

The Intentional Family

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The vital role of the family can never be understated. We are counselled that it is, “the heart of the community, of the church, and of the nation is the household. The well-being of society, the success of the church, the prosperity of the nation, depend upon home influences” (The Adventist Home, 16). This being the case, we are compelled to make every effort to nurture, protect and establish the family in a position of primacy within the household of faith and our communities. However, it is often the case that we falsely assume that families know how to function in healthy ways.

The Eastern proverb states, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” This wisdom is highly appropriate to the work of family ministry where we are called to train, equip and empower others for more effective family living. The Psalmist admonishes us, “Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it” (Psalm 127:3).

Such understanding is foundational because secular society’s definition of success and God’s definition of success are “chalk and cheese”. The secular world tends to prioritise possessions and accomplishments, but God looks at character development. Success lays in understanding God’s purpose for our lives and then allowing Him to fulfil his purpose in us, for us, and through us.

The process of learning, by definition, involves the acquiring of knowledge and skills we do not at present possess. As we learn, we will inevitably make mistakes. In his excellent book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families*, Stephen Covey makes the surprising observation that in spite of a perfect flight plan, aeroplanes are off track about 90% of the time and that the only way the pilot can get the plane to its ultimate destination is to continually make corrections and adjustments. He uses this analogy to make the point that, in families, we are all fallible human beings who will inevitably make mistakes, but the key to success is to make the necessary corrections to get our relationships back on track.

Turbulence in a relationship is an opportunity for growth and learning and that even when we mess up, we can always repair the relationship. Teddy Roosevelt commented that, “The only man who never makes a mistake is the man who never does anything.” Developing healthy family relationships requires the courage to try new things because change doesn’t happen by accident. Ellen White stated, “Experience is knowledge derived from experiment. Experimental religion is what is needed now” (The Adventist Home, 252). Change requires innovation and a willingness to change our perspective. However, to use Covey’s illustration, it is vital that we have a ‘flight plan’ so that we are clear about the direction in which we want our families to go.

Aristotle said that “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” At the base of everything that is good about life is discipline, the decision to live intentionally by choice and not by default. This is essentially the

ability to act based on principles and values rather than reacting based on emotion or circumstance. In the space between what happens to us and how we respond lies our power to choose, which determines whether we grow or diminish in character development. We are counselled, “Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to me; it is mine to exercise (Steps to Christ, 47). Our lives are our responsibility. No matter what other people say or do, we always have choice as to how we respond.

One of the key determinants for remaining on track in our relationships is to keep in mind what we are ultimately trying to achieve. The Bible says, “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18). Covey, therefore, advocates the importance of writing a family mission statement. While we tend to assume that mission statements are limited churches and even business organisations, they are applicable to any system or entity that operates with a purpose, including the family. The prophet poses the question, “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3).

The purpose of a mission statement is to provide families with an agreed plan of action based on shared values and four basic human needs, “to live, to love, to learn, to leave a legacy.” Family mission statements focus on possibilities rather than limitations. They help us to picture a special future for our families as God has done for us. He states, “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). When we have a clear vision in mind, we are then able to prioritise. With all the legitimate calls our time it is possible that “the good can become the enemy of the best.” Pastor Henry Wright said it well when he stated, “We may need to leave aside that which is important that we may do that which is essential.”

Jesus shared this principle when he stated, “Seek first the kingdom of God” (Matthew 6:33). In order to “keep the main thing, the main thing”, we need to become creative our allocation of time to plan ways to be available when our spouse and family members are free. In his book *Ordering Your Private World*, Gordon McDonald states that “The central principle of all personal organisation of time is simple: Time must be budgeted!”

Family members who are able to collaborate in creating a shared vision are able to think in terms of mutual benefit. They foster support and mutual respect because they appreciate that “the whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts.” Collaboration between each person in the family contributes something for the benefit of all. They think interdependently – “we,” not “me” – and develop win-win agreements. They are able to embrace “The Golden Rule” to treat people as they would like to be treated. Such collaborative work comes from a willingness to look outside of self, to see the world from another person’s perspective. Covey makes the point that “we do not see the world as it is, we see it as we are.”

Paul stresses the importance of understanding when he gives marital counsel. He states, “Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honour to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life,

that your prayers may not be hindered” (1 Peter 3:7). He links our efforts to understand our loved ones with our ability to experience effective communication with God Himself. This ability to enter another person’s world is the foundation of empathy. It has been said that everybody walks around with an invisible badge that says, “make me feel important.” There are few things more important than listening in order to accomplish this because listening allows us to enter another person’s story. True intimacy becomes a reality when family members afford each other this special gift.

Covey concludes that anything that is alive needs to grow, or it will deteriorate, and this applies to family relationships. He uses the analogy of sharpening a saw to represent continual improvement in every aspect of our personal and family life. This “sharpening” takes place in the areas of the four basic human needs, the physical (to live), the social (to love), the intellectual (to learn) and the spiritual (to leave a legacy). The best thing we can do for our families is to be the best that we can be. Paul counsels “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord . . . you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward” (Colossians 3:23).