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Family and Community Ministries

empowering through faith

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Family and Community Ministries: Empowering Through Faith is a journal for the heart, head and soul, committed to helping congregations and religiously affiliated organizations to be the hands and feet of God. Through the journal, the Center for Family and Community Ministries seeks to provide resources for family and community that foster creativity, promote critical thinking and inspire contemplation.



Offering ourselves in service

Jon Singletary
Assistant Professor;
Editor; Director,
Center for Family and
Community Ministries



*God has not called me
to be successful. He has
called me to be faithful.*

Mother Teresa

Let me begin with a word of thanksgiving. Your response to the transition of *Family and Community Ministries* to Baylor University and to our first issue has been amazing. You have inspired us even though our hope is that this journal will inspire your ministry. The relationships we are continuing with our Presbyterian heritage through Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and our Baptist heritage through the Baptist General Convention of Texas and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship are being strengthened, even as we seek to strengthen ministries in your communities. Through initial feedback, we are rediscovering voices of support from days gone by and developing ministries together with new partners. Thank you for your responses and please continue to give us feedback on the journal.

In this issue, we offer you a variety of resources from academic articles to poetry and from personal commentaries to congregational profiles. We believe this collection will be of value as you serve with families and in communities.

Rob Rogers, director of Baylor's Center for Literacy, makes the connection between family and community ministry through his presentation of a family literacy ministry. This model offers adult and childhood education, a focus on parenting education, and a time for parents and children together. It's a highly relevant approach for a congregational ministry designed to strengthen families. The model was developed collaboratively with the Center for Literacy, the Baylor School of Education, and a local middle school, and it is now being offered as a model for churches.

Likewise, Jack Holland offers research of a model for equipping lay caregivers to utilize solution-focused conversations as they come alongside people

in need. Holland conducted a focus group with five Paracletes, the name given to the trained volunteers in the program, to assess what was most helpful in preparing them for this caregiving ministry. His findings provide the practical guidance congregations may need as they seek new approaches to pastoral care.

Franci Rogers profiles a congregation where one of the many church partnerships with Buckner Children and Family Services comes alive. Buckner is committed to helping us understand the value of church social work staff positions, and this is evident in the work of Carol McEntyre at First Baptist Church of Knoxville.

There are many situations in ministry that clergy, helping professionals, and dedicated lay leaders share in common, from the joys of new life to the struggles of complicated mourning. While we share the experiences and perhaps offer similar responses, we have too few opportunities to discuss these situations. Faith in Action, our regular section edited by Michael Kelly, invites your response to some of these experiences in ministry. In this issue, Sam Oakley shares some of her personal struggle to offer not only benevolence but genuine compassion to a man living with AIDS. We hope her authentic expression leads you to share a heartfelt response with us and others in ministry.

Vicki M. Kabat conveys the power of a story as only she can and at the same time references a local ecumenical church that I know keeps her “believing in humanity one person at a time.” This church is rooted in the tradition of The Church of the Saviour, started by Gordon and Mary Cosby.

Several of us had lunch with Gordon in Washington, D.C., in late June, and a part of that conversation is presented in this issue. In reading Gordon’s comments, I hope you will begin to understand the value of the inward/outward journey that has guided their ministries. The conversation certainly affected the students who were there. Mallory Homeyer is a graduate student in social work and divinity at Baylor, and she shared this:

“Gordon is 90 years old and he has daily refused to surrender to our American temptations of success and power to live out the Christian life he believes in because of the Christ that he wants people to know. He expressed to us how essential it is to *be* and know who we *are* rather than to continue doing and doing. It reminded me of how essential it is to come together as a group... just so we remember who we *are* and who we are trying to *be*.”

Mallory is one of 10 students working on a project in the Center for Family and Community Ministries designed to strengthen congregational community ministries. Her words are invaluable to me because even in our work with churches, a financial bottom line driven by efficiency or an outcome-based bottom line driven by effectiveness too quickly becomes our focus. Too often these goals replace what Thom Jeavons, director of the multisector Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action, knows to be true: that the bottom line for congregational and religiously affiliated ministries must be faithfulness.

I am convinced that faithfulness in outward service and leadership in ministry demands the inward journey of self-understanding. Wes

Granberg-Michaelson, in *Leadership from the Inside Out*, urges the development of knowledge of one’s self as God has made us to be. Our students learn this as professional self-awareness. This spiritual attentiveness to self knowledge provides a foundation centered in who God has made us to be and out of which we are able to minister. To love ourselves so that we might more authentically love God and our neighbors requires nothing less than this deep knowledge of ourselves as God’s beloved. From this, Granberg-Michaelson writes, we can engage in faithful ministry offering ourselves in service and leadership with others.

Our prayer in the CFCM is that we develop an understanding of who we are called to be, and that out of this “inward journey” our ministries of service and care, justice and love will become our “outward journey” of faithfulness.

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that faithfulness in
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Family literacy as a church ministry

This article introduces readers to family literacy as an approach to strengthening families and building communities by teaching literacy and English as a Second Language (ESL). The model presented is adaptable for use by congregations and in nonsectarian settings. The four components of family literacy – adult education, childhood education, parenting education, and parent and child together time – are described using examples from an ESL program at a middle school in a predominantly Hispanic urban neighborhood. After defining family literacy ministry, the author describes keys to his team’s success and provides guidelines for congregations desiring to implement such a ministry.

Robin K. Rogers
Associate Professor,
School of Social Work;
Director, Center for Literacy
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Photos for this article were taken during a LEAF session at César Chávez Middle School in Waco, Texas.

In 2002, the state-of-the-art César Chávez Middle School opened its doors in a predominately Mexican American neighborhood in Waco, Texas. Hundreds of energetic children enrolled, but their parents seldom crossed the threshold. Notes, calls, and meetings from the teachers and administrators went unanswered and unattended. The school’s Campus Decision-making Committee, composed of teachers, administrators, community residents, and business people, probed for answers. They discovered that approximately 70% of the parents of their students could not read, write, or speak English, a number that far exceeded earlier estimates.

To help the school bridge the language and related cultural differences, the committee turned to Dr. Randy Wood, professor of education at Baylor University in Waco who supervises School of Education interns at César Chávez. About this time, Dr. Wood and I were seeking a location to demonstrate a family-oriented approach to teaching literacy that we had developed. He made a presentation to the committee, and they invited us to test our model of teaching ESL to parents of the school’s students.

Two months after launching Learning English Among Friends (LEAF) in September 2003, response from the community was so great that enrollment

in the program was opened to the public. By April 2005, LEAF had more than 150 adults enrolled with an average weekly attendance of 40 adults and 60 children from infancy through middle school. LEAF is now the collective effort of several organizational partners, college students, community volunteers, and the school's staff, all of whom work with the participants to create a stimulating learning environment. To emphasize the spirit of collaboration that is at the heart of LEAF, this article is written in first-person plural.¹

Through experiences in LEAF, we have learned valuable insights about developing a family literacy program, collaborating with community organizations, and working with diverse populations. Our purpose in writing this article is to encourage congregations and religiously affiliated nonprofit organizations to consider using this model as a ministry to help strengthen families and build communities through teaching literacy and ESL. Although LEAF is based in a public school, the model is adaptable to church settings as a family literacy ministry program.

This article provides a brief review of the development of family literacy and some of the current issues in the field, followed by a description of the LEAF program and the four components of the model on which it is based. The next section discusses family literacy as a ministry of the church and includes suggestions about how to implement such a ministry. Particular attention is given to program location and cultural diversity among staff and participants. The article concludes by describing several keys to a successful family literacy program.

¹I would also like to acknowledge the competent work of several social work graduate student interns from the Baylor School of Social Work who contributed both to the successful implementation of LEAF and to the contents of this article: Cini Bretzlaff, Christina Craddock, Natalie Foote, and Julia Howard.

**OVERVIEW OF FAMILY LITERACY
DEVELOPMENT AND ISSUES**

The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (Title II) of The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 defines literacy as “an individual’s ability to read, write, speak in English, compute, and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual and in society.” In federal legislation that includes the Head Start Act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Reading Excellence Act, and the Workforce Investment Act, the government’s definition of “family literacy” is:

Services that are of sufficient intensity in terms of hours, and of sufficient duration, to make sustainable changes in a family and that integrate all of the following activities: (1) interactive literacy activities between parents and their children; (2) training for parents regarding how to be the primary teacher for their children and full partners in the education of their children; (3) parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency; and (4) an age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life experiences (State Library of Ohio, 2005).

Family literacy first gained prominence at the state level in the mid-1980s and expanded nationwide through the federally funded Even Start Family Literacy Program in 1988 and the founding of the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) the following year (King & McMaster, 2000). Even Start provides child care for small children and parent education and literacy skills for adults. It is the only federal governmental family literacy program that attempts to address issues of literacy. The development of both public and private family literacy programs during the past 15 years has been well documented in reviews and evaluations (Padak, Sapin, & Baycich, 2002).

From their beginning, family literacy programs have focused primarily on preschool children and

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school’s staff ...

their parents (Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, 1991; Darling, 1988). In the past decade, however, we have witnessed the emergence of program models that include elementary (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Quint, 2001) and middle school children (Connors, 1994).

Family literacy is a broad term and an approach that focuses on helping the whole family, with “family” defined as a unit or social reality rather than as separate individuals living together. Although families are composed of individuals, family literacy recognizes that family members are significantly connected to and profoundly affected by each other.

Consequently, the foundation for most family literacy program models consists of three guiding principles rooted in empirical evidence. The foremost principle is that parents are the first and most important teachers of their children (Cordry & Wilson, 2004; Padak, Sapin, & Baycich, 2002; Park, 2001). Second is that the educational achievement of children is related directly to their parents’ literacy and education levels (Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler, 2000). The third principle is that every family possesses strengths that need to be recognized and built upon in programs of family literacy (Auerbach, 1989; Brown, 1998). We will expand on these themes throughout this article.

Currently in the evolution of family literacy concepts and practices, several issues are at the forefront of discussions among practitioners, academics, and policymakers. One such issue concerns the extent to which culture and ethnicity, including parenting practices and preferred learning styles, impact effective instruction (Boyd, Brock, & Rozendal, 2004; Brown, 1998; National Center for ESL Literacy in Education, 2002; Park, 2001). The sources cited here are a few among a growing body of research findings that demonstrate the positive effects of attending to the cultural dynamics of participants in literacy programs.

A second predominant issue stems from the rapid growth of the Hispanic population in the United States. Data from the Current Population Survey show that from 1994 to 2004, the Hispanic popula-

tion in the United States grew from 26.6 million to 40.4 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). With ESL becoming an increasingly common element in family literacy programs, academics and practitioners are debating vigorously the relative merits of bilingual versus English-only instructional models (Boyd, Brock, & Rozendal, 2004; Calderon & Minaya-Rowe, 2003; Slavin & Cheung, 2005). Proponents of bilingual education argue that this approach helps reduce the frustration of trying to learn a new language and values the students’ native language as an essential aspect of their culture. Proponents of English-only instruction counter with evidence that students in their model learn English more quickly and efficiently (Slavin & Cheung, 2005).

Another major concern in literacy circles is the absence of fathers in the education of their children. Research has demonstrated consistently that children are more likely to perform and behave well in school when their fathers are involved (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997). Consequently, academics and practitioners are focusing more attention on developing strategies to encourage and enable fathers to participate in learning with their children (Gadsden & Ray, 2003; Karther, 2002; Ortiz, Stile,

& Brown, 1999).

There also is intense discussion within the field about the issues of program funding and location (Brown, 1998; Swick, 1994). The interplay of funding sources (governmental, philanthropic, and religious) and program location (schools, libraries, child care facilities, churches, and private residences) raises an array of philosophical and logistical concerns about who receives what services and how they are delivered. Not surprisingly, we have had to address each of the above issues in the LEAF program.

Finally, an array of program models exists that embraces the name family literacy. The most widely used family literacy model is the one endorsed by the National Center for Family Literacy and Even Start. This model consists of four components: (1) adult education, which includes literacy, GED, and life skills education; (2) child education, which

... the educational
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directly to their
parents’ literacy and
education levels.



consists of literacy instruction for children of all ages; (3) parent and child together (PACT) time, in which parents and their children engage in reading and relationship-building activities; and (4) parent time, which includes parenting classes and other resource development activities (Hughes & Botkins, 2001; Logue, 2000; National Center for Family Literacy, 1997; Padak, Sapin, & Baycich, 2002).

THE LEAF PROGRAM AS ONE MODEL

As described earlier, Learning English Among Friends (LEAF) was launched at César Chávez Middle School in response to an invitation by school and community representatives. LEAF meets weekly on Thursdays beginning at 5:30 p.m. When participants arrive, they sign in and pick up their nametags. Before going to the ESL or GED classes, the parents accompany their children to one of three places. Children from infancy to 3 attend enriched child care classes provided by AVANCE Waco, a parent education agency that serves Spanish-speaking individuals in Waco. Children between the ages of 4 and 6 attend LEAF Kids, a pre-reading class where they play, listen to stories, and engage in activities that expose them to hearing and speaking English. Children 6 and older participate in age-appropriate games, art, and craft activities in the gymnasium.

The ESL class is taught in small groups for 90 minutes, with one teacher for each five to seven students. Together they study workbooks with pictures and vocabulary focused on a theme such as

rooms in a house, common tools, a trip to a grocery store, or playground equipment. Frequently, the teachers bring examples of the objects being studied or magazines with pictures the students cut out to make posters or collages. For example, for the unit on measurement, the groups use scales to weigh items and rulers and yardsticks to measure each other's height, the dimensions of the room, and pieces of furniture.

At 6:45 p.m., a staff member asks the entire group a question related to learning English, family life, or living in South Waco. Examples are, "What difference has learning English made in your life?" and "What do you like about living in

Waco?" Each group discusses the question for a few minutes. Then one volunteer from each group stands and reports in English the highlights of their discussion. Everyone in the room is expectant as each person stands to speak. Although most of the participants struggle to express themselves, the group provides support. After each report, the speaker receives heartfelt applause.

At 7 p.m., the parents go to their children's rooms to pick them up and see their handiwork. They then go to the cafeteria for a family meal that is either purchased from a local vendor or provided by a local church. After dinner, some LEAF participants attend a computer literacy class taught in Spanish by a LEAF participant until 8:30 p.m. Participants in the GED class return to their studies until 9 p.m., and their children go to the gym for supervised recreation.

A few times during the year, the LEAF staff and participants jointly organize special events, such as Valentine's Day and Cinco de Mayo fiestas, and field trips to places such as the zoo, museum, or water park. Once one of Waco's state representatives arranged a trip to Austin for LEAF participants to tour the Capitol and meet with the Mexican American legislative delegation. These family-focused events provide valuable opportunities to develop leadership skills among the participants and to strengthen their sense of ownership of the program. Such experiences also empower parents by introducing them to new options for family activities in the community.

Developing partnerships and linkages with vari-

ous sectors – business, education, government, social service, and religion – has been a key component in the strategy for reaching these families. In order to achieve the larger goal of strengthening families and building community, LEAF had to be positioned as an integral part of the community. Professors and students from Baylor University's Schools of Education and Social Work serve as the staff for the LEAF program. Child care is provided by staff from AVANCE Waco and supervised recreation by staff from the YMCA. Nearby McLennan Community College provides the GED instructor, and GEAR UP Waco (a federal grant program that promotes postsecondary education in schools located in low socioeconomic areas) provides funding and an instructor for the computer literacy class. In addition, several private foundations, individuals, and organizations, including churches, provide funding or in-kind support for the LEAF program. Finding ways for others to contribute to LEAF and sharing recognition with them for the program's success has created a network of mutual support and pride that is vital to the stability and growth of the South Waco community.

A MODEL FOR FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS

Let us now examine more closely the components of the model for family literacy that can be implemented in a variety of ways and contexts. LEAF is one example of a family literacy program based on the framework described below. First, to be considered a family literacy program, it needs to include at least two of the following components: adult education, childhood education, parent education, and parent and child together time. A diagram of this model is provided on page 15.

Adult education. Adult education in family literacy programs can take many forms, such as English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, beginning reading and writing, computer literacy, and adult basic education. Adult education simply means adults are learning skills that will help them function more efficiently in society, at work, and in relationships. In the LEAF program, most of the

participants attend the ESL class, and some attend the GED and computer literacy classes. Each week, 35 to 45 LEAF participants come to the ESL class, which is taught in small groups of five to seven students. In a small group setting, students are able to discuss what they are learning, build genuine relationships with each other and their teachers, and feel more freedom to make mistakes and ask questions. They are eager to be there and remain on task during the entire session. Their laughter and smiles are evidence that they enjoy the process.



Participants regularly tell us that the reason they keep coming back is because they enjoy learning in the small groups rather than the one-on-one tutoring or class-size instruction used in other ESL programs they have attended.

Enjoying the learning experience is necessary to keep adults engaged in any voluntary educational endeavor, but it also must be relevant. They invest the time and energy because they want to solve a problem, learn a skill, or be able to do something they presently cannot do. Those of us who provide educational programs are responsible for doing all we can to ensure that the participants achieve their learning goals. With LEAF, the participants want to learn English for a variety of reasons including helping their children succeed in school, getting a promotion at work, or finding a more rewarding job.

As professional educators administering LEAF, we thought measuring success would be a straightforward process – determine competence level in English when a participant begins and measure it every four to six months. We use the Basic English Skills Test (BEST) as a pre- and post-test assess-

ment to measure a participant's progress, and we have found both slight and substantial gains in skill levels over time. We also have realized in a more profound way, however, that success in learning English is more than becoming proficient in a language. We are learning to measure success from the participant's perspective, too.

Most of the LEAF participants are first-generation immigrants, many in the United States for only a few months. For them, enrolling in an educational program is a courageous step, especially in an English class where their lack of proficiency is readily apparent. Success for them is working two or more jobs and still finding the energy to dress their kids and attend this class as often as possible. Success is becoming familiar with new settings, seeing their children make new friends, and learning to interact more comfortably with Anglo professionals and college students whose backgrounds and lifestyles are so radically different from their own. Success is gaining confidence and feeling empowered to have a vision of a new life and then to pursue it. Regardless of the type of adult education being offered in a family literacy program, success is multidimensional and needs to be documented and celebrated through both standardized testing and the stories of changed lives.

Childhood education. In family literacy programs, childhood education is divided into early childhood and children and youth. Early childhood education refers to age-appropriate activities that prepare children for success in school and life experiences. For example, in the LEAF program, children between infancy and 3 are cared for by trained and experienced child care staff who interact with the children through play, looking at pictures, and reading. Because most of the children in LEAF between the ages of 4 and 6 do not yet speak English, they attend a class that is specially tailored for children learning English. The teachers engage the children in pre-reading activities including games, arts and crafts, storytelling through drama, and reading.

As noted earlier, children and youth, from first through eighth grade, participate in supervised age-appropriate recreational and arts and crafts activities. A week or so prior to special LEAF events, such as Cinco de Mayo, the children make banners, piñatas, and other decorations for the cafeteria, where the fiestas are held. Throughout these ac-

tivities, the focus is on building relationships with the staff and among the participants. Many of the children in elementary and middle school do not speak English with confidence, so the staff members encourage English speaking through conversation, discussion groups, supportive chatter during athletic games, and other creative ways. Tutoring and homework help also are excellent activities through which to build relationships and let the students practice speaking English, although these are not part of the LEAF program.

It is vitally important for a family literacy program to encourage, emphasize, and seek to build the strengths and assets of children and youth, rather than to focus on their problems and needs. The 40 Developmental Assets, as identified by the Search Institute, are strengths that children and youth may possess. Research studies (Scales & Leffert, 1999) have demonstrated that the presence of these assets is significantly related to higher levels of quality of life and success in school and other dimensions of life. By building on the strengths children and youth already possess, as well as by stimulating the development of new assets, we believe these young people will feel encouraged, valued, and motivated to make positive and constructive decisions.

One way to accomplish this at LEAF is by developing leadership skills. As children help to facilitate games and other activities, we affirm them verbally and provide opportunities for them to assist the staff in a variety of program responsibilities. Sometimes, disruptive behavior on the part of a child is a signal that he or she needs a more challenging activity or role in the group. As a result, several of the older children and youth have specific roles and responsibilities that contribute to the success of the program. Feeling empowered and recognized, these children and youth are eager to learn new things and demonstrate their competence at school, church, and in other settings. They regularly share these experiences with us at LEAF.

Parent education. Like adult education, parent education encompasses a broad array of activities. In general, parent education means learning knowledge and skills for family living and community service. For example, parent education may consist of seminars for new parents, support groups for parents of adolescents, or sessions on how to handle family conflict. During the first year of the LEAF program, guest speakers made 10-minute presenta-

tions during the mealtime. The speakers included a city council representative and the Waco chief of police (both of whom are Hispanic), the mayor of Waco, healthcare professionals, and others who provided information about accessing community services such as the library, assistance with immigration issues, and affordable child care. Although beneficial, this practice was discontinued because having speakers during the meal diminished family time and prevented staff from interacting with the families. Subsequently, we have held brief sessions at the end of the ESL lesson on topics about easy-to-make toys for young children and how to engage children in play. Parent education is the one component of our program where staff and participants explore their needs and desires for relevant topics and ways to address them.

Parent and child time together. Perhaps most important, family literacy programs need to include parent and child together time (PACT). These activities provide opportunity for intentional communication between parents and their children, shared experiences that strengthen bonds, and chances for parents and children to be excited about learning together. PACT also reinforces parents' role of being the primary teacher in their children's lives. Some examples of PACT activities are reading books, eating a meal as a family, discussing what they are learning in the program or at school or work, and doing art and craft projects. At the LEAF program, we offer a family dinner each week as our PACT time. During this meal, children and parents have the opportunity to share what they have learned in the past hour. We also provide fun, family field trips, and fiestas.

FAMILY LITERACY: AN INNOVATIVE MODEL FOR CHURCH MINISTRY

The framework for family literacy described and used by LEAF is highly compatible with the mission and ministry of the church, perhaps especially for family ministry. In *Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide*, Diana Garland describes family ministry as "including everything a church and its representatives do that has an impact on the founding, development, and ministry of families" (1999, p. 374). Family ministry includes attending to and meeting people's needs, whether they are spiritual, emotional, social, educational, or physical. In other words, family ministry is an umbrella for a diverse

group of programs, including family literacy, that offers opportunities for empowerment.

In the context of church ministry, family literacy – or a family literacy ministry – becomes the means for practical expressions of the love and mercy of God. More specifically, family literacy ministry can be defined as the collaborative effort of the church to strengthen families by teaching literacy and relationship skills that enhance the family's ability to live more meaningful and productive lives. This definition communicates that family literacy ministry includes more than teaching isolated literacy skills; it is a holistic ministry.

There are several predominant ways that family literacy ministries strengthen the families that participate. First, it is the family-based approach to teaching literacy skills that is the essential prerequisite for adults who want to pursue additional education and more meaningful or better-paying jobs. Consequently, family literacy ministry can help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Additionally, family literacy ministry facilitates parents as they become full partners in their children's education. Studies show that children whose parents are actively involved in their education are more likely to succeed in school. Being involved in their children's education means that the parents develop a positive relationship with their children's teachers, help their children with homework, encourage their children to study and do their best in school, and participate in school functions. Also, as children see the value their parents place on pursuing education, the children will be more likely to value and pursue learning themselves. Finally, family literacy enables and equips parents to be more effective teachers and role models in the lives of their children.

Family literacy ministry begins when a congregation assesses the needs of families in its community, both church members and nonmembers, and matches those needs with the church's mission. A congregation must value meeting the needs of families in its community as an essential component of its ministry; otherwise it will be difficult to begin or sustain a family literacy ministry program. When a church sponsors such a program, it is helping to meet, directly or indirectly, the educational, psychological, spiritual, social, and emotional needs of families. Family literacy ministry encompasses much more than simply inviting people into the

church to learn literacy skills. As congregants interact with each other and others in the community, they are reaching out with the eyes, ears, and hands of Jesus Christ to meet practical needs in people's lives.

DECIDING WHERE TO LOCATE THE PROGRAM

When thinking about how to organize and structure a family literacy program, it is important to examine carefully where the program should be located. Perhaps the most obvious site is in the physical facilities of the sponsoring church, but ask these questions before making that choice: (1) Where is your church located relative to the people you want to serve? (2) Is this population group currently involved in your church? (3) If not, are they likely to feel comfortable in your church?

For example, a church may be located in a poor, ethnically diverse neighborhood yet have a membership that is largely middle-class and Caucasian. When asked, community residents often will say they are intimidated about coming to the church building because they feel so different from the people they see entering the church on Sunday morning. If this is your church's situation, it does not mean your church should not host the program. It does point to the need, however, to build relationships with the community residents prior to inviting them to participate in any program at your church.

If a church decides to conduct the program in its facilities, begin by identifying components of the family literacy model that currently are part of the church's programming. For example, many churches have regular mid-week educational activities for adults, children, and youth, and some also provide a weekly meal. Outreach ministries to the community such as after-school tutoring, Mother's Day Out, or child care programs also are common. Almost any program or ministry can be integrated into



one of the four components of a family literacy program – childhood education, adult education, parent education, and PACT.

If it is not feasible to begin this ministry with an existing church program, then start with only one of the family literacy ministry components. For example, offer an adult education class, such as beginning reading and writing, and later add child care, recreational, or educational activities for the participants' children. Think creatively about how to use church resources, such as a fellowship hall, children's classrooms, art supplies, and sports equip-

ment. It also is important to identify church members' skills, interests, and areas of passion. For example, who enjoys working with children? Who is gifted and/or a professional teacher or who enjoys cooking and serving food? Churches are optimal places for a family literacy program and may have more resources than originally anticipated.

Most communities have other facilities where a church may offer a family literacy program. As with church locations, a key issue is the level of comfort for the population group that will be the beneficiaries of this ministry. Family-friendly public facilities, such as a school, community center, public library, YMCA, or YWCA, are widely available options. When exploring possible sites, consider any safe place where children or adults gather regularly. A new but discernable trend in some areas is for churches to rent former retail space in mini-malls. School buildings are natural places for family literacy programs, because they are centers for education and are recognized as familiar and safe places in the community. School districts vary in their policies for the use of school buildings by community groups, but many are eager to have their facilities seen as trustworthy, family-friendly places in the community. LEAF, for example, is held in a middle school where, initially, most of the participants were parents of the students at the school. Word about the program spread throughout

the community, however, and increasingly participants include community members who do not have children in the school. The school's principal commends LEAF for helping build bridges to non-English-speaking parents in the community and for the substantial increase in parental participation at school events.

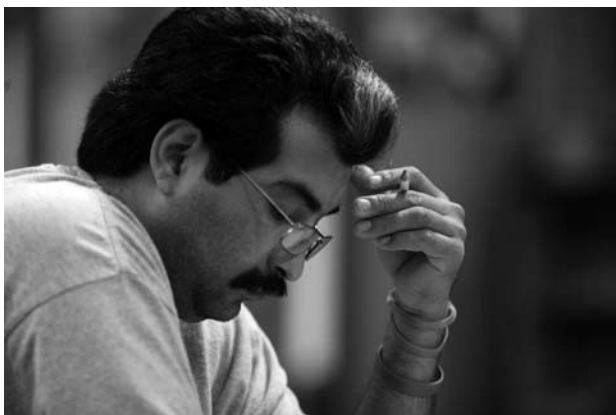
Initiating a family literacy program outside of the church walls will require cooperation and collaboration with other entities. Developing effective partnerships is an arduous process, at best, requiring patience, flexibility, ongoing communication, and humility. LEAF began as a joint venture with the middle school and two professors from different university departments. One of our first actions was to meet with existing after-school program leaders to explore ways to collaborate. Next, we scanned the community for organizations and programs that address the needs of Hispanic adults and children. Through this effort, a community organization with a parent support program referred its participants to our LEAF program. A year later, we were able to provide child care during LEAF, which enabled even more parents with young children to attend. Our working relationship with this child care agency was a significant factor in our obtaining new funding from a local foundation. Sharing the resources, risks, and rewards of serving a community inevitably strengthens all of the partners, provides a role model for others, and can lead to unexpected and beneficial outcomes.

RECOGNIZING AND RESPONDING TO CULTURAL DIVERSITY

In addition to context, it also is essential to consider issues of diversity when planning and operating a family literacy program. Some participants will differ from program staff in their socioeconomic status, age, gender, ethnicity, or culture. These factors affect the way people learn, interact with each other and with staff, respond to the program's structure and activities, and ultimately the extent to which participants benefit from the program. Being aware of these characteristics and making adjustments is a tangible way of valuing participants as a cultural group, with its own stories,

challenges, and talents.

For example, the majority of LEAF participants are from Mexico, but only a few of the staff are Hispanic. From the beginning of the LEAF program, we made a conscious effort to learn about the Mexican culture and worldview by reading, consulting with educators and other professionals who work with Mexicans, and by learning from the LEAF participants themselves. We have used this exchange of information to shape the program and to guide our interaction with the participants. For instance, Mexican culture values the needs of



the group over the needs of the individual. It also values relationships over tasks. Consequently, the ESL classes are conducted in small groups, rather than in individual or classroom settings, because that better facilitates relationship building among teachers and participants. In the context of these supportive relationships, participants are more willing to ask questions, risk making mistakes, and offer to help others. Participants regularly express that the small groups make learning interesting and fun.

In addition to learning about the culture of the participants, those of us who administer, teach, or serve in other capacities at LEAF have worked to become more aware of our own cultural preferences and standards. Socioeconomic status, age, gender, ethnicity, and culture shape our worldview just as they do for program participants. When reading, consulting with other service providers, and talking with LEAF participants, we often inquire about aspects of the Anglo culture that differ from the Mexican culture. This is a regular topic at our staff meetings, especially when reviewing a new activ-

ity or an event that did not go as well as we had expected. We recognize that each of us has cultural biases and beliefs, whether overt or latent, that affect the ways we interact with one another. These differences are constantly surfacing and prompting us to reassess ourselves, our presence as a staff, and the program.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Learning English Among Friends (LEAF) is one example of a family literacy program. It is innovative in that it has activities in each of the four areas of the family literacy model, and it has programming for children of all ages, not just preschool. During our first two years of operation in 2003-2005, four core elements of success were identified and may be applicable for any family literacy program, whether it is co-sponsored by a public school, as in the case of LEAF, or by a church. These keys to success are: (1) teaching in small, relational groups; (2) ensuring quality programming for children; (3) engaging participants and developing leadership; and (4) responding to the whole person.

Though teaching ESL in small, relational groups is particularly applicable in Mexican culture, we think the benefits of a small group structure – including mutual support among participants and personal attention from the teacher without undue pressure – would enhance learning for other cultural groups as well. Second, the LEAF participants individually and collectively have expressed their appreciation for the quality of care their children receive. Parents feel welcomed and comfortable when they recognize that their children are valued and safe, and that age-appropriate activities are available. Also, when parents see their children enjoying themselves, it is an incentive for parents to continue in the program.

Our experiences in LEAF have reaffirmed that individuals benefit most from a program in which they have a sense of ownership. Being invited by the local middle school's Campus Decision-making Committee to implement LEAF gave the school and the community this sense of ownership from the outset. Furthermore, we intentionally engage adults and children in planning, implementing, or evaluating every aspect of the programming. With assistance from the staff, the adult participants selected the LEAF logo, formed committees to plan the fiestas, and chose books to read with their chil-

dren. The children assist the staff with games and crafts, sign-in, and meal preparation. Consequently, leadership skills develop through valuing and empowering individual abilities. Other participants observe their peers modeling these skills. Many participants have told us they invite friends and family to come to "their" LEAF program. Equally as important, engaging the participants as co-owners in the program has fostered humility among the staff members as we learn from and with them.

Finally, we have learned that a successful program does not mean it attempts to meet all the needs of its participants. There will always be situations that a family literacy program is not equipped to address, and then we may suggest referrals. Sometimes our LEAF partners can provide the needed assistance, but more often we help connect the participants with government agencies, social services organizations, and church-sponsored programs offered in the wider community. The national 2-1-1 Social Services Hotline is available in many communities to help staff identify resources for domestic abuse, health care and nutrition, substance abuse, and transportation, among others.

What is important for a successful program is that staff members recognize and relate to participants holistically, as individuals with physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions.

CONCLUSION

The family literacy model described in this article goes beyond teaching essential literacy skills. It provides a framework for a variety of activities designed to strengthen families and build community among the staff and participants. By focusing on relationships, recognizing strengths, and developing leadership skills among adults and children alike, a family literacy program can help meet an individual's fundamental need to be accepted and valued in tangible ways. In this way, family literacy programs can serve as a vehicle for ministry through which the church expresses Christ's transforming love and acceptance.

Family Literacy Ministry Program Model

Program Emphasis	Components		
	Literacy/ESL Instruction	Parent Education Learning knowledge & skills for family living and community service	Interactive Parent/Child Activities Learning knowledge & skills for family living and community service
<i>Early Childhood</i> (Birth-Preschool)		Learning Examples Parent education seminars; support groups for parents of adolescents; family communication skills training	Reading and play activities that emphasize parents as teachers of their children and learners with them
<i>Children & Youth</i> (Elementary - Middle School)		Service Examples Teaching how to provide respite care for caregivers; developing adult mentors and friends for teens	Writing and singing songs together; talking about TV programs and ads; planning and cooking meals together using recipes
<i>Adults</i> (High School Adults Senior Adults)			Tutoring siblings or children; discussing current events; sharing experiences from school or work

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\$3 Worth of God

I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please, not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of him to make me love a black man or pick beets with a migrant. I want ecstasy, not transformation; I want warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please.

Source: Rees, Wilbur. *Leadership*, Vol. 4, No. 1



First Baptist
Knoxville photos

From 'handouts' to holistic ministry

Franci Rogers
freelance writer



McEntyre pitches in at a Kids Hope event in which First Baptist Knoxville participated.

When she looked at the way many churches do community ministries, Carol McEntyre saw the best intentions but not always the best methods. “We want to share the love of Christ and spread the good news but churches haven’t always been effective in doing that,” she said. In her role as director of Buckner Community Ministries at First Baptist Church of Knoxville (Tenn.), McEntyre is finding ways to combine the two.

McEntyre works at the church as an employee of Buckner Children and Family Services, a globally oriented ministry that works with children in need, and a division of Buckner International, Dallas, Texas. A social worker, with an undergraduate degree from Carson Newman College and a Master of Social Work degree from Baylor University, McEntyre was first employed by the 1,700-member congregation in 2004 as minister to university students.

She has found that many churches engage in what she calls “commodities-based ministries,” giving people food, clothes or money for rent. “But to me, building community ministries in the church means building ministries that are life-transforming.”

She said the question she and First Baptist are exploring together is, “How do we take everything we do and make it about relationship and life transformation and not about giving stuff away?”

McEntyre uses her social work background to help congregation members better understand what the long-term effects of community ministry can be. Instead of the immediate good feeling of giving away a Christmas basket or sponsoring a child at the holidays, she said, “We are trying to go a step

further and change lives. Once they [congregation members] heard the rationale, they began to understand that we could really make a difference, and they have just been totally on board.”

The Rev. Dr. William D. Shiell, senior pastor at First Baptist Knoxville, said McEntyre’s focus on transforming ministries has been revitalizing. “Carol empowers the church to develop relationships and move beyond the standard ‘programs and handouts’ so often found in downtown ministry,” he said.

Kids Hope USA is an example of a community ministry that McEntyre believes can have a lasting impact and be an eye-opener for congregation members. The school-based mentoring program brings volunteers face-to-face with at-risk children. It works in collaboration with Buckner in many parts of the country. She helped First Baptist become involved in Kids Hope USA two years ago at a local elementary school.

“We have 19 mentors at the school now. That means 19 hours out of every week there is somebody from First Baptist Knoxville at that elementary school,” she said. “Once you start something like that, it’s easier to say we don’t want to just give stuff away, but we want to engage people in relationships.”

As trust grows between the school and the church, the relationship becomes reciprocal. McEntyre said that when the school recently wanted to send some students to safety patrol training in Washington, D.C., the school social worker called the church and asked for help. With just one e-mail, the Kids Hope volunteers raised all the money needed.

“It’s because those mentors know the school, love the school, love the children and are invested,” McEntyre said. “If we had not had the relationship with the school, we could not have raised that money.”

It’s that kind of collaboration that Shiell finds so rewarding. “Buckner has provided the catalyst for our community ministry to come to fruition,” he said. “Without their collaboration, we would not be able to minister in an effective, holistic way.”

In addition, Shiell said that investing in such an empowered community ministry has attracted new members to the church. “Many people have been drawn to our church who want to make a difference in Knoxville,” he said.

That’s exactly what Buckner hopes will happen when it places a staff member into a church, said Scott Waller, director of program initiatives for Buckner International. “We don’t place professional social workers into churches to do church ministry for them,” he said. “We want to empower, equip and energize the congregation to do what only the congregation can do.”

For that to happen, Waller said the church culture, vision and leadership have to align. “When all of that lines up, like it has in Knoxville, that’s when the church can create long-term, sustainable, effective ministries,” he said.

Another example of such an emerging ministry at the church is its English for Speakers of Other Languages program. A large Latino population lives in the community where the church is located, and the ESOL program has grown quickly. This challenged the church to think about ways to take the ministry to another level.

“Last year we brought in a bivocational minister to begin a Latino congregation in our church,” McEntyre said. “And so now it’s a really interesting blend of the ESOL program feeding and nurturing the church, and the church feeding people into the ESOL program.”

One positive result of the Latino Ministry is that the demarcation between the church and the community has blurred. “It becomes just part of the DNA of the church. It’s who the church is and what we do,” McEntyre said. “It’s not their community over there and the church over here.”

“That’s life-transforming, to move to a culture and not know the language and to end up learning the language, and to have this church body supporting you and encouraging you.”

Sharing her passion to serve with the members of First Baptist Knoxville has been a blessing, said McEntyre, who first felt called to ministry in college.

“I felt like serving people who were in need

**It becomes just part
of the DNA of the
church. It’s who the
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we do. It’s not their
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and the church over
here.**

“GET TO KNOW PEOPLE ... WHAT THEY ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT”

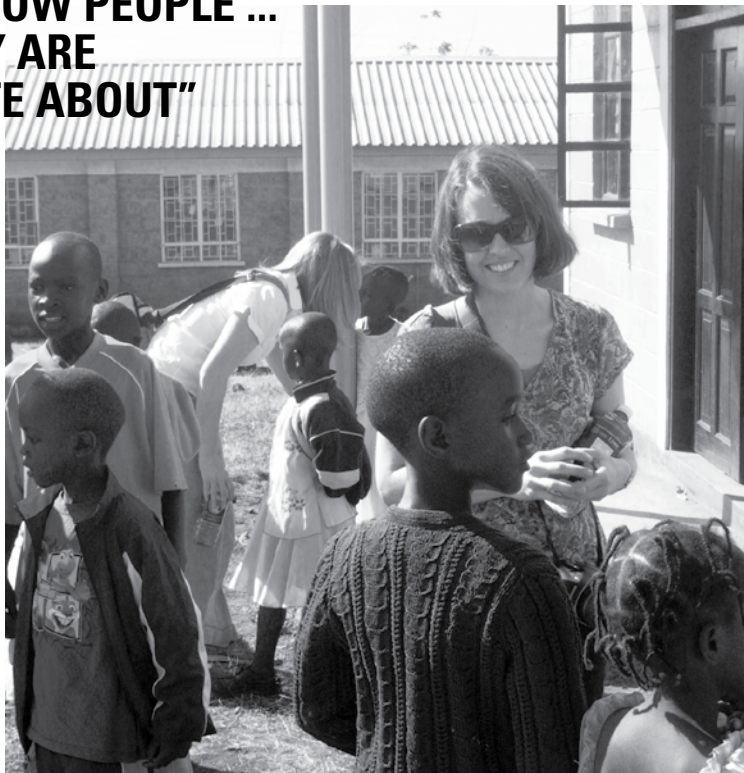
would be a very practical, tangible, real way to live out my faith,” she said. “And I really feel like my role as community minister is mobilizing church members to serve the ‘least of these.’”

A lack of compassion for others is not the problem, McEntyre said, but she hopes to help people focus their compassion and then establish realistic, sustainable boundaries.

“‘Healthy helping’ is a term we’ve begun to use around here,” she said. “We find ourselves asking ‘How do we help in a way that’s healthy?’ It’s funny that this is a challenge, but it is,” she said. “And now that we’ve begun down this road of community ministries, I have church members coming to me all the time, interested in starting new community ministries.”

Recently, First Baptist conducted a churchwide, six-week program it called “Get Connected,” in which sermons and Sunday school lessons focused on volunteerism. The program talked about setting specific boundaries for the church’s community ministry programs and evaluating where members’ passions lie.

In addition, McEntyre trained 27 church mem-



bers in how to conduct interviews with individuals about their passions, interests, skills and gifts. Some of the questions included “If time, money and talent were not an issue, what would you love to do?” and “What kind of skills do you have that you would be willing to lend to the church?” These responses are still being studied, but already McEntyre sees pockets of interest emerging.

McEntyre encourages other churches that are beginning or want to improve their community ministries to first look within.

“I would say the first thing you need to do is get to know your congregation,” she said. “Get to know people. What are people passionate about and how can we channel that passion and energy and concern?”

“People are committed,” McEntyre said. “Expect big things from people, and they’ll rise to the occasion.” – *Additional reporting by Angela Dennison*



FIND OUT MORE ...

First Baptist Knoxville
www.fbcknox.org

Buckner International
www.buckner.org

Kids Hope USA
www.kidshopeusa.org



A LITANY OF GOD'S CARE

CARING GOD, YOU HAVE ALWAYS LOVED, STRENGTHENED, AND COMFORTED US.

WE KNOW YOU WILL PROVIDE US TIME TO REST AND FEEL AT PEACE,

HEALING FOR THE THINGS WHICH BRING US PAIN,

GUIDANCE IN DOING WHAT IS RIGHT,

A PLACE AT YOUR TABLE FOREVER,

A WAY TO MAKE PEACE WITH THOSE WE DISLIKE OR FEAR,

THE PROMISE THAT EACH OF US HAS A TASK TO DO FOR YOU,

THE ASSURANCE THAT YOUR LOVE AND CARE WILL NEVER STOP,

THE CONSTANT DESIRE TO DO WHAT IS GOOD IN YOUR EYES,

THE BELIEF THAT YOU GIVE US ALL THAT WE NEED.

A CALL TO AWARENESS

THE WORLD IS POPULATED BY BILLIONS OF PEOPLE AND FILLED WITH THICK
NEWSPAPERS, SPEAKING OF TOO MUCH DIVISION.

GOD'S WORLD IS VAST; GOD'S CONCERN IS INTIMATE.

SOCIETIES, CULTURES, CHURCHES FAIL TO EMBRACE THOSE DIFFERENT
FROM THEMSELVES.

GOD'S WORLD IS VAST; GOD'S CONCERN IS INTIMATE.

OUR OWN PREOCCUPATION WITH THE FAMILIAR KEEPS US FROM LIVING
GOD'S EXPANSIVE VISION.

GOD'S WORLD IS VAST; GOD'S CONCERN IS INTIMATE.

A LITANY OF COMMUNITY

ALL MERCIFUL AND TENDER GOD, YOU GAVE BIRTH TO THE WORLD AND TO ALL
THE PEOPLE WHO LOOK AT THE SAME MOON THAT WE SEE.

**WE LIVE IN COMMUNITY WITH PEOPLE IN PLACES WHERE PEACE WALKS
A TIGHTROPE.**

WE LIVE IN COMMUNITY WITH THOSE WHO ARE ANXIOUS FOR THE TOMORROWS
OF THEIR SONS AND DAUGHTERS.

**WE LIVE IN COMMUNITY WITH THOSE FOR WHOM A BOWL OF SOUP AND A
PIECE OF BREAD IS A FEAST.**

WE LIVE IN COMMUNITY WITH THOSE WHO HAVE FORGOTTEN THE LANGUAGE
OF HOPE.

**WE LIVE IN COMMUNITY WITH THOSE WHO CAN TEACH US MUCH ABOUT
DEPENDING ON YOU TO PROVIDE FOR US DAY BY DAY.**

**GOD OF ALL PEACE, GOD OF ALL HOPE, GIVE US KIND AND GENTLE HEARTS, THAT
WE MIGHT ACT WITH COMPASSION TOWARD THE WHOLE HUMAN FAMILY. AMEN.**

— SHARLANDE SLEDGE



Solution-focused lay pastoral care

Jack Holland
Associate Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling,
Emmanuel School of Religion



Lay counseling ministries are designed to address the pastoral care needs of members within local congregations. This article reports on one congregation's effort to equip lay caregivers in the techniques of solution-focused conversation. A focus group interview of lay caregivers serving in the pastoral care ministry of the church used open-ended questions to learn what the caregivers found to be the most important and influential aspects of their training in the solution-focused model for their ministries. Responses to an additional question regarding how the overall ethos of the congregation supports their ministry also are summarized.

Theories on the history of pastoral care reveal that different assumptions and models often develop in response to the greater transitions of human need within the culture. Gerkin (1997) notes that "different emphases in pastoral care have emerged in response to the changing scenes of human experience over the long reaches of time" (p. 21). Sunderland and Shelp (2003) propose that one of these shifts occurred as the field of pastoral counseling "underwent a radical change in the last quarter of the twentieth century" (p. 10) as "pastoral ministry passed from being an exclusive function of the clergy to acknowledgment as one of the obligations of the congregation" (p. 11). Gerkin (1997) supports this perspective, observing that after World War II pastoral caregivers began to "turn away from the heavy influence of individual psychology and psychopathology ... toward a renewed concern for and interest in the care of the community of Christians" (p. 73). Sunderland and Shelp (2003) add that, "By the last decade of the century, the old mold had been broken, and calling and training laypeople for their congregation's pastoral ministry became

customary as lay pastoral care training programs spread nationally” (p. 11).

This emphasis spawned a number of approaches intending to promote the ministry of lay members as givers of pastoral care, including the works of: Tan, 1991; Bogban & Bogban, 1979; Collins, 1976, 1988; Crabb, 1975; Haugk, 1984; Shelp & Sunderland, 2000, and others. Although this list is not exhaustive, Tan (1997) summarizes that most models of training for paraprofessionals in basic counseling and helping skills usually include “listening and empathy skills as well as referral skills but can also be broadened to include some cognitive-behavioral, marital and family, or systemic counseling methods” (p. 369).

This article proposes that the techniques of solution-focused counseling offer a timely and appropriate methodology for lay Christian counselors serving in contemporary congregations. Even though there is a growing body of literature encouraging the use of solution-focused principles in the practice of pastoral counseling, and there is a growing body of literature in the use of lay Christian counselors, this review found no examples of lay Christian counselors being trained to use a solution-focused approach.

The origins of solution-focused counseling can be traced to the practice of Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg, and colleagues at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee, WI. Their long-held belief that “holistically observing and reflecting on the actual process in which they work with their clients will teach them more about how to be effective than will traditional scientific research” (DeJong & Berg, 2002, p. 11) generated this alternate approach that has been developing since the mid-1980s. Solution-focused counseling is rooted in the assumption that counselees are the experts on their own lives, and that honoring their unique perspective can be a most effective way of helping them find solutions to their problems.

This model recognizes that in the midst of perplexing problems people often develop a “tunnel vision” view of the issue in which they redouble their efforts at methods that are not working simply because they do not know what else to do. In a solution-focused approach, the counselor attempts first to understand the problem, from the perspective of the counselee, and also the solutions he or she has tried. Rather than offering expert diagno-

sis or advice, the counselor attempts to help the counselee discover a view of what life will be like when the problem is less severe or no longer exists. In this “different view” of a future without the problem, conversation focuses on the counselee’s understanding of the strengths, experiences, and resources he or she has available to begin moving toward that different view.

The proposal in this article to equip lay caregivers in the use of this model asserts that the assumptions of solution-focused counseling obviate the paternalistic biases of modern psychology. Further, it allows for a postmodern, collaborative approach to helping others that is particularly well suited to the practice of lay Christian counseling and to the ecclesiological fulfillment of the call to “bear one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2). One of the early voices in the lay counseling movement, author Larry Crabb, seems to support this perspective, stating that “the lay counseling movement has not challenged the basic thing I’m challenging, which is the expert-elder distinction. I think they still operate under the assumption that people need a specialist – an expert with certified training who has more than biblical wisdom, personal godliness and deep compassion” (1975, p. 17).

Stone (2001) lends support to this schema in his discussion of a content analysis of works by major authors in the field of pastoral counseling throughout the last five decades. In summary, Stone concludes that this body of literature “shows a significant long-term therapy bias” (p. 184), that it treats “congregational ministry with superficiality and silence” (p. 184), that the “heavy reliance of an entire field on the thinking of one person – Carl Rogers – is astonishing” (p. 185), that the counseling process “is very individualized and as a result becomes cut off from the community, the fellowship of believers” (p. 187), and that the pastoral counseling field is “developmentally stuck” in a “therapeutic model of an earlier era” (p. 187).

In contrast, Stone (2001) argues that the techniques available in the solution-focused approach offer pastors the “best way to help our parishioners through their difficulties so that they can regain hope and be faithful to God’s call” (p. 196). Given this support for the implementation of solution-focused techniques in pastoral counseling, it seems reasonable to apply this model to the practice of lay pastoral counseling as well. Sharp (1999) supports

this proposition, noting that the solution-focused approach is a “viable alternative for ministers, lay caregivers, and pastoral counseling specialists” and that it “meets the unique challenges of the local congregation, including time constraints, while providing a highly effective counseling approach” (p. 73).

A SOLUTION-FOCUSED LAY COUNSELING MINISTRY

In January 2000, a congregation of approximately 1,500 members located in a rapidly growing community in the Northwestern United States initiated a lay pastoral care ministry. They contacted this author to provide training for the caregivers. Ten individuals deemed by the leadership of the congregation to be mature, spiritually sound, and gifted for a ministry of pastoral care were invited to participate in a week-long training process in which the curriculum reported on in this article was introduced. In 2003, a second group of individuals received the same training. Both groups continue to be supervised and to receive continuing education in the practice of solution-focused conversation.

Individuals, couples, and families from the congregation and the community who have expressed a need for pastoral counsel to the church's Pastoral Ministry staff are referred to the lay care ministry. The model of lay care in this church follows closely the “informal, organized model” delineated by Tan (1991) in which the “lay counselors are given systematic training in helping skills and receive regular, ongoing, and relatively close supervision” (p. 84). The unique aspect of lay care in this church is that its lay counselors are taught the solution-focused approach in their systematic training.

To clarify the emphasis on pastoral care in this ministry, as opposed to professionalized counseling, the lay caregivers are referred to as Paracletes, from the Greek word meaning to “come alongside.” The following description portrays how the Paraclete ministry is promoted to the congregation: “The Paraclete Ministry is comprised of mature Christians who have the biblical knowledge and wisdom to effectively minister to the spiritual needs of others. ... The Paracletes go through nearly fifty hours of intensive classroom training over several months, along with regular follow-up study and reading assignments. Paracletes are not licensed

counselors, but can direct individuals, couples and families to licensed counselors who hold fast to their Christian faith.”

Training curriculum

It should be noted that the solution-focused model also guides the approach taken in the 50-hour training program. In other words, the training honors the trainee's unique experience and involves collaborative work to find solutions. In debriefing role plays and other exercises, the conversation focuses on sharpening the trainees' awareness of what they do well, complimenting strengths, and identifying and working on problem areas. Works consulted for training include *Interviewing for Solutions* (DeJong & Berg, 2002); *Competency Based Counseling* (Thomas & Cockburn, 1998); *Invitation to Possibility Land* (Bertolino & O'Hanlon, 1999); and *Solution-focused Pastoral Counseling* (Kollar, 1997).

In summer 2006, five randomly chosen individuals who had received the Paraclete training were invited to participate in a three-hour focus group interview to reflect on their experience with this ministry approach. This interview sought to understand what the Paraclete ministers found to be the most important and influential aspects of their training. Four interview questions were adapted from a qualitative interview guide analyzing client and therapist perceptions developed by Metcalf, Thomas, Duncan, Miller, & Hubble (*Handbook of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy*, 1996). A fifth question was formulated during the interview in response to recurring comments from the participants regarding the unique ethos that has developed in the congregation as a result of how the church leaders posture themselves in the lives of hurting people. The suitability of this question as a part of this interview is demonstrated by the response that it received. The five open-ended questions were:

- As a Paraclete minister, what exactly is it that you do, from your point of view?
- As a Paraclete minister, what do you see as your role when you meet with people?
- What has helped you the most in carrying out this ministry?
- What are some of the difficulties/challenges you have had?
- How does the overall ethos/climate of this church impact your ministry?

A final summary question asked the interviewees if there was anything else important that they wished to discuss.

Results

Data from this interview are reported in summaries of key statements that the focus group participants made in response to the open-ended questioning. Because these questions sought to understand how the interviewees are applying the training they have received in their ministry, their responses are matched with an overview of the specific content of the training curriculum that they reference. This presentation will give a summary of the interview and an overview of the solution-focused training curriculum.

The first interview question was: “As a Paraclete minister, what exactly is it that you do, from your point of view?” The group response centered on the solution-focused idea of expertise. One interviewee reported that because of the training, “I don’t have any anxiety about being inept at this task; it is not our job to fix the problem.” Another added that, “a short-term counseling setup like this requires that I practice active listening. I want to hear their perspective and help them think through problems and solutions in an orderly way.” A third respondent stressed that, “Paracletes are interviewed and handpicked. The irony is that we are often people who would be the most likely to tell other people what to do. That has made it easier to buy into this model. I don’t have to be a detective, solving the person’s problem.” A fourth respondent stated that, “it has been a huge amount of relief to not have to give answers.”

These perspectives on expertise, which were shared by all of the interview participants, are a

major emphasis in the Paraclete training. Referred to as a “not-knowing position” by Anderson and Goolishian (1992), this perspective stresses “a general attitude or stance in which the therapist’s actions communicate an abundant, genuine curiosity” (p. 29). This perspective is predicated on the belief that the individual or family knows more about their lives than the counselor, and is in contrast to a medical model of therapy where the professional is the expert. Freedman and Combs (1996) explain that the counselor’s “knowledge is of the process of therapy, not the content and meaning of people’s lives” (p. 44).

With this basic assumption in mind, the first session of the Paraclete Ministry training begins with the reading of a passage of scripture from Isaiah 9:2-6:

²The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined. ³You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.

Photo by Melissa Jackson, BSW student

⁴For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulder; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (*New Revised Standard*).

The reading of this text is followed by an assurance to the Paraclete trainees that they are not expected to become a “Wonderful Counselor,” i.e., that position is already occupied. Rather, our vocation as caring Christians is to participate in conversations with the people in our care that bring

them into the presence of the “Wonderful Counselor.” There is regularly a deep sigh of relief at this point from a somewhat anxious group of trainees in which members often feel intimidated by the ministry to which they have been called.

The content of the initial training session then turns to the importance of active listening skills. The emphasis in this session encourages participants to practice what O’Hanlon (Bertolino & O’Hanlon, 1999) describes as “pure attention” (p. 19). O’Hanlon stresses that when listening to another person, “if you’re over there in your head thinking, ‘I’ve got to come up with something clever’” (p. 19), then you may miss something important that the client is attempting to express. This is often a revolutionary and paradigmatic shift for the trainees who, particularly because they have been identified as gifted for this ministry of care, have assumed that their job description must entail the imparting of great wisdom and spiritual advice. In contrast, they learn that honoring the perspectives and strengths of another is often more empowering than offering expert solutions.

Participants experience the value of this approach in an active listening exercise in which they are divided into groups of three – a speaker, listener, and observer. The listener is encouraged to concentrate on “listening for understanding” (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 44) and to attend to his or her own “internal conversation” (p. 45) as the speaker discusses any topic he or she chooses. Rather than rummaging through one’s mind for a clever response as the other is talking, trainees are coached to concentrate their listening on what it feels like to be this person in this situation, asking themselves, “What more do I need to know in order to step into this person’s shoes?” (p. 45).

After several rounds of this exercise, in which each member occupies each of the roles, discussion follows. Trainees are encouraged particularly to notice what they and their partners did well in listening to one another. Rather than offering a lecture on the characteristics of good listening, which

is an incongruous way of teaching those skills, this exercise allows participants themselves to identify the important ingredients of eye contact, attentive body language, the use of silence, and the like.

One of the common pitfalls for trainees in learning to attend to their own internal conversation is that they become distracted by wondering whether or not they are listening. This often creates an internal dialogue centered on how well they are listening, rather than genuine concentration on what the speaker is saying. In processing this aspect of the exercise, trainees are encouraged to reflect on how they manage to quiet their own internal conversation, what they tell themselves that helps maintain their focus, and how they manage to regain concentration when they are distracted.

This focus on the identification and practice of good listening skills is foundational to the training of lay counselors. It is often stressed to the trainees that if they do nothing but improve their listening skills, their training time will have been well spent.

The second interview question was, “As a Paraclete minister what do you see as your role when you meet with people?” The discussion in response to this question revealed that the Paracletes’ perceptions of their role is understood not in terms of a position that they

hold, but rather in the context of a particular kind of relationship with the people in their care. They describe their role as “helping people see that there is a solution within them,” “to encourage and validate them,” and to “let them have some hope.” One interviewee commented that, “I do what I would do for a friend, our work is not sterile – rather it is characterized by caring and warmth. That takes some of the pressure off. I always feel very inadequate, and I am amazed that this model of counseling works. Even when I personally can’t see any hope for them, the solution-oriented questions help them to find some.” Another emphasized, “We get big major stuff, so it doesn’t take much sometimes to instill a little hope.”

Several members of the interview group added to this discussion by noting that their care extends

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beyond the actual session with the counselee. They reported that they stay in touch with their counselees, calling just to say, "Hey, is everything going well?" One specific practice that several individuals have crafted is to "nonchalantly touch base" with their counselee. Taking care to protect the confidentiality of the counselee, when they pass them in the church foyer they may simply motion for a "thumbs up or down" hand signal to report on how things are going. It is heartening that in the understanding of their role in this ministry, these individuals give primacy to the relational aspect of their task. It is assumed that this awareness is an innate quality for these gifted people.

An aspect of the Paraclete training that seeks to support this perspective is the presentation of research by Miller, Hubble, and Duncan (1995), which reports "four common factors that underlie the effectiveness of therapy" (p. 56). The four factors include: (1) therapeutic technique; (2) the influence of expectancy and the placebo effect; (3) the nature of the therapeutic relationship; and (4) client factors.

In the training session presenting this research, each of the four factors is applied to the Paraclete ministry. Regarding "therapeutic technique," Miller, Hubble, and Duncan (1995) report that when "objective judges listen to tapes of therapy, the non-technical aspects are the things that correlate with outcome more than any technical intervention" (p. 56). In light of this finding, the Paracletes are encouraged to develop their own personal style of building rapport and offering pastoral care. The training emphasizes that even though learning useful techniques can be helpful, it will be from the non-technical aspects of their ministry that counselees will benefit most. Training at this point also seeks to help Paracletes become more aware of their own unresolved personal issues and how those may impact their counseling. They are encouraged to find ways of working on their own personal growth so that they can be truly available to those in their care. This aspect of the Paraclete training is also a major theme in their ongoing supervision as they process and evaluate their ministry with their supervisor.

Next, "the influence of expectancy and the placebo effect" is addressed. Miller, Hubble, and Duncan (1995) explain this factor as "the increased hope and positive expectation for change that cli-

ents experience simply from making their way into treatment" (p. 56). The authors emphasize that "the creation of such hope is greatly influenced by the therapist's attitude toward the client during the opening moments of therapy" (p. 56). The influence of "expectancy" is stressed to the Paraclete trainees even as they are encouraged to realize that when a person seeks help from the church with life's difficulties, they also are turning to God for help. As a representative of God, the Paraclete is encouraged to capitalize on the expectations that people who seek them out for help bring to the relationship. For example, the Paracletes learn to open their sessions, when it is appropriate, with a question focusing on how things have improved since they first made the appointment.

The third ingredient, "the nature of the therapeutic relationship" (Miller, Hubble, & Duncan, 1995, p. 56) refers to the strong alliances that "are formed when clients perceive the therapist as warm, trustworthy, non-judgmental, and empathic." This element of the Paraclete ministry is evidenced in the interviewees' perceptions of how they extend themselves to those in their care. Specifically, the respondents revealed an emphasis on friendliness and empathy. There appears to be a profound level of rapport and trust between the Paracletes and their counselees. In the training and supervision sessions, the elements of non-traditional care are encouraged as they work to foster ways to connect with people more effectively.

The final element, "client factors," is described as "the quality of a client's participation in treatment, his or her perceptions of the therapist and what the therapist is doing, determine whether any treatment will work" (Miller, Hubble, & Duncan, 1995, pp. 56-57). The principles of solution-focused counseling fit well with this finding. In the training session, one of the most groundbreaking group exercises comes from a role-play found in DeJong and Berg (2002, pp. 1-3, 13-16). These authors provide the transcripts of two conversations in which two counselors interact with a character named Rosie. In the first transcript, the counselor clearly has an agenda for the solutions that Rosie needs to try. These efforts result in Rosie's apparent non-compliance and seeming lack of motivation. In the second transcript, the counselor uses a solution-focused model that results in a completely different conversation. In the Paraclete training,

these two transcripts are read and discussed as participants list and debrief the assumptions that each counselor had about how to be helpful to Rosie. As an introductory exercise in the Paraclete training, these role-plays have served the process particularly well because they clearly demonstrate the inherent value of honoring the reality of the client, of working to elicit the client's own solutions, and of helping to shape the client's perceptions of what the therapist is doing.

The third focus group interview question asked, "What has helped you the most in carrying out this ministry?" Feedback from the interviewees for this question emphasized the importance of the Paracletes' own prayers asking God to help them as they prepared for a session. Additionally, respondents stressed that the act of using the solution-focused model itself helped them to gain confidence. As one interviewee stated, "I have confidence because of success in using the model in the past, I have tested the model, and, like practicing my golf swing, I know that it works." Another emphasized the importance of role-playing in the practice sessions: "Without practice at doing this, I would lack confidence."

Another emphasis in response to the third interview question was the helpfulness of learning to ask "scaling questions." Four of five participants stressed that this technique was a preferred tool. One informant summarized this perspective stating, "I love the scaling questions because it lets them see that things can be better. Scaling normalizes what they are going through and can give them a steady diet of small choices."

A technique of the solution-focused model, "scaling questions" are useful in helping counselees discover exceptions to their problems such as instances when the problem was less extreme, or

even absent. As stated by Thomas and Cockburn (1998), "Change is often easier both to conceptualize and to achieve when it is removed from the all/nothing dichotomy" (p. 68). An important assumption in this regard is that "every complaint description includes some sort of exception ... nothing happens 100 percent of the time" (p. 49).

The Paracletes are encouraged to think about how people who are overwhelmed with a problem in their lives often fall into this all/nothing dichotomy; however, when they are introduced to

the possibility of a difference they may begin to consider a greater range of options. The practice of scaling encourages the Paraclete to use the language and metaphors of their counselee to structure a scale of the individual's perspective on his or her problem. A continuum, often ranging from "0" to "10" is presented in which the counselee is asked to consider "0" as the lowest point of the scale, i.e., the problem is worse than it has ever been. At the other extreme, "10" represents a point of absolute perfection – the "best you could hope for" (Thompson & Cockburn, 1998, p. 69).

Next, the counselee is asked to rate his or her perception of how extreme the problem is on the proposed scale. Training then focuses on using this rating of the problem as a conversational tool from which the Paraclete can structure a variety of exception-finding questions. For example, "You say you are at a '4' on this scale; where will you be on the scale when you are able to say that our work together has been helpful?" "You say that you are at a '4' on this scale; if you saw yourself at a '5' what would be different?" There are any number of questions that can be formulated along this pattern as the quantification of the client's view of their problem helps to make "complex aspects of the client's life more



Photo by Melissa Jackson, BSW student

concrete and accessible to both practitioner and the client” (Thompson & Cockburn, 1998, p. 108).

The fourth interview question asked, “What are some of the difficulties/challenges you have had?” One informant reported a difficulty “remembering everything I am supposed to do in a session.” Another reported struggling with the tendency of sometimes being “too direct.” A primary theme in response to this question centered on the respondents’ desire for further training, particularly for more practice in role-playing and in dialoguing about their progress and struggles in applying the solution-focused model. One representative comment on this was, “I need continued training, with more regularity, more sharing of experiences about what works, and simply reviewing and practicing the model.” From a training perspective, this discussion was interpreted as a critique that will be used to improve the quality of the training curriculum. Particular steps will be taken to make the training more interactive. Although effort has been made to avoid lecturing, this analysis calls for a more concerted attempt to find additional creative instructional approaches that will help the Paraclete ministers to more truly “own” the model of solution-focused counseling, rather than just “hear” it presented.

In the process of seeking to understand the perspectives of the Paraclete ministers regarding their experience with this ministry, an additional question was formulated based on a recurring topic in the participants’ comments. Frequent references were made to the atmosphere of the congregation that made the Paraclete Ministry possible. To learn more about this aspect, we asked, “How does the overall atmosphere of this church impact your ministry?” The primary theme in response to this question centered on the Paracletes’ perceptions of the ministerial staff; as one respondent explained, “They are comfortable with people seeing their flaws.” Another respondent noted that this “sets the tone for those of us who know we are not perfect. Just as an example, I’ve heard our ministers talk about how they struggle with their temper. To me, it is unique

and refreshing for a leader to be that open about their own struggles.” Another interviewee added, “This church has lost people who say, ‘I won’t go there – they have divorced people and alcoholics in their church.’” A third respondent pointed out that, “There is freedom to make a mistake in this church and you won’t be judged. For the people that we work with it is like they are standing there in their underwear. I’ve seen it all – affairs, pornography – and you have to have a culture that accepts that. Our senior minister is willing to lose people to be real.” Another added that, “I was raised in the church, I was there all my life, and this church maintains the feeling of being a big family where there is real care; our ministry is a small part of that.” These perspectives that the atmosphere of the congregation is open to the real struggles in peoples’ lives were presented anecdotally, and thus

call for more rigorous investigation regarding these particular dynamics. It is clear from these comments, though, that the leaders of this congregation have an integral role in the success of this lay pastoral care ministry.

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**RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR FURTHER STUDY**

This article has reported a preliminary investigation into the application of solution-focused counseling models as an appropriate methodology for lay pastoral caregiving. Tan (1990) observes that even though there has been some research evaluating the effectiveness of lay Christian counselor training, “much less research has been conducted on the effectiveness of lay Christian counseling” (p. 63). To begin addressing this need, a comparative study between how the caregivers see themselves offering this service and how those in their care perceive that service is called for, as this study has only considered one side of the perspective.

There is a growing body of literature reporting evaluations of the effectiveness of solution-focused therapy (Metcalf, Thomas, Duncan, Miller, & Hubble, 1996). It is important that lay caregiving ministries that use solution-focused principles receive the same kind of rigorous in-

vestigation regarding their effectiveness. Detailed analysis of actual lay counseling sessions also will be profitable. The particular nuances, strategies, and communication styles of the lay counselor can be examined for therapeutic effectiveness as well.

As was observed in the evaluation of the focus group interview of this investigation, the ethos of the particular congregation offering a ministry of lay pastoral care may be indispensable to its effectiveness. Research focusing on the influence and perspectives of congregational leadership in lay pastoral caregiving may be an important contribution to the growing body of literature in the field of congregational studies.

CONCLUSION

This article has reported on the efforts of one congregation to introduce a pastoral care ministry provided by lay members trained in the use of solution-focused counseling. A focus group interview of five individuals who are trained to offer this type of care was conducted to better understand how their training impacts their ministry. The participants in this group reported that the solution-focused model has equipped them to offer care that introduces hope into the lives of the troubled individuals to whom they minister. The training they have received has relieved them of the expectation that they must be experts and allows them to develop the relational aspects of their ministry of constructing helpful conversations.

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Epiphany Prayer

Father Adrian van Kaam

Thank you, Lord, for this new day in which you call me to be
an epiphany of your care and concern.

Radiate your presence through me in my family, in my places
of labor and leisure.

Give me the grace to meet you in the sacrament of everydayness.

Let me share in the beauty of your hidden life in Nazareth.

When I fail, let me experience in joy your forgiveness
in which I am immersed always, everywhere.

Teach me to turn obstacles and failures, benefits and successes,
into formation opportunities.

Strengthen my commitment to be a manifestation of your
love and tender mercy.

Amen.



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Sherry Castello photo

An interview with Gordon Cosby

Co-founder of The Church of the Saviour

*“Beneath the doing and
beneath the knowing,
what is there? What is
your essence? What is
your being? This is the
most important thing to
talk about.”*

*Pictured above is Christ House,
which provides residential medical
care for homeless men and
women. It is one of the ministries
of The Church of the Saviour.*

Just before his 90th birthday, the innovative pastor and reformer, Gordon Cosby, shared a meal with a group of Baylor social work and seminary students at The Potter’s House in Washington, D.C. Potter’s House is the bookstore and café that serves as the outpost for more than 20 other ministries and nine D.C.-area fellowships in the tradition of The Church of the Saviour. Gordon and Mary Cosby, who founded the church in 1946, continue to live out the call that first led to the creation of this missional church.

Gordon remains steadfast today in the belief that our vocation, our journey outward, is deeply tied to our journey inward. He shared some thoughts with us over that lunch and several of our students joined in the conversation.

For years to come, the gift of this conversation with Gordon will be an influence on the journeys of the servant leaders who attended that day. We hope it has a similar influence in preparing you for the journey inward and the journey outward. —Jon Singletary, editor

Q: Many of us are new to the tradition of The Church of the Saviour and its focus on understanding our identity and vocation as Christians. Tell us what this discernment process means for the churches and ministries that have come out of this tradition.

A: We started the COTS in 1946 and officially came into being in 1947. We’ve been around for 60 years, but we officially went out of existence in 1994 because we thought we ought to exist in new forms and not the old

forms, and that if we wanted to live out our call in the old forms, we wouldn't be able to do it.

We work on the principle that living out God's call means that our forms are always open to change. Groups are always changing, so when people ask me about the COTS, I ask them, "Which one?" If someone asked you about Baylor University, I think you'd have to ask which one because there are different Bayers in different periods of history – each living its essence but in different forms.

It is important to make a distinction between the essence of an institution, what makes it what it is, and the forms of that institution. What is the essence of the institution or the church with which you are working? And then, what are the wineskins through which you channel who you are to the world, to give yourselves to the world?

It is very difficult to talk about the essence, the spirit of anything. If people ask me what I do, I ask them if they have a week or two to talk about it. If anybody dares ask me who I am, I have to start pondering. You all can tell me what you do and how busy you are, and what you are studying, and all the rest, but tell me now who you really are? Beneath the doing and beneath the knowing, what is there? What is your essence? What is your being? This is the most important thing to talk about. We need to make this distinction between being and doing.

You are all very young, so you have a lot of doing out ahead of you. You are also very smart, and this culture is addicted to knowing and to doing, so we have a hard time getting to the being because everybody wants to know and do more. We want to read the next book, get the next degree, but that is not what is most needed.

I was a chaplain in the Second World War, dealing with Hitler's Germany. This was the most educated nation in the world that produced Hitler's culture. Today, we are an educated nation, but ... our city is tragic. One-third of our children live in poverty. There are 3,800 people over in the city jail. Our educational system is among the worst in the world. Here is a nation, an educated nation, yet

when you look at life in our cities, it is tragic.

Q: When I hear you talk about our knowing who we are, about our being, I think of your image of the journey inward. Is this what you are talking about?

A: The journey inward is a journey into knowing who we are, who we really are, and who we are intended to be because our Christian faith says we are made in God's image. Therefore, built into us is God's own being, God's own image. The question is whether we are going to become who we are intended to become in the few years that we may have.

Do we, in this period of time, cling to being? We talk so much about what we do, what our job is, or how impressive our job has been, about how much credence people give to what we have done, our career. But not so much is said about who we are. And that is a much more basic question than what we do.

The inner journey is to help us work with who we are. We all have different ways of working with these things, but we have to work with it.

Q: (from a student): In thinking about who we are, I think about our wealth and the poverty of people all around us. What is our responsibility to people who live in poverty, who suffer in our culture from injustice?

A: It's important to understand what is happening, to know the situations facing our communities. ... We want to care about the people Jesus cared about, the least of these, and give them a chance. Say we are Christians, and Jesus taught us to pray that God would bring to earth that which is in heaven. What do we want to see when we claim this as a city of love based on what God is doing? What would it look like if the Kingdom comes on earth as in heaven?

Before I go to a church in another city, I have a friend who can find for me on the computer information on the needs of that city. I go down and too often I know more about that city from 5 minutes online than the ministers who live in that city. I'll

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ask about the housing situation, and the ministers will say, ‘We don’t know about our housing situation.’ I say, ‘Here’s a little information.’ The same is true for employment, education, and so on.

I feel that we have to get specific on what is and what, by faith, we want to be. And then we must work with our inner selves to decide whether or not we are going to claim what God says God wants to do based on who we are.

We have to get serious about that prayer we pray weekly and sometimes two to three times a day: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We don’t even have any idea what it would look like for God to answer our prayers. God wants us to be co-creators with Him or Her. God would like us to know who we are so that we can better know what we are to do with God.

God would like us to have knowledge, but we have to go beneath the knowledge. What does our faith say is possible? Are we going to claim it? Is Washington going to be a city of love? Are we going to care for all of its people, which is what we mean by “city of love?” Are we going to claim the city for God? Really? Is this the case with your city? What does God want there? This seems to be what your School of Social Work ought to be all about.

Q: We are trying to develop an intentional focus on vocation at the school. We have spent more time recently reflecting on who God wants us to be and then what that would mean to live out what God wants us to do. How do these journeys relate to your focus on discerning vocation?

A: Once you get ahold of what you are intended to be, you ask, “What is the appropriate doing for that being?” What were you intended to be in each period of life, and what are you to do next? What I am intended to be is different now and has been different at every stage of life.

I just marvel at who is sitting around this table. I really do. But I don’t have time to really get to know you in the rest of my life, but you have to know yourselves.

We know that the inward work always issues an active outward work. This is what Jesus said: “I abide in my Father.” “I dwell in my Father.” When he would separate himself from the others, he was keeping the connection with the Ultimate. Out of that, he knew what he was to do. And at times, even Jesus resisted it.

That is a part of what the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane is about: “Is it really the best thing for me to die now? Because these disciples that have been hanging around for three years, they don’t have a clue. Am I going to give them a clue best by dying, or should I hang around a couple of more years? All I have to do is just slip over that hill.” He had to decide, even until the end, what is the outward work. Each of us has to decide these things.

Do we want to live an
impressive life? Or do
we want to do what
Jesus said, to abide in
the Father?

Q: (from a student): There is a constant pressure, from within the church as well as outside of it, to measure up to a standard of success that is different from what we are talking about. How do you handle this?

A: It gets back to deciding whether to trust God or the culture. Too often we live as though the culture is much stronger than God. . . . We have to get straight where we take our cues. I have to look at my life, at who I am, and then decide what I want to do and if I’m doing it on the basis of achievement, on the basis of culture. Or do I want to look at my life, at who I have been, and ask if I’ve been faithful.

If I look back on my own life, I am not the least bit impressed with what I have done. I’m really not. Often people comment on our work here and I thank them for being impressed, but I say, “Can we talk about what has produced this?” So, let’s get back to the being. What is the ultimate source of life? Do we want to live an impressive life? Or do we want to do what Jesus said, to abide in the Father, to dwell in the Father, and to abide in Jesus? That’s where the answer must be found.

Q: Gordon, you make it sound so easy, but I know it’s not. I can talk about following, but am I ever going to be willing to do so? As the church, are we willing to

make the commitment to follow in this kind of way? I guess that's the real challenge of the Gospel.

A: That's right. What Jesus said, and what we say to each other is, "Are we talking about something important or is it just talk?"

That is what Jesus was doing with the people who said, "I want to follow you." He would ask the people who said they wanted to follow if they really did. They were deciding if they would get in the boat with Jesus. He was so clear in saying, "Let's think about it first." One guy said, "I'd like to go. It's pretty interesting what you're talking about, but I've got to tend to some family responsibilities." Jesus said, "This boat's leaving. When you get back, this boat won't be here."

And that's the same struggle today. New birth is never easy. This way is probably more difficult for smart people, for gifted people, for efficient people, for hard-working people. You take those of us who can pull it off, but we don't try to pull it off. Rather, we commit ourselves in faith to a God who says He or She will pull it off. And then pulls it off by dying. I agree, living this kind of commitment to this kind of God is hard.



FIND OUT MORE ...

The Church of the Saviour
www.inwardoutward.org

Recommended books:

Journey Inward Journey Outward
by Elizabeth O'Connor

A Call to Commitment
by Elizabeth O'Connor



The Confession

When we pray "Your kingdom come, Your will be done," we acknowledge the existence of other kingdoms and pray for God's purpose only to be done.

God of life, because Jesus teaches us to trust you in all things, we claim Christ's words and share Christ's plea:

**Your kingdom come,
your will be done.**

Where food is scarce or wasted, Jesus says, "Feed the hungry."

**Your kingdom come,
your will be done.**

When your people are excluded, Jesus says, "Let them come to me."

**Your kingdom come,
your will be done.**

Whenever communities are divided, Jesus says, "Love one another."

**Your kingdom come,
your will be done.**

– Sharlande Sledge





We are the church Jesus tried to change

by Samantha Oakley

During the final semester of their degree program, Baylor School of Social Work graduate students are placed in field internships. They are required to spend 30 to 35 hours a week at an approved site and are supervised by a licensed social worker. The students maintain a weekly journal of their experiences and learning, which they share with their field supervisors. This article is a compilation of excerpts from one especially meaningful week in the internship of Samantha Oakley, MSW 2007/MDiv student. With her permission and assuring confidentiality, we share Sam's honest and poignant struggle. We believe it is a struggle that is common to many of us engaged in this helping profession.

I have never seen a man grieve like this man and not have any words of comfort to offer. He is dying, and he is not ready to die.

My field internship is in an urban church in Waco, Texas. Earlier in the week, the church secretary, Janice,* had asked me to meet with this man. His name is Tom, she said. He's coming in for food and he's dying of AIDS. I was feeling very stressed about everything that I had to do that week, and I was not anxious to rearrange my schedule. But, I told Janice I could meet him on Friday afternoon.

As I looked into Tom's situation, I discovered that he had no place to stay and no network of people to help or support him. I've seen other people pretend they have AIDS as a scam to get help, and I feared this was what was happening with Tom. All I needed to discover was that Tom really did not have AIDS.

I arrived early for my appointment and talked with Janice to find out more about him. Janice has been the church's secretary for many years. She must tell at least 10 people a day that the church cannot help. She said Tom had been coming in for a few years now asking for help, but that he never asked for much and was always very grateful. Although she had seen his health deteriorating, she did not know until this week that he had AIDS.

As Janice told me about Tom, she became very emotional. I could tell that she cared deeply about him, and that she believed he genuinely needed help. In talking with her, I had new sympathy for her situation. She feels like she is put in a difficult and often awkward situation on a regular basis by being the one who has to turn down just about every benevolence seeker. But here she was, a very proper, meticulously neat woman, who hugged my client with his sickness and with his grime, and grieved for him and beat herself up for not seeking more help for him sooner. I was dumbfounded. She was living out what most of us only talk about doing – embracing and being in relationship with someone who is truly marginalized.

About then, Tom came into the church. As I rose to meet him, I quickly assessed his physical appearance. It is not difficult to locate signs of AIDS. I could see sores on his face, neck and collarbone. Tom noticed that I was looking at his sores, and he pulled back the collar of his shirt to me give me a better view. I was so embarrassed. I was so consumed with myself and my own stuff that I was convinced that he was probably wasting my precious time, and I was looking for a sign to quickly invalidate his story. I was insensitive to him.

Tom told me how people think he doesn't notice that no one will touch him or even be close to him – but that he does notice. I apologized and asked

*Why could I not
proclaim the God I love,
why could I not ask for
hope and love?*

* Names have been changed.



RESOURCES:

<http://www.elca.org/aids/learning/web-sites.html>

An excellent clearinghouse of denominational and health sites, with resources for youth, adults and senior adults.

<http://www.thefellowship.info/aids>

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship site provides resources for engaging in AIDS ministries and much more.

if we could go to the room where I would interview him. He had a bad limp and it was a slow walk.

When we got there, he just fell apart. He told me about his fears of dying, that he knew that it was his fault that he had AIDS.

This man was grieving, and he needed to grieve. He said he just wanted a luxury before he died, and I wondered what that would mean to him – probably something I considered a right. He said he wanted his life to mean something, he wanted to matter. He wanted someone to hug him, to care about him. He told he how hard it is to be rejected by everybody. He then told me that he needed a place to live, food, and some money.

I knew Tom needed to grieve, and that he did not need to grieve without any support. I felt I needed to help him move to a more positive place before I had to leave. I asked some future-oriented questions to help him talk about things he wanted or could do. I reminded him of people who did care about him. I got him some food from the church's small food pantry, and I was able to calm him down so that he could get some much-needed rest.

I left the church in tears. It had been an exhausting week preceded by an exhausting week, but my encounter with Tom exhausted me in a new way. I spent most of the afternoon grieving for Tom, for myself, for the church and for our society. I wondered how many people did Tom have supporting him while he was growing up, how much encouragement did he receive, how many systems had failed him before this point in his life?

As I sat with Tom in that first meeting, I found I was praying the whole time that we were talking, but I could not pray with him. I was crying with him as he told me his story, but I could not proclaim a sovereign God to him. I was so ashamed. Why could I not proclaim the God I love, why could I not ask for hope and love, why could I not even just voice my questions? I think I feared that I would get no response, or that the response would not make sense to me.

A friend of mine on mission in Haiti has told me that he has not been able to engage in public prayer or even certain faith proclamations since

he arrived there. He still has faith, he told me, but he just can't say certain things in all honesty. Now that I've allowed myself to really engage, I understand his struggle. And I appreciate the struggle because I have great confidence,

hope and faith that God will bring me through this and help me develop a more coherent and stronger faith than I had before.

I continued to work on Tom's situation, but in trying to find help for him, I ran into barrier after barrier. I finally talked with someone who works with the AIDS community, and he was thrilled to hear about me, a social worker at a church caring about a man with AIDS. He told me about the lack of church involvement in AIDS work in our city. But we are the church that Jesus tried to change. We will work for AIDS relief in Africa and talk about what a tragedy it is we can't do more about it, but we won't touch the man with AIDS in our own community. If we don't care for our neighbor, how are we really going to care for the stranger? I had been a part of the problem.

I am learning about myself – in this internship, as I work with church staff, as I sit with a man dying of AIDS and cry with him. I am learning about my faith, my biases, my inaction, my choices and my questions. Tom has turned out to be a blessing in my life as I am being forced to work through some tough issues in my own heart and mind and to realize many things about our society and our churches. My motivation and my purpose come from my faith, and I must grow in my faith so that I can grow in my work.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

⇒ Oakley poses the question, "If we don't care for our neighbor, how are we really going to care for the stranger?" How would you respond?

⇒ Are you aware of agencies in your community that help individuals with AIDS? Is your church welcoming to those with this disease?

⇒ Have you ever been in a situation where you could not pray with someone over his or her grief? Have you thought about why that was?

Know Our Source

by Father Adrian van Kaam

If you would only know
the loving Trinity,
the mystery that makes you be,
you would not feel so low,
so chilled by discontent
on a journey without end.

You would trust the tender hand
reaching in the barren land
of your despondency.

You would marvel at a mystery
enfolding you continuously
as in a golden mist
that softens life around the edges.

Blessed by the bending reed
swept by defeat
yet rising beyond the gale,
enchanted by the tale
of a source divine
that is the holy mine
of poise and harmony.

Tread no longer heedlessly
on the tapestry
of everyday events,
each of them an invitation
to disclose in appreciation
their holy source.

Travel no longer blindly
Like a seagull lost in snow and fog
that drown the song of sea
the clarity of mountain cliffs
veiled far below
its wet and tired wings.

There are no strings
attached to hiding in the cliff
of your divine origination,
so pray with me:
Take away the veil of apathy,
the blanket of despondency.
Surprise me, holy source,
by your light within
that has been dim
for too long a time.

Let me no longer whine,
when I hear your invitation
that soft annunciation
sweet as the cooing of a dove,
a declaration of eternal love.

Whisper to me again
how you formed me in my mother's womb,
fashioned me over generations,
over aeons of unfolding of the earth
until it could bear life
on its flaky crust, the dust
from which you formed our earthly frame
endowing each of us with a name
known to you alone.

Remind me how I dwelt in you,
my source and origin,
a call from all eternity,
an archetype of life to be
unique and irreplaceably
your own.

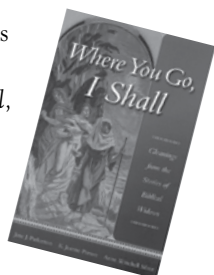
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Books and Resources

Where You Go, I Shall: Gleanings from the Stories of Biblical Widows by Jane J. Parkerton, K. Jeanne Person and Anne Winchell Silver

Cowley Publications (Cambridge, 2005). ISBN: 1-56101-237-8, 129 pp.

In a market of numerous books on widowhood and grief, *Where You Go, I Shall*, is a refreshing, valuable resource for helping professionals and for those who are experiencing the loss of a spouse.



The authors use the metaphor of “gleaning” from the Book of Ruth to illustrate the wisdom and insights available in the stories of widows in the scripture. The inspiration for the book originated in a church-sponsored grief support group for widows shared by the three authors who led and participated in the group. The authors include an Episcopal minister, a widow without children whose husband died after a lengthy illness, and a widow with children whose husband died years earlier from a sudden heart attack.

Where You Go, I Shall speaks to the companionship of grief. The authors address the alienation and loneliness that accompanies losing one’s spouse by sharing insights from scripture. Each chapter draws from a different widow’s story and provides a reflection, prayer and meditation recommendations. Each author then responds to the story with her own insights and applications. This format provides the reader with a clear connection between the biblical experiences of grief and the experiences of women today who are dealing with loss.

The authors confront realistically the complexities and emotions of widowhood through the stories of Abigail, Naomi, Tamar and others. With thoughtful exposition and compelling descriptions, the reader engages with these women’s powerlessness and anger, but also with their strength, resilience and charity. We encounter anew the strength

in being able to tell one’s story and sense the nods of understanding and care from others.

I especially appreciated Anne’s reflections on 16 possible answers to the question: “How are you?” This is one of the most challenging questions posed to the bereaved. The socially anticipated answer is “fine,” but most who ask the question do not genuinely consider the absurdity of the question. How should one be when one’s husband has just died? Anne’s 16 answers give those who are grieving a variety of responses from which to choose while validating that the question itself provokes pain.

The reader will be intrigued by the story of Tamar and the lengths to which this widow went in order to survive and will be awed by the widow whose mite stirred Jesus to comment on her giving out of her need. As compelling as the biblical stories, however, is the way the authors connect these stories with our stories. We meet women in the church today who, facing grief, must also find a way to survive and give and live and love. The commentary on grief found in books of theory comes alive in these pages in the use of metaphor and parable. It isn’t a long book, but it is a rich read.

These three women have the gift of combining their work into a total that is more than the sum of its parts. There is a synergy in their ability to name feelings and experiences for which many of us have no words. As I read, I found my heart and spirit nodding a silent and grateful “yes.”

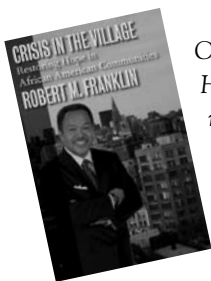
Helen Harris is a licensed clinical social worker with more than 25 years practice experience in the area of grief and loss.

She has taught advanced practice and courses in loss and grief in the School of Social Work at Baylor University for the past 10 years. She has written in the area of loss and bereavement, specifically disenfranchised grief and the church.



Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope to African American Communities by Robert M. Franklin

Fortress (Minneapolis, 2007). ISBN-10: 0-8006-3887-5, 280 pp.



Robert M. Franklin wrote *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* as a call to strategic action to renew the African American “village.” Franklin is the Distinguished Professor of Social Ethics at Emory University.

He is a scholar-preacher and insightful educator. He previously has served at the University of Chicago, Harvard Divinity School, Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, and the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta.

Although there is no lack of books available that examine the issues facing African American communities, Franklin says these books fail to outline a clear plan of renewal. In this book he invites “anchor institutions,” which he identifies as families, churches and schools, to move beyond examination and begin taking steps to bring renewal to the village.

Franklin first examines the African American family, which he believes is in a “crisis of commitment.” After examining the crisis, he calls for leaders and communities to begin answering the question: “How can African Americans, working in partnership with allies, renew a culture of commitment that fosters healthy relationships, dating, marriage, and parenting?”

The author then turns to the African American church, which he believes has lost some of the credibility in the community it achieved during the Civil Rights Movement. Franklin critiques the “prosperity movement,” calling it “the single greatest threat to the historical legacy and core values of the contemporary black church tradition.” He also calls African American clergy to move beyond talking and begin taking action to bring renewal to the village. Franklin outlines a plan for African American churches to take the lead and work collaboratively with other denominations in restoring the village’s educational excellence (Methodists), helping people who have been incarcerated rejoin society with integrity and support (Baptists), and developing the potential of youth (Pentecostals).

Next, Franklin addresses the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), challenging them to do a better job of developing the character of their students, to be more accountable to the village, and to have a positive impact on the educational, economic, and cultural conditions of their surrounding communities.

Franklin concludes by proposing a six-step plan of action. One, the village needs to convene a conversation about the future of anchor institutions and the village’s expectations of these institutions. Two, organizations should collaborate to create partnerships to begin working on village renewal. Three, a comprehensive, strategic action plan for village renewal with timelines and a plan for accountability needs to be developed. Four, village youth should hold leaders accountable by making weekly inquiries about the status of renewal programs. Five, the philanthropic sector should unite to fund village renewal projects. Six, successes should be documented and celebrated.

The book issues a clear call to people and organizations to become involved with the renewal process. It presents concrete, tangible methods to improve families, churches and HBCUs – a plan that counters the paralysis that so often precludes initiative and action. The issues facing the village are extensive and require everyone strategically working together to bring renewal. The lingering question remains: “Who will accept the call?”

Walker Moore is a community organizer at Waco Community Development. He received his MSW from Baylor University and is working on his MDiv at George W. Truett Theological Seminary. He is married to Tasha, MSW 2007.



The Danger of Raising Nice Kids: Preparing Our Children to Change Their World by Timothy Smith

InterVarsity Press (Downers Grove, 2006). ISBN-10: 0-8308-3375-7, 202 pp.

With all of the time constraints, stress and pressures that families are facing, sometimes parents lose sight of the end goal. Children from “good Christian families” who seem to have it all together actually may not be prepared for real life. Every parent knows well the stories of children who have flaked out on life in their late teens and early 20s leaving parents and other family members in their

wake confused, frustrated and wondering “what went wrong?”

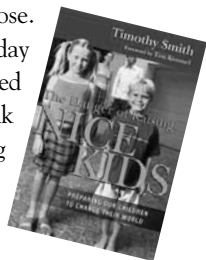
Smith, who is a Gallup Research Fellow, exposes the deficits that arise from parenting without discernment and purpose.

He suggests that parents today are in survival mode—too tired and without the time to think about purposeful parenting that prepares our children for a secular society. We have children who are nice and polite, he contends, yet they lack essential character development. He cites nine forgotten qualities that most parents neglect to instill in their children: vision, authenticity, listening, empathy, compassion, discernment, boundaries, contentment and passionate love.

Smith uses stories from his experience as a minister and family coach to illustrate many of his points and shows how his practical solutions can impact children positively. His approach is warm, yet convicting, practical and theological. He challenges parents to be more intentional about their parenting by focusing on family mission and purpose and provides useful examples on how to do this. His suggestions on parenting effectiveness are preventative and focus on birth through mid-teen years. The main question he wants parents to ask themselves is, “Is my child a change-agent in this world and does he/she have vision?”

The Danger of Raising Nice Kids has practical tools and suggestions for age-appropriate consequences and helps parents distinguish between discipline and discipleship. Smith suggests that our homes should be less like a retreat from the world and more of a boot camp that prepares our children for the pressures of an increasingly secular society. This book will be helpful for any parent but may be most useful for parents who still have children in the home. With his examples and practical communication techniques, any parent can make changes and better prepare their children for life.

Tiffani Harris is a graduate of George W. Truett Theological Seminary and a member of Calvary Baptist Church, Waco, Texas. She and her husband, Brent, have three children, ages 7, 6 and 3.



FOCUS

When families are not safe

Domestic violence is increasing across the nation. Whether the violence is physical, emotional, sexual or verbal, the damage it causes often has life-changing consequences. In this section, we suggest two books for your consideration and a brief Q&A with David Davis, executive director of the Advocacy Center in Waco, Texas. We pray this is information to be helpful in your church ministry.

A Conspiracy of Love: Living Through & Beyond Childhood Sexual Abuse by Wendy Read

Northstone Publishing, Houghton Boston Printers (Saskatchewan, Canada). ISBN-1-896836-77-1, 188 pp.

Many adults who were sexually abused as children carry with them a legacy of fear, distrust, shame and guilt. They often feel alienated not only from themselves but sometimes from a God whose teachings and scriptures have been used punitively against them.

Wendy Read, a minister in the United Church of Canada and a child who was abused by her father and her priest, reclaims

the scriptures' purpose of healing and hope, offering them with fresh insight to those whose innocence and trust have been severely damaged.

In her foreword to *A Conspiracy of Love*, the

Rev. Dr. Marie M. Fortune writes:

“The Bible is a resource which should not be denied to those who have lived through sexual abuse. But neither should it be used to hit them over the head. . . . Rather the Bible is God’s ongoing gift to people of faith, given to be a source of help, support, and understanding in the midst of life’s traumas.”

Read cites familiar passages, many used regularly in lectionary-based worship, and responds to each by writing her own personal psalms of anger and confusion, trust and faith.

The book is divided into four sections fo-



cusing on truth, community, life, and grace with several scriptures, reflections, poems and discussion questions within each section.

Revisiting these scriptures through the lens of one who was sexually abused as a child compels the reader to become vulnerable to the pain and betrayal inherent in this reprehensible act. Too, we see familiar and comforting verses very differently. In Read's reflection on the Lord's Prayer, she conveys the confusion that plagues and haunts those who have been abused as they seek a relationship with God: "If we can, we cope with the discrepancy by maintaining two separate meanings for the word father, one for in our prayers in church, and the other for in our beds at home. But what if we can't?" (p. 75)

She writes "there is nowhere to go where the memories are not" (p. 33), yet this book is a resource of renewal, and she is one who chooses to follow the Spirit because "in spite of everything – we cling to the promise of abundant life" (p. 33).

As much as anything, Read confirms that those seeking healing and wholeness need community, and she calls the church to offer respite and safety to those it historically has ignored. "We need to be less alone in our struggle and in our suffering. We need a community that cares enough – even if it doesn't understand completely – to invite us in" (p. 50). This challenge is especially difficult with our knowledge that many times the sexual abuse of childhood occurs in places of worship or at the hands of representatives of a religious group. Nevertheless, the church is called to tend to all wounds, not just socially acceptable ones.

For the church that has not yet addressed this issue, Read's book is an excellent starting point. Its format lends itself to small group discussion.

The process of healing from childhood sexual abuse is never completely finished, yet Read asks that people of faith walk alongside those who are experiencing this profound suf-

fering so that their conspiracy of silence and fear can be replaced with a conspiracy of love.

– Reviewed by Vicki M. Kabat



VISIT ONLINE:

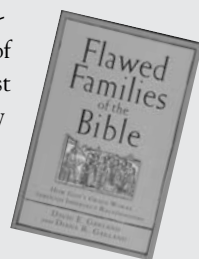
FaithTrust Institute, a nonprofit organization for the prevention of sexual and domestic violence – www.faithtrustinstitute.org

Flawed Families of the Bible: How God's Grace Works Through Imperfect Relationships by David E. Garland and Diana R. Garland

Brazos Press (Grand Rapids, 2007). ISBN: 1-58743-155-6, 230 pp.

Gang rape, murder, slavery, adultery, child abuse – these are topics we expect to find on the evening news, not in the hallowed pages of our Bible. In their book, *Flawed Families*, the Garlands tackle the stories of the Bible that make most of us cringe because they seem to portray really messed up people and a God who is capricious and removed from the atrocities being played out in the name of religion. The insightful, straightforward way that the authors delve into these stories, such as the rape of Dinah, enables the reader to view stories of pain, struggle, and despair in a new light. In reading this book, I found my understanding these biblical accounts and God's role in these sordid tales to be dramatically changed.

David Garland is dean of George W. Truett Theological Seminary and the William M. Hinson Professor of Christian Scriptures. Diana Garland is dean of Baylor School of Social Work and a noted scholar on family dynamics. Both have authored many books. With their combined exper-



tise, they tackle the myriad of issues raised by the people called the children of God, looking at: Sarah and Hagar, Leah, Dinah, Tamar, Michal, Bathsheba, Jephthah's daughter and David's daughter, Tamar, and the Ethiopian eunuch. Their hope is that "we can see our own conflicts and problems and may even find comfort in seeing ourselves in the company of these ancient family members of Jesus. If we think our lives are a mess, look at what they went through! And God never abandoned them. God's grace somehow managed to work through all of their imperfections" (p. 13).

The image of the "perfect family" is often most idealized in the church. We are expected to have it all together and be successful and happy. What happens when we can't measure up to this ideal? Does God love us any less? Throughout *Flawed Families*, the Garlands assure us that God isn't looking for perfection, but love and obedience to God. They also challenge us in the last chapter to redefine our concept of family. "Family is composed of those who join themselves in obedience to God and, consequently, to others who have chosen to follow Jesus" (p. 208).

This book is an excellent resource and a must-read for all those in the church. We no longer have to skip over these confusing and embarrassing stories. With the wisdom and grace shared in *Flawed Families*, hopefully we now can talk about the pain, darkness and despair in our lives and somehow find God's grace in the midst of it.

Amy Castello is a graduate of George W. Truett Theological Seminary and currently serves as the Preschool Minister at Meadowbrook Baptist Church in Robinson, Texas. She spends most of her time chasing her three children and trying to have at least a 5 minute conversation with her husband, Charlie.



Q: Why should we be concerned about domestic violence here?

A: Not only should we be alarmed by the prevalence of domestic violence in every community, we should be concerned about the basic ways violence impacts secure human development, spirituality and relationships. Violence is the action and voice of scared, insecure people. It wounds physically and emotionally while destroying life. Domestic violence breeds fear and limits the trust and love required for the kind of intimacy that regenerates. Ultimately domestic violence leads to death.

Q: How can I best educate our congregation about issues of domestic violence?

A: Begin to discuss its reality. Reference domestic violence topically and dramatically in worship. Reveal it for what it is: fundamentally faithless. Introduce the congregation to people involved in local community organizations focusing on family violence, child abuse and sexual assault. Utilize the video resources of the Faith Trust Institute to introduce the issues and stimulate discussion. Contact local programs and agencies and ask how to become involved and request a guest speaker.

Q: What agencies or resources might be available in my area?

A: The local police department is a great place to start. They may have a victim services unit or community outreach officer to provide information about intervention with a specific situation or volunteer opportunities for your congregation. National and statewide sexual assault and family violence organizations also have web resources with good information, links and referrals to local agencies helping victims of violence in your areas. Also, denomination offices are quickly developing programs to assist congregations with these issues.

David Davis is executive director of the Advocacy Center in Waco, Texas. ddavis@advocacycntr.org



O Word of God, Creative One

O Word of God, Creative One,
whose language shaped the seas and sun.
Emmanuel, we wait your birth.
Come dwell in us; come live on earth.

O Word of Hope, Incarnate One,
come live through us what you've begun.
Dispel our fear; our words unfurl
to write your hope upon the world.

O Word of Peace, come with us live.
Teach us the language to forgive.
Reign in our world; make this your home—
a place of peace, salaam, shalom.

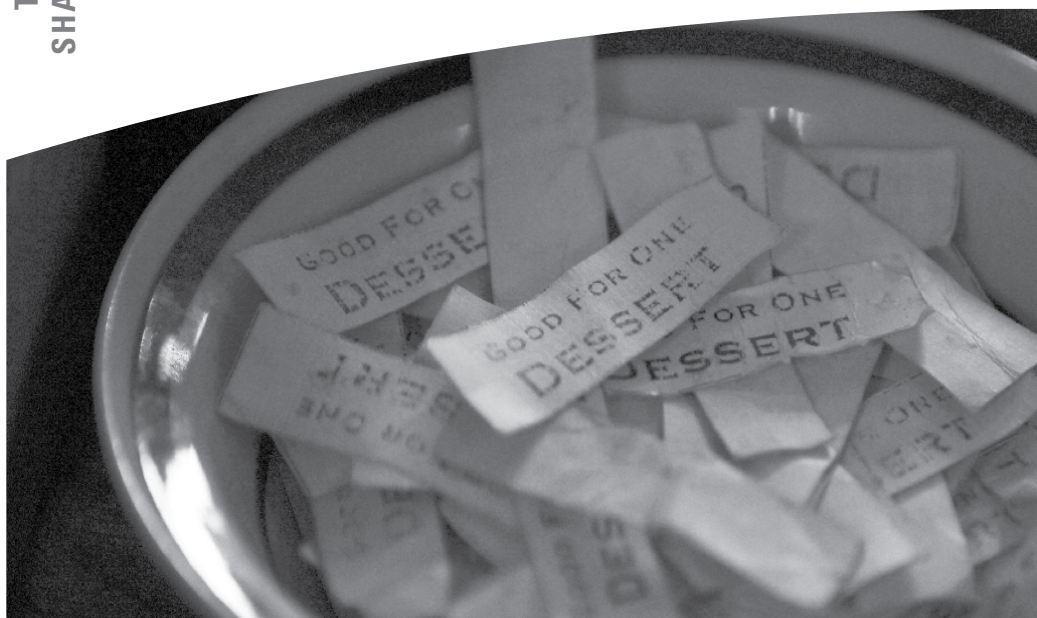
O Word of Joy, our heart's delight,
that whispers even in the night
and rises with the glad refrain
that cheers, inspires, uplifts, sustains.

O Word of Love, always the same,
you've written on our lives your name.
You came, a little child on earth.
You risked your love for our new birth.

O Word of God, the Birth of Light,
your story is our gift to write.
Among the many, may we claim
Hope, Peace, Joy, Love — your gracious names.

Words by Sharlunde Sledge
Tune is "Puer Nobis Nascitur"

Advent and Christmas 2006



Always a place and always enough

Vicki M. Kabat
Associate Director,
Center for Family and Community Ministries



Rod Aydlotte Photo

On a Sunday evening in mid-May, I sat with 22 people in a worship service in a small house church.

Three days a week, this room with its sunny yellow walls and blue trim becomes a café, serving hot meals to some 200 people each day by donation and with volunteer help. Virtually none who eat there can donate anything. They are the homeless, the addicted and the working poor who remain invisible to many of us.

Some of these same folks come back for Sunday evening service at this ecumenical church that meets in the midst of one of our city's poorest neighborhoods. Communion is passed from hand to hand, and each person is seen and known and called by name – welcomed at God's table, where there is always a place and always enough.

After communion that Sunday evening, we stood and sang "Blessed Assurance." There was no organ, no guitar, no taped instrumentals. These few voices lifted in harmony and praise, full of joy and thanksgiving as we swayed and prayed the words of this great old hymn.

Three days after that service, I stood in a performing arts center in Nashville, Tenn., with 1,680 pastors at the annual Festival of Homiletics. And again, I sang "Blessed Assurance." This time, the multitude of voices swelled around me like rising waters, carrying me upon its crest.

"This is my story, this is my song,

Singing God's praises all the day long."

Two very different gatherings – each a group of believers singing about a story that transcends time, place and circumstance.

I believe in the power of story. I grew up listening to stories – those my father told as we sat on the front porch of our farm house in Missouri, those my grandmother told as I snuggled next to her on sleepovers, and those I read

long into the night as the crickets chirped their cadences outside my open bedroom windows.

Later, stories would become the way I made my living – first as a reporter and copy editor on a daily newspaper and later as a freelance writer for a variety of publications. For many years, I wrote a weekly column recounting the stories of our family life – seeking the humor and the holy in events as ordinary as carpooling and cleaning bathrooms.

I know a good story when I hear one. Most people innately do. The one thing I've learned is that the story has to have truth in it, something real to which people can relate. Fake it, manipulate it, tie it off with a tidy ending and readers will know. They can tell. It's the difference between fresh, churned butter and whipped oleo spread.

That's why one particular story has stayed with me and shaped me through most of my life. It's the one about a newborn baby, a cattle trough, a cry in the dark night, and a star that would shine through the ages.

It is a good story. It holds up. No matter how many times I've heard it or shared it, its power and vitality never falter. Even though a few pastors I can recall did their best to anesthetize it, the story prevails. And people who hear, know it. Somewhere deep within them, whether they want it to or not, this story resonates as truth.

Recently, I saw a bumper sticker with this message: "Giving up on humanity one person at a time."

That's bleak. That's despair. That story doesn't hold up for me. I see evidence against it every day – in the smile of a child, in laughter we hear in hall-

ways, in hands that serve hot food to the hungry, in friends gathered at a hospital bed.

The despair of that bumper sticker is not a story that will stand the test of time – even though it may hold us in its grip momentarily.

Maybe the power of the gospel story is that it is specifically for us. Like a genealogy carefully researched and documented, this is our family history. And no one is excluded from this family. Neither Jew nor Gentile, prostitute nor taxpayer, children, immigrants, gays, rich or homeless – not even the hard-hearted cynic.

We are known, recognized and invited to the table – with free dessert tickets even!

Each person's voice blends into this larger harmony, enriching and energizing not only those who sing it but those who hear it. It is our Sunday after the excruciating Friday, after the desolate Saturday.

We call it community.

Henri Nouwen, in a selection from *Gracias! A Latin American Journal* (1983), writes that, "Community develops where we experience that something significant is taking place where we are. It is the fruit of the intimate knowledge that we are together not because of a common need ... but because we are called together to help make God's presence visible in the world."

We are called together. I felt that in the small house church. I felt it in that cavernous convention hall. And the moral of this story is the exact opposite of that bumper sticker. A baby's cry tells us that humanity is worth believing in – one person at a time. Vicki_Marsh-Kabat@baylor.edu

The Unity of God

Julian of Norwich

God wants to be thought of as our Lover.

I must see myself so bound in love

as if everything that has been done

has been done for me.

That is to say, the Love of God makes such a unity

in us that when we see this unity

no one is able to separate oneself

from another.

Source: Meditations With Julian of Norwich

CONTRIBUTORS

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