Musa permission to go to his church and told Musa he was welcome to come back and live with him and Grandmother in their home.

After seven months, Grandfather and Grandmother started attending church with Musa. Four months later they were baptized. Musa is a happy young man now because his grandparents go to church with him and they worship God together.

From House to Home

Toward Greater Family Togetherness

by Apostolos Maglis
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Greek Mission
Trans-European Division

Overview

This seminar links “family togetherness” with the basic definition of “home.” It considers forces that militate against family togetherness and how Christian families can cope with these deterrents to togetherness in practical ways. Consideration is given to applying biblical principles to developing the atmosphere of togetherness at home.

Handouts

Worksheet #1 *Basic Unit of Society*
Worksheet #2 *Time with Each Other*
Worksheet #3 *Social Mobility*
Worksheet #4 *Family Qualities*
Worksheet #5 *Christian Family Relationships*
Worksheet #6 *Family Atmosphere*

Presentation Helps

Have you ever thought about the difference between “house” and “home”? In our Greek language, for example, there is a distinct difference between a house (*oikia*) and a home (*oikos*). *Oikia* refers to the *building* in which people live, while *oikos* refers to the *inhabitants* living in the *oikia*. Further, these inhabitants (*oikos*) are not a “home” in the fullest sense unless their life together makes them feel that where they live is a place dear to everyone because of their interpersonal relationships and feelings of comfort, security, warmth, fellowship and friendship. In other words, home is not just a roof over ones head; it is a place of connection, of attachment, a place of refuge from the demands of life.

Happiness in the house does not depend so much on material things as it does upon the atmosphere that is created by the people. Our Greek word for the inhabitants, for this people, whose life together in the *oikos* is known by its relationships of comfort, security, warmth, fellowship and friendship is *oikogeneia*, that is, a “family.”

“Family” is the total of what its members are individually, but even more, it refers to their interrelationships one with the other. “Family” quite literally means “togetherness.”

The Basic Social Unit

Family is the basic unit of society. Think about this concept. [*Use Worksheet #1 Basic Unit of Society*] Consider the following Bible verse:

“So Noah went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives with him. Every beast, every creeping thing, every bird, and whatever creeps on the earth, according to their families, went out of the ark” (Gen. 8:18, 19, NKJV)

What facts concerning families do you see in this verse? As you think of the wider context of this piece of Scripture—the new beginning after the Flood, what is the importance of Noah’s family in the purposes of God? What might be the implications for Christian families living in today’s society? How does the quotation below highlight the strategic significance of the family unit?

The well-being of society, the success of the church, the prosperity of the nation, depend upon home influences” (Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 349).

Forces Threatening Family Togetherness

Many forces in modern living combine to threaten the “togetherness” of the family life.

Group exercise. [*Invite participants to work as a large group to list some of the factors they can identify which threaten family togetherness. Write their list on a flip-chart, chalk board or white board.*]

The home is often no longer the centre of recreation, education, or worship. Thus it is difficult to maintain common interests which involve all its members.

Time with each other. One factor in family togetherness is the amount of time we spend with each other.

Personal/couple exercise. [*Use Worksheet #2 Time with Each Other. Think about your time with your family last week. How much actual time did you spend with them (do not include mealtimes)? Record the approximate amount of time for each day:*]

1. Sunday _____

5. Thursday _____

2. Monday _____

6. Friday _____

3. Tuesday _____

7. Saturday _____

4. Wednesday _____

Total time spent _____

What did this exercise in recording time spent with family mean to you? What are you most pleased about? What would you like to change? How can you make a difference this week?

Social mobility. Families today move often. Commonly, relatives do not live near each other as was more typical of the past. As a result, they do not have the opportunity for close physical contact with each other which can be related to emotional availability and tangible caring for one another.

Individual/family exercise. [*Reflect as individuals or as families on your family members' proximity to each other and the effects of this on family togetherness. Use Worksheet #3 Social Mobility. What impact has social mobility—family movement—had on your family? How has famine, war, economic hardship, illness, persecution, or migration brought change to your family? How do you think this social change in your generation or in previous generations affected you and your children? Given the reality of social mobility, how do you maintain connection?*]

The Atmosphere in the House

“Through wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches.” Proverbs 24:3, 4 (NKJV)

“In the home it is possible to have a little church which will honor and glorify the Redeemer” (Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 323).

Like the spokes of a wheel, the closer family members are to the Hub (Christ), the closer they are to each other.

Fathers and mothers should look upon their children as younger members of the Lord's family, committed to them to educate for heaven. The lessons that we ourselves learn from Christ we should give to our children, as the young minds can receive them, little by little opening to them the beauty of the principles of heaven. Thus the Christian home becomes a school, where the parents serve as underteachers, while Christ Himself is the chief instructor (Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 515).

Bible study on home atmosphere. [*Use Worksheet #4 Family Strengths; Worksheet #5 Christian Family Relationships; Worksheet #6 Family Atmosphere. Divide the seminar participants into 3 small groups. Give each group one of the worksheets. When small group work is completed, debrief in the large group. Note: Participants should be encouraged to maintain appropriate family boundaries when discussing these topics in groups. Participants should share only those personal marriage and family illustrations that are appropriate and which they have permission from others in their families to share.*]

• *Worksheet #4 Family Strengths.* Study the following Bible passages. What family qualities do you find there? What principles are applicable to family life today? How can they be implemented in our homes?

1. Genesis 18:19. Why did God trust Abraham? What qualities of family life were present?
2. Joshua 24:15. What was the commitment Joshua made for himself and his family?

3. 1 John 1:3. How will the lifestyle and the everyday relationship of the parents with Jesus Christ prepare their children for faith in Him?
4. Psalm 127:1. What is the source of family strength according to this verse?

- **Worksheet #5 *Christian Family Relationships*.** Study Colossians 3:12-15. According to these verses, what ten things should characterize relationships in a Christian family? Reflect on how each of the qualities listed interacts with every other. How would you explain the relationship between: Forgiveness and peace? Compassion and kindness? Forbearance and patience?

- **Worksheet #6 *Family Atmosphere*.** What characteristics and qualities related to the atmosphere in the home do you see in the follow Scriptures? What lasting principles can we take away from these biblical insights? What challenges face us as we try to implement these principles in our homes today?

1. Psalm 133:1
2. Proverbs 15:17
3. Proverbs 17:1
4. Proverbs 17:22
5. Proverbs 25:24
6. Mark 3:25

Couple exercise. *[If this seminar is being used with married couples, an additional exercise or an alternative to working in groups would be to assign one or more of the worksheets #4, #5, #6 to the couples. Working together privately as husband and wife, they can specifically address the issues in their marriage and home life. Invite the couples to make an analysis of their marriage and home situation. What strengths are there? What areas are pretty good but could be improved? Talk together with your spouse about things you personally will commit to doing to bring needed changes.]*

Additional key qualities in family togetherness.

- It is important that your home be attractively kept and a pleasant place to live.
- It is important that there be a balance between group spirit and individuality so that each family member can mature as a unique person.
- It is important that a family *enjoy* life together. Family activities and home life should include a lot of laughter, fun and games!

“Let the evenings be spent as happily as possible. Let home be a place where cheerfulness, courtesy, and love exist” (Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Health*, p. 100).

Personal/couple exercise. *[These additional “key qualities” could be printed out and distributed, presented on a PowerPoint slide or written on a flip-chart, chalkboard or white board. Give a period of time for personal reflection: As you reflect on your childhood days, which of these elements were present in your family life? How did this affect you as a person? A follow-up to the personal reflection could be a sharing between spouses of the importance of these qualities to their present experience. In which of these areas are they strong? What areas are pretty good but could be improved? Share the things you personally will commit to doing to bring needed changes.]*

Summary

Our homes must be more than places to eat and sleep if they are to fulfill their mission! The basic emotions—the desire to be loved, to be secure, to be needed and to belong—are best nurtured in the relationships of the family and the experience of family togetherness.

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Basic Unit of Society

“So Noah went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives with him. Every beast, every creeping thing, every bird, and whatever creeps on the earth, according to their families, went out of the ark.”Genesis 8:18, 19 (NKJV)

Reflect on this Bible passage. What facts concerning families do you see in this verse?

As you think of the wider context of this piece of Scripture—the new beginning after the Flood, what is the importance of Noah’s family in the purposes of God?

What might be the implications for Christian families living in today’s society?

How does the quotation below highlight the strategic significance of the family unit?

The well-being of society, the success of the church, the prosperity of the nation, depend upon home influences” (Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 349).

Time with Each Other

Think about your time with your family last week. How much actual time did you spend with them (do not include mealtimes)?

Record below the approximate amount of time for each day:

1. Sunday _____

2. Monday _____

3. Tuesday _____

4. Wednesday _____

5. Thursday _____

6. Friday _____

7. Sabbath _____

Total time _____

What did this exercise in recording time spent with family mean to you?

What are you most pleased about?

What would you like to change?

How can you make a difference this week?

Social Mobility

Reflect as individuals or family units on your family members' proximity to each other and the effects of this on family togetherness.

1. What impact has social mobility—family movement—had on your family?

2. How has famine, war, economic hardship, illness, persecution, or migration brought change to your family?

3. How do you think this social change in your generation or in previous generations affected you and your children?

4. Given the reality of social mobility, how do you maintain connection?

Family Qualities

Study the following Bible passages. What family qualities do you find there? What principles are applicable to family life today? How can they be implemented in our homes?

1. Genesis 18:19. Why did God trust Abraham? What qualities of family life were present?

2. Joshua 24:15. What was the commitment Joshua made for himself and his family?

3. 1 John 1:3. How will the lifestyle and the everyday relationship of parents with Jesus Christ prepare their children for faith in Him?

4. Psalm 127:1. What is the source of family strength according to this verse?

Christian Family Relationships

Study Colossians 3:12-15. According to these verses, what ten things should characterize relationships in a Christian family? Reflect on how each of the qualities listed interacts with every other.

- | | |
|----------|-----------|
| 1. _____ | 6. _____ |
| 2. _____ | 7. _____ |
| 3. _____ | 8. _____ |
| 4. _____ | 9. _____ |
| 5. _____ | 10. _____ |

How would you explain the relationship between:

Forgiveness and peace? _____

Compassion and kindness? _____

Forbearance and patience? _____

Family Atmosphere

What characteristics and qualities related to the atmosphere in the home do you see in the following Scriptures? What lasting principles can we take away from these biblical insights? What challenges face us as we try to implement these principles in homes today?

1. Psalm 133:1 _____

2. Proverbs 15:17 _____

3. Proverbs 17:1 _____

4. Proverbs 17:22 _____

5. Proverbs 25:24 _____

6. Mark 3:25 _____

Searching for Family Togetherness

By Zoica Lascu, Family Ministries Director
Ion Lascu, Pastor
Andreea Lascu, Media & Communications Student
Israel Field
Trans-European Division

Part 1 **Dramatic Monologues – Family Togetherness?**

Michael's Monologue

“Another busy day! I am awake earlier than usual, so I’m going to head out. I have to go to a computer store and buy some ram memory for the computer . . . The computer’s so slow! Sometimes it freezes up right in the middle of our poor Benjamin’s ‘Command and Conquer’ video game. He gets so frustrated. After that, I have to go by the cable company office to sign the contract so we can have more channels available to watch the news about the conflict in the Gulf region.

“My mobile phone is ringing! So early! Every client it seems wants my fast and affordable services—right now! What a day! I can’t even remember if I kissed Elisabeth good bye this morning . . . She was still asleep, and I know I didn’t go by the kids’ room. But, I will be home before they leave and I will go straight to the kitchen to help Elisabeth prepare for Friday evening’s supper. We’ve invited so many friends. . . . The phone is ringing again! Oh, yes, it’s Mr. George. His son is getting married and he wants the apartment remodeled. He is such a good man, and pays well. I will go visit him tonight.

“I am so busy! I can’t handle this ringing phone. I think I will just turn it off.

“Let’s see, where was I? I can’t remember! All I can see before my eyes right now is a long list of to-do things for this whole week. I have to prepare a Family Togetherness seminar for the weekend at church. I know a lot of my friends will be there . . . I can’t wait for them to hear my great ideas. I will bewilder them with my originality.

“It’s early, but there’s already traffic. I have to drive across this big intersection by the park . . . Move ahead, sir! What are you waiting for? This traffic is so slow!

“What’s that over there? Big, heavy machines! Being installed in the park! A sign that says it’s a new project—a commercial center. Chopping up the park!! I am furious! They can’t do that! This park has been here for ages, since the town was built. This is where we go out on picnics. This is where I met my wife, where we first kissed! I asked her to marry me here—right by that old oak there while we watched stars together one night. They can’t take down that tree!! They can’t!! Here in this park I taught my kids to ride their bikes. I taught them

about different trees. Here is where we come every Saturday evening during the summer to play volleyball with our church friends.

“Hmm. I met an old gentleman in this park. He is a professor at Bar-Ilan University. I asked him what was the greatest need of this country, and he answered without hesitation: a “parentology” school. ‘Parents don’t know anymore how to raise their children,’ he said. ‘They must be taught how.’

“Whew! Glad that part of the drive is over! Say, that computer store must be close! What? The way is blocked! Police and road blocks! Let me ask this officer.... Could be they’re expecting some visiting foreign officials. I can’t believe it!! He tells me they are preparing for the Gay Parade!

“I am a father! I’m in a great hurry to get things done so I can get back to my family before everyone leaves the house! Here I am, stuck in traffic because the city is interested in increasing its income and in promoting ‘social tolerance!’”

Elisabeth’s Monologue

“Michael! Michael!? Honey?

“I wake up and Michael is not in bed. Maybe he’s in our home office. Let me go and see I want to tell him about my weird, but interesting dream. No, he’s not in the office. . . . He’s not in the bathroom Not in the kitchen. Oh! His shoes are gone from the hallway and the safety chain on the door is open: he must have left early today! I hope he remembers to buy fruit; we have the pastor coming over for supper today. Oh! I do hope he remembers the pastor is coming; he himself invited him. . . . Maybe I should call him and remind him.

“He’s not answering the phone! Maybe the battery died. Anyway, I’ll try later. I’ve got so much to do I have to make breakfast and wake up the kids. And clean! And iron the Sabbath clothes; tomorrow I’ll have no time for that.

“What a family we are! We teach others about how to accomplish family unity and harmony and we are so scattered ourselves. The kids go around with earphones and I have to yell at them so they can hear me. Benji is spending all his free time in his room playing at the computer. Just the other day he put a sticker on his door which says, ‘Keep out. Leave me alone!’ I see light in his room until late at night. I hardly can wake him up in the morning. He’s always late for school. Mary is still young, but does whatever her brother does. She copies him so well, as if he were her hero. She listens to him more than she listens to me.

“We’re almost out of breakfast cereal; I have to write down a list of things we need to buy before Sabbath.

“The TV!! Well, that’s another thing. We bought the TV and a VCR to watch sermon tapes of Mark Finley and Doug Batchelor, but now the TV is turned on 24/7 it seems. The kids skip through all the channels watching movies and cartoons

“Michael works so much and is always coming home late. He barely sees the kids And I feel so alone!

“I should make a list of things we should discuss with the pastor tonight. I hope Michael comes home early so we can talk about this before the pastor comes. . . . Maybe Michael will have some things to add to the list.”

We’ve just presented to you a “normal” family. With much of what has been said, many of us can identify. It’s a sad reality.

Workshop exercise. *[Divide the group into 4 different teams and give each group one of the following questions for discussion (10-15 minutes).*

1. *What is the main problem in the story?*
2. *What would you write on the list of things to talk to the pastor about?*
3. *What would you not tell the pastor and why?*
4. *If you were the pastor of this family, and you knew them well, what advice would you give them? How would you help them?*

Reconvene as a large group and have an open floor discussion with each group presenting their answers.]

Part 2

How It Is and How It Should Be

In our secular world, everyone considers himself important, free to choose and to plan as personal needs and interests dictate. Basic values of family and community are overturned in a search for personal accomplishment. We argue to defend the way it is, saying that the problems existing today are due to gaps between the generations, to the distance between us, to our schedules and many other factors, everything except seeing how we ourselves and our individualism are so much a part of the problem. We contend that each of us must be efficient, and of course it’s hard to be efficient when you depend on others. That is why we cannot allow ourselves to be tied down to our families, to friends, to church

Why is this so? Why so much estrangement? Who loses and who wins?

Once upon a time, according to a Native American legend, the colors of the world got into a quarrel. Each was eloquently presenting their importance above the others: blue was boasting about being in oceans and sky, green was covering valleys and mountains, yellow was bragging about fields of wheat and great deserts and daffodils, red was arguing it was the color of blood and blood is life. And so they kept on debating until a few drops of rain mixed them all up into a beautiful rainbow.

Satan has a great interest in getting us to quarrel. He wants families to be divided. He has created a vast arsenal of weapons with which to attack our homes. He even uses innocent things, good things to keep us occupied and away from our loved ones. Satan’s way, though, leads to isolation, distrust, pride and loss of intimacy with each other and with God (cf. 1 Peter 5: 8).

The Creator's plan however, is that the beauty, the strength of the family will be in its unity and intimacy. God will take us, with all our diverse colors, and bless us by the rain of His Spirit on us. Just as He met Adam and Eve morning and evening and blessed them, He longs to come and be in the midst of our families today.

We mothers and fathers and children are called to “submit ourselves to God” and to “resist the devil” (James 4:7). We are called to consolidate our families, to take action, to rebuild weak and lost relationships, and to fortify the stronghold of our homes through the strength of the Holy Spirit. Remember, even if, like the colors, we are all thinking of our own particular interests and prerogatives, it will only take a few drops of God's Holy Spirit to blend us together and so restore our families.

Ellen White talks about how the bond of the family is the tightest, yet the most delicate and sacred of all human ties. Families were meant to be a blessing for humanity (cf. *Ministry of Healing*, p. 356). In *The Adventist Home*, in a chapter about the atmosphere of the home, she says that God would like our families to serve as symbols of the celestial family. Parents and children together should daily aspire to achieve this, considering one another members of God's family. In such ways, their lives will reflect to the whole world what it means to love God and to obey His commandments. In such homes, Christ is glorified. Peace, long-suffering and love will be in that family (cf. *The Adventist Home*, p. 17).

Part 3 Strategies for Family Togetherness

As we were browsing the Internet to see what others understood about family togetherness, we found a website with questions and answers. One question asked about strategies for family togetherness: “I don't know about you guys, but it seems like families can get pretty scattered, even living under the same roof. In our house, everyone has their own TV and their own agenda and responsibilities. What do you do to keep the family together?” (<http://www.thriftyfun.com/>)

Workshop activity. [Ask the groups to discuss the question, “What do you do to keep the family together?” and find answers. Then, have the groups share their answers with everyone.]

On the website, there were only 11 answers to this question, although the question was posted in 2004!! Not many people considered this topic important. A summary of the answers posted there would be something like: “Eat together and have pleasant table conversation. Have only one TV so you can at least be all in the same room.” The answers focused primarily on the physical aspect of family togetherness. But is that what togetherness is all about? Since we were not satisfied with the answer, we kept searching.

On Wikipedia (the free Internet encyclopedia) we found this definition of togetherness:

Togetherness is the *feeling* of being *close to another person emotionally and physically*. It makes one *feel warm on the inside*, and creates an altogether *positive atmosphere* for the persons involved. It is well symbolized by the gesture of holding both hands up, slightly

cupped with palms facing each other, and moving them together to create a circle. The other symbol is also when two arms hold each other at the wrist.

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Togetherness>, emphasis supplied)

Here we have a new dimension presented—that of feeling. Togetherness is something one should feel, even if he is thousands of miles away from home.

If we take a boat as an example, what is it that makes the boat advance toward its destination? There are two main elements—the engine, which brings about movement, and the steering system, which gives direction. In our families, what gives us direction? What makes our family move toward the destination of togetherness? We think there are two main factors: *religion* and *time*.

Religion. “In the beginning God” On all levels, physically, mentally, socially, emotionally, religion has a powerful influence on family ties. We think practical religion is a walk with a personal God, a lifestyle. This should be taught in the family when the children are young. We should present religion as something practical, not abstract, and involve the children, according to their level of understanding, in the act of worship.

In our family, our children were raised in the city, but with no TV, computer, PlayStation video games, or any toys of a real sort. They found pleasure in doing surveys for the church in the park, in handing out invitations for evangelistic meetings, in inviting church members for lunch on Sabbath, in visiting nursing homes, and in participation in church programs and activities. When they were barely 12 years old, they asked to be baptized. It is amazing for us parents to see them today, nearly 30 years old, still filled with the same desire and enthusiasm for the church and for the people. On vacations when we are together, we still visit the sick, prepare church activities together, and invite church friends for Sabbath lunch. When we are apart, there is still a feeling of togetherness that stretches over the thousands of miles between us.

On the other hand, my family shares a different story. I (Ion) am the firstborn and my parents, especially my mother, loved me in a special way. We spent time together and had a strong bond. When I was 20, my parents left the faith and converted to Judaism. I remained in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Our different beliefs now divided us. Even after many years, there is still coldness in our dealings with each other.

Religious faith—when shared by all the members of the family—gives us a direction because we all have one common goal, one common set of principles. The home is bound together by one faith and one Lord. Belief in God provides each of us with peace, love, long-suffering, assurance of forgiveness and salvation, wisdom, trust, self-sacrifice and many other elements needed to reach a heavenly atmosphere in the home and, as the Wikipedia definition says, a warm feeling.

When not all of your household shares the same belief, remember that the believer is a blessing to the non-believer and sanctifies them (cf. 1 Cor. 7:14). When one is in Christ, all power is at his disposition to make things work, because God desires, much more than we do, that our families be happy.

Faith is where it all begins for the home—faith in the heart of husband and wife, father and mother. God is the source of energy that keeps each of us going, and all of us going together.

Time. Once the boat starts on its way, what direction will it go? It must be steered if it is to reach its desired destination. In families, we think that the amount of time invested in relationships has a similar effect. Time will steer the relational “ship” of the family into one of many directions. Do you see? If you let go of the steering, the boat will be carried away by waves, even if the engine is working. But if you hold on to the steering wheel or tiller, if you plan your time and take charge of it, you will succeed in reaching your destination.

Joyce Coleman, director of Clinical Social Work at St. Louis Children Hospital, talks about how modern families are highly mobile. Children get involved in extracurricular activities, even at young ages. And because there’s limited time for families to come together, it’s important to establish a weekly or biweekly meeting with which nothing conflicts. It is our solemn duty, the duty of each family member, to *make* time for relationships in the family. Family time should be planned and scheduled so that nothing will conflict with this time. We should not cancel our family plans for other plans. Families *are* important.

- You can bring great joy to your kids when you come home in the evening and take them out into nature, have a pillow fight, help them with difficult homework, or take them on your lap for evening worship and bedtime stories.
- You can bring great joy to your wife when you go grocery shopping with her, or when you do domestic chores around the house together, or ask for her help on spiritual or business matters.
- You can bring great joy to your husband when you encourage him with your smiles and your love, spending time with him—even in his workshop!
- You can bring great joy to your parents when you help them with the household chores and with Sabbath preparations.

But all this takes and requires time. It is not time wasted; it’s time invested! Investing time in your family is a win-win business plan. There has to exist a common family agreement, a commitment of each member regarding family time. A time for you to be together physically, involved in the same activities and united in spirit. When you take charge of your time and not let it pass you by, then your home will be safely steered toward a most pleasant destination.

This, then, is the strategy we as a family found for family togetherness. This is a starting point. The rest is in the powerful hands of God. With His help, you can make your own strategy, a personalized plan according to the needs and desires of your family. But first you must have Him. Then make a serious commitment to invest in your family.

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