

2024  
RESOURCE  
BOOK



Adventist<sup>®</sup>  
Family Ministries

*I WILL GO WITH MY FAMILY:*

# **UNDERSTANDING DIVERSE FAMILIES**

**WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER**



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*WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER*

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## Adventist® Family Ministries

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#### Other Family Ministries Resource Books in this series:

- I Will Go with My Family: Families and Mental Health
- I Will Go with My Family: Family Resilience
- I Will Go with My Family: Unity in Community
- Reaching Families for Jesus: Making Disciples
- Reaching Families for Jesus: Strengthening Disciples
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- Revival and Reformation: Families Reaching Out
- Revival and Reformation: Families Reaching Across

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# PREFACE

In John 17:20-23, the beloved disciple records one of the last prayers of Jesus, that His followers would be known for their love for each other; that their relationship would look like the kind of harmony He shared with His heavenly Father.

“I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me.” (NLT)

In this prayer Jesus directed His attention to future generations of believers. He was praying for us and for believers who will come after us. His main concern in this prayer was for the unity of His followers, established on His unity with His Father (John 10:30, 38; 14:10, 20). In concert with love (John 15:12-13; 17:26), unity is uppermost in the life of believers because it displays the reconciling power of the ministry of Jesus in the world (John 17:21; cf. v. 23).

Remarkably, the great commission is about “making disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19); “every nation and tribe and tongue and people” (Rev. 14:6). Yet, the more differences there are among peoples, the higher the probability of misunderstandings and disagreements. Of course—as disciples of Jesus—it is our privilege to represent Him. However, what represents Jesus to the world is our “love for one another” (John 13:34-35). This kind of love is best modeled in family relationships; especially in the kind of family that has decided to live by the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22, 23), rather than engaging in “the works of the flesh” (Gal. 5:19-21).

Given the diversity of families in our congregations—married, single, divorced, widowed, never married, older, younger, with children, without children, disabled, neurodivergent and more—there is a high probability for tension, disaffection, apathy, and alienation. Still, “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26; Mk. 10:27), as we trust Him to help us to “be holy as He is holy” (1 Peter 1:15, 16; Lev. 11:45).

Our prayer is that the 2024 Adventist Family Ministries Resource Book titled *Understanding Diverse Families* will serve as a valuable resource for pastors, Family Ministries leaders, and disciple-makers dedicated to supporting families navigate the chasm of difference with the heart of Jesus. That by so doing, all will be able to answer the prayer of Jesus to be one with each other, and be able to live out the vision of *I Will Go with My Family*.

Maranatha!

**Willie and Elaine Oliver, Directors**

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# HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE BOOK

The Family Ministries Resource Book is an annual resource organized by the General Conference Adventist Family Ministries with input from the world field to provide Family Ministries leaders in divisions, unions, conferences, and local churches around the world with resources for the special family emphases weeks and Sabbaths.

Within this Resource Book you will find sermon ideas, seminars, children's stories as well as leadership resources, reprinted articles, and book reviews to help facilitate these special days and other programs you may want to implement during the year. In Appendix A you will find useful information that will assist you in implementing family ministries in the local church.

This resource also includes Microsoft PowerPoint® presentations of the seminars and handouts. Seminar facilitators are encouraged to personalize the Microsoft PowerPoint® presentations with their own personal stories and pictures that reflect the diversity of their various communities. To download a presentation please visit: **[family.adventist.org/2024RB](https://family.adventist.org/2024RB)**

For more topics on a range of family life issues, download previous years of the Resource Book at [family.adventist.org/resources/resource-book/](https://family.adventist.org/resources/resource-book/)

## **CHRISTIAN HOME AND MARRIAGE WEEK: FEBRUARY 10-17**

Christian Home and Marriage Week takes place in February embracing two Sabbaths: Christian Marriage Day that emphasizes Christian marriage and Christian Home Day that emphasizes parenting. Christian Home and Marriage Week begins on the second Sabbath and ends on the third Sabbath in February.

**CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE DAY (EMPHASIZES MARRIAGE):  
SABBATH, FEBRUARY 10**

Use the marriage sermon idea for the Sabbath worship service and the marriage seminar for any program segment during this celebration.

**CHRISTIAN HOME DAY (EMPHASIZES PARENTING):  
SABBATH, FEBRUARY 17**

Use the parenting sermon idea for the Sabbath worship service and the parenting seminar for any program segment during this celebration.

**FAMILY TOGETHERNESS WEEK OF PRAYER:  
SEPTEMBER 1-7**

Family Togetherness Week of Prayer is scheduled during the first week of September, beginning with the first Sunday and ending on the following Sabbath with Family Togetherness Day of Prayer. Family Togetherness Week of Prayer and Family Togetherness Day of Prayer highlight celebrating families and the church as a family.

A supplemental resource with daily readings and family activities will be provided for the Family Togetherness Week of Prayer. To download this resource please visit: [family.adventist.org/familyworship](http://family.adventist.org/familyworship)

**FAMILY TOGETHERNESS DAY OF PRAYER:  
(FOR MARRIAGES, FAMILIES AND RELATIONSHIPS)  
SABBATH, SEPTEMBER 7**

Use the Family Sermon idea for the Sabbath worship service found in this Resource Book.

# SERMON IDEAS

— *Sermon Ideas* are meant to be an inspiration—the beginning of your own sermon. Pray to be guided by the Holy Spirit, so your thoughts and words may be an extension of God's love for each heart and family.

# THE *BREAD* EVERY MARRIAGE AND FAMILY NEEDS TODAY

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BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

## THE TEXT:

John 6:24-35 ESV

## I. INTRODUCTION

Bread is a staple food prepared from flour dough—usually wheat—and water, commonly baked in an oven. Throughout recorded history around the world, bread has been an essential part of the diet of many cultures. Bread, to be sure, is one of the oldest human-made foods, having been of remarkable significance since the emergence of agriculture, playing an indispensable role in both religious rituals as well as secular culture.

Bread may be leavened by naturally occurring microorganisms, like in sourdough, chemicals like baking soda, industrially produced yeast, or high-pressure ventilation, creating gas bubbles fluffing up bread. In many countries, commercial bread often includes additives to improve flavor, texture, color, shelf life, nutrition, and ease of production.

We are gastronomes. We are commonly referred to as foodies in the United States of America, or food lovers—a more widely used phrase. One of the places where we enjoy eating is at *The Cheesecake Factory*, an American restaurant popular across the United States and also found in

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several countries around the world. We love the bread. You can have as much as you want, especially the brown bread (aka the whole wheat baguette). The bread is so popular—based on a Native American bread recipe—that the chain has begun to sell it in stores.

Over the past century, massive changes have been made to how food is prepared and delivered to people. From drive-thru restaurants to driverless cars, our eating and drinking have been transformed by innovation.

Food delivery began in 1922. Telephone-based food ordering started at a Chinese restaurant in Los Angeles and spread rapidly. Now, food delivery is a \$50 billion business in the United States, involving apps such as Grubhub, Uber Eats, and others. Even supermarkets deliver food now, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Drive-thru restaurants first appeared in 1948, when In-N-Out Burger allowed people to order and pick up food without leaving their cars. Today, up to 70 percent of fast-food sales are drive-thru, and even establishments such as *Starbucks* and *Chipotle* are in on the act.

*The McDonald's system* was created in 1955, using consistent preparation methods and a dependable supply chain. Now, almost every fast-food restaurant has developed a similar system, with a newcomer called *Just Salad* bragging that its employees can toss a salad every minute.

*Molecular gastronomy* was developed in 1987 when a microbiologist made ice cream with liquid nitrogen and invented the popular treat *Dippin' Dots*. Similar innovations, such as cooking vacuum-sealed food through a process called *sous vide* (pronounced *sue-veed*), are being done at *Panera*.

Then, *Instagram* appeared in 2010, establishing a new relationship between food and photo-sharing. Now, we don't only eat food; we send and receive pictures of it!

And finally, in 2017, *robots* became the latest innovation in eating. *Chowbotics* is a salad maker, *Cafe X* is a robot barista, and Domino's Pizza has been delivering pizza in certain markets during the past few years via self-driving cars. "Customers grab their order from the back," reports *Fast Company*, "no human interaction necessary." Lidsky, D. (2017, November). Wow!

Today, we are talking about bread and how vital it is to our lives. Nevertheless, we are not talking about just any kind of bread but about Jesus Christ, *The Bread of Life*. Our topic today is titled *The Bread Every Marriage and Family Needs Today*. Let's pray.

## II. THE TEXT: JOHN 6:24-35 ESV (JESUS THE BREAD OF LIFE)

<sup>24</sup>So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus. <sup>25</sup>When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?' <sup>26</sup>Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. <sup>27</sup>Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of

Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.’<sup>28</sup> Then they said to him, ‘What must we do, to be doing the works of God?’<sup>29</sup> Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’<sup>30</sup> So they said to him, ‘Then what sign do you do, that we may see, and believe you? What work do you perform?’<sup>31</sup> Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’<sup>32</sup> Jesus then said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven.’<sup>33</sup> For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’<sup>34</sup> They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’<sup>35</sup> Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.’”

### III. EXPLICATION AND APPLICATION

#### MIRACLE WORKER

Jesus was a true innovator in the world of eating, but he always had a human touch. In all four gospels (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14), Jesus feeds 5,000 men (and perhaps an equal number of women and more children; so probably about 20,000 people) by the Sea of Galilee. With just five barley loaves and two little fish, he creates a meal in which everyone gets as much as they want, and all are satisfied.

That’s not molecular gastronomy -- that’s *miraculous* gastronomy!

#### TEMPORAL FOOD VS. ETERNAL FOOD

Then, in the Gospel of John, Jesus warns the crowd not to focus too much on the bread he has just given them. “Do not work for the food that perishes,” He says, “but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you...” (John 6:27). The people are curious about this “food that endures to eternal life,” wondering what in the world Jesus is talking about. Is he speaking about easy-to-store, vacuum-sealed food cooked with the *sous vide* process?

Not exactly.

The people of Galilee have already experienced innovations in eating. Not drive-thru restaurants or food prepared by the McDonald’s system, but miraculous bread that comes from heaven. “Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness;” they say, “as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’” (John 6:31).

Jesus knows all about this manna-style bread but wants to introduce something new. “Truly, truly, I say to you,” says Jesus, “it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven” (John 6:32). Bread from heaven—the manna received in the passage from Egypt to Canaan—is great, he seems to be saying, but not as awesome as the “true bread from heaven.” An even more significant innovation is coming and is now here to

transform the hearts of every husband and every wife, to transform every home and every person in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, regardless of your status: single—never married, divorced, widowed—married, old, middle-aged, or young. The True Bread from Heaven is available to everyone who will have it.

“For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven,” Jesus announces, “and gives life to the world” (John 6:33). He is talking about heavenly bread that doesn’t simply fill the stomach but satisfies the soul, transforms husbands and wives; changes fathers and mothers and children and people of every country, culture, language, and tribe, and “gives life to the world.” Indeed, he gives life to the world of every family, including your family, if you will allow Him into your lives. You won’t find that one on the menu at *The Cheesecake Factory* or at one of your favorite restaurants. This one you must seek with all your heart. As declared by the prophet Jeremiah: “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13).

Not surprisingly, the people respond by saying, “Sir, give us this bread always” (John 6:34).

### LIFE GIVING BREAD

We can understand their hunger while wondering whether they really know what they are asking for. What exactly *is* this bread of God that gives life to the world? It’s not a loaf that has been shot with a blast of liquid nitrogen. It’s not a type of bread kneaded by a robot or delivered by a driverless car. It is not the kind of bread you can find at the supermarket or by the side of the road. This Bread is the kind you must daily and intentionally seek, as Ellen White counsels in *Steps to Christ*, p. 70: “Consecrate yourself to God in the morning; make this your very first work.” White, E. G. (1892).

No, this bread of God is nothing less than Jesus himself. “I am the bread of life;” says Jesus. “whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).

The greatest of all innovations in eating is the appearance of Jesus as the “bread of life.” For the first time, the people Jesus speaks with can receive “the true bread from heaven,” which gives life to the world and satisfies their souls’ deepest hunger and thirst. We, too, can receive “the true bread from heaven” to change the realities in our families by helping us manage differences of opinions and bad attitudes, forgive past slights and hurts, and make the wrongs right again.

So, what does it mean for Jesus to give life to the world or life to your marriage and family relationships? Glad you asked!

The answer to this question is both universal and very personal, and both levels are equally important. After all, bread is a universal food, available almost everywhere around the world. It is also very personal in the sense that it appears in many different forms in a variety of cultures: when we visited Russia for the first time—many years ago—we had freshly baked braided bread in our apartment at the Euro-Asia Division Headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Moscow, where we stayed during our visit. This is a common welcoming gesture in that country. The aroma of this special bread filled the room and conveyed a welcoming spirit. Then there’s nan bread we’ve enjoyed many times in India; chapati in East Africa; pita bread in Egypt, Israel, Jordan,

Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, the UAE, and other parts of the Middle East; baguette in France; tortillas in Mexico; and coco bread in Jamaica. And Jesus is much more than these.

On a universal level, Jesus is the Word of God in human form. As God's Word, "He was in the beginning with God." John tells us, "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men [the Greek word for men is *Anthropos*; humankind/everyone]" (John 1:2-4).

### HE MADE ALL THINGS AND HOLDS ALL THINGS

Whether considering the Big Bang theory or the creation story of Genesis chapters 1 and 2, it is important to realize that Jesus was there. Everything has come into being through him, including life, marriage, and family. The apostle Paul says much the same thing in his letter to the Colossians when he describes Jesus as the firstborn of all creation. "For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth," says Paul. "and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:16-17).

Jesus was in the beginning with God. In him, all things hold together. This is the universal Jesus, the eternal bread that gives life to the world. The eternal Father that can keep marriages and families together, regardless of how different from each other we might be. Interestingly, we believe we have so much in common before getting married. After marriage, though, we tend to wonder how we got together since we are as different as different. Life can be strange sometimes because we choose to live by our feelings rather than by the principle of love, which is "patient and kind; not envious or boastful; not arrogant or rude; does not insist on its own way; is not irritable or resentful; does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. Bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends..." (1 Cor. 13:4-8).

Someone once said that before marriage, opposites attract. But after marriage, opposites tend to repel. Yet, we are here to tell you that Jesus, the bread from heaven, can bring peace and harmony to every individual, every marriage, and every home, even yours. If you hear His voice and open the door, He will come in and eat with you, your spouse and family, and you with Him (Revelation 3:20).

### THE PERSONAL BREAD

But maybe this cosmic Christ is too big for us to swallow in one piece. It is hard to take a bite out of a loaf this large. So, it's better to drop to a much more personal level, focusing on Jesus as the bread of life for each of us. Perhaps that's why he was born in the little town of Bethlehem, which means *house of bread*.

As our personal bread, Jesus gives us strength to face the challenges of personal life, of life in our marriage and family relationships—both minor irritations and huge obstacles. Everyone knows what it feels like to be "hangry"—that is, bad-tempered or irritable because of being hungry. A little snack can lift your spirits and give you the strength you need to move ahead. Long-distance runners know they cannot complete an entire marathon with the fuel they have in their stomachs from breakfast. They must eat along the way, fueling their muscles with gel packs, power bars, and other carbohydrates. So, we need to snack on Jesus all day long by prayer, Bible reading, and practicing



acknowledging His presence in our lives every day—all day. He can soothe our anxieties, calm our fears, and give us strength to forgive and ask for forgiveness. His presence can give us patience and kindness when we need them most. Jesus must become our personal bread.

As the bread of life, Jesus gives us the help we need to be gentle and forgiving in our marriage and family relationships. He is the Word of God in human form, offering us correction, guidance, and forgiveness. He is the bread of life in human form, giving us nourishment, strength, inspiration, and kindness. Without this living bread, we would quickly wear out and give up in the face of the many challenges in personal life, as well as in marriage and family life. Jesus is the One who is with us and available to us, able to satisfy and fix our hunger and our thirst, our lack of patience and anger. Paul reminds us to seek the bread of life when he says: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil” (Ephesians 6:10, 11).

In this context, Ellen White shares in *The Adventist Home*, pp. 108-109:

“God tests and proves us by the common occurrences of life. It is the little things which reveal the chapters of the heart. It is the little attentions, the numerous small incidents and simple courtesies of life, that make up the sum of life’s happiness; and it is the neglect of kindly, encouraging, affectionate words, and the little courtesies of life, which helps compose the sum of life’s wretchedness. It will be found at last that the denial of self for the good and happiness of those around us constitutes a large share of the life record in heaven. And the fact will also be revealed that the care of self, irrespective of the good and happiness of others, is not beneath the notice of our heavenly Father.” White, E. G. (1952).

### **THE DAILY BREAD**

It is no surprise, then, that this meal, this Bread of Life, needs to be offered regularly in our homes because we all need the nourishment that comes from the presence and influence of the Bread Jesus Christ.

On this note, Ellen White offers in *Child Guidance*, p. 520:

“In every family there should be a fixed time for morning and evening worship. How appropriate it is for parents to gather their children about them before the fast is broken, to thank the heavenly Father for His protection during the night, and...when evening comes, to gather once more before Him and thank Him for the blessings of the day past.” White, E. G. (1954).

Jesus knew we would need the bread of life not just once but repeatedly, especially as we deal with the daily challenges of marriage and family differences. That’s why Jesus said, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on

the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock” (Matthew 7:24, 25). So, to partake of the bread of life is to build on the Words of Jesus, to build on His teachings, to build on His values, to build on His love.

### THE INNOVATIVE BREAD

To be sure, Jesus is God’s greatest innovation, the one sent into the world “that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). When we believe in him and eat the Bread of Life by reading His Word in our families every day, we receive the forgiveness and inspiration we need to face the many challenges that will inevitably emerge in our marriage and family relationships. Nourished by “the food that endures to eternal life” (John 6:27), we can be Christ’s people in the world, and point others to the peace, justice, humility, patience, kindness, and salvation of the kingdom of heaven in our marriage and family relationships despite the differences among us. In this vein, Paul reminds us: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6, 7).

Over the centuries, there have been many innovations in eating, from food delivery to salad-making robots. But all this earthly food eventually spoils; it is “the food that perishes” (John 6:27). As good as it is, even cornbread spoils. In fact—even manna—as miraculous as it was, spoiled after a day. None of it endures for eternal life. Only by believing in Jesus and doing His will in our marriage and family relationships each day, through love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22, 23), can we receive the bread of God which gives us and the world life, both personally and universally, especially in our marriage and family relationships.

## IV. CONCLUSION

All of us have opened the refrigerator many times to grab a snack and said to ourselves, “I’m hungry, but don’t know what I want to eat?” Truth be told, many of us have been snacking on junk food for far too long. It is time to get serious about consuming and enjoying nutritious, growth-producing, life-transforming food. Today, we need to join the crowd around Jesus in saying, “Sir, give us this bread always” (John 6:34). It is a request we can make without needing a smartphone or an app. It is a request we need to make every day, every hour, in fact, every minute.

For our deepest hunger—to be sure—is for the authentic living bread, Jesus Christ himself. He needs to be our choice in our marriage and family relationships today and every day. As the apostle Paul declares, “...walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Galatians 5:16, 17).

As we choose to partake of the Bread of Life today, the Bread Jesus Christ, may God bless your marriage and family today—despite your differences—as you recognize and embrace the truth that Jesus is the bread every marriage and family needs today.

God bless you.

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# JUST SHOW UP!

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BY CÉSAR AND CAROLANN DE LEÓN

## THE TEXT

Luke 14:1,15-24

## INTRODUCTION

Our story begins with Jesus being invited to the house of a Pharisee ruler to eat bread. It was a Sabbath day, so you might initially think this is a nice invitation we sometimes receive to join a Sabbath-keeping family for lunch.

I remember the time when my wife and I visited a town where I had been a college student. We had already been invited for a meal with a dear family that Sabbath; however, after the sermon, six additional families invited us to a meal for the following day, which was our last day in town—and nobody took no for an answer. So, we attended six meal invitations distributed throughout the day to honor each gracious and loving host. [Presenter can add a personal story to connect with the audience].

However, in our story, the invitation was not coming from a loving saint. The motive behind his invitation was not altogether virtuous. This religious leader had invited Jesus with one evil purpose, “to be watched.” They likely wanted to gather more data to see how they might destroy him more quickly. Knowing their intentions, Jesus told them a story.

<sup>15</sup> When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God. <sup>16</sup> Jesus replied: A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. <sup>17</sup> At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’ <sup>18</sup> But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’ <sup>19</sup> Another said, ‘I have just bought five yokes of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’ <sup>20</sup> Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’ <sup>21</sup> The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’ <sup>22</sup> ‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’ <sup>23</sup> Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. <sup>24</sup> I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’ Luke 14:15-24 (NIV)

## AN INVITATION TO THE SUPER SUPPER

This invitation symbolizes the heavenly banquet our Lord is preparing for His treasured guests to enjoy with Him. It represents heaven’s utmost effort to attract the objects of God’s deepest affection. This banquet invitation is just a revelation of who He is. Our God is a relational God who enjoys fellowship and communion. This is one of the greatest realities spoken of in the Gospels.

<sup>1</sup>“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup>Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” John 1:1-2 (NIV)

<sup>7</sup>“If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.” <sup>8</sup> Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” <sup>9</sup> Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ <sup>10</sup> Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. <sup>11</sup> Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves.” John 14:7-11 (NIV)

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all

the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. <sup>27</sup> So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Genesis 1:26-27 (NIV)

God is a community of three persons who interrelate with each other in love, justice, and peace. Thus, we cannot be surprised that God creates humans and places them in the context of a family community. The image of God in us is displayed every time we demonstrate our ability to live in harmonious, peaceful, and loving micro-communities called families, which God wants to use to influence and bless the greater family— the world.

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. <sup>14</sup> And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. <sup>15</sup> Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. <sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Col. 3:12-17 (NIV)

## SHOW UP!

At first sight, our story today seems to indicate that people at this dinner understood the privilege of having supper with Jesus.

### LUKE 14:15 (NIV)

“When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, “Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.”

So, Jesus decided to follow up with the conversation by telling them a story. A story that would reveal that their hearts were not where their words were. The invitees received a special invitation to be participants in this honorable banquet. However, they were too busy to attend! The Biblical narrative records that they “politely” excused themselves, and *none* of the invitees showed up.

Let’s assume that this banquet represents our family. What is keeping us from showing up? What are the excuses we are giving for staying away from our families?

Where have we been when our family has celebrated important and meaningful moments in their lives? Where have we been when our family has had a need, whether financial, emotional, or spiritual? When our spouses have needed us and our children have been in crisis—where have we been?

Sleeping in our beds, having family meals, and seeing our family for a few moments here and there does *not* mean we are genuinely emotionally connected to them. Too many spouses, fathers, and mothers are home physically but emotionally absent. Sadly, being emotionally absent is typically something we do unconsciously. Parental absenteeism is something we often practice without being aware. It is difficult to identify when we have *checked out* emotionally.

Psychosocial studies have demonstrated that parents who are physically present but are emotionally absent inadvertently cause deeper emotional damage to their children than when they are unable to be physically present.

### ILLUSTRATION

There was a young man who was profoundly bitter towards his aging father because although the father was home while he was growing up, he was too busy to be a part of his son's life experiences. You see, this father was well into his 50s when his son was born, and he was extremely busy developing his career and making a name for himself. He simply did not have any time for his young son. Today, his son suffers from deep depression, a fragmented sense of self, and feelings of rejection. We were created to be a part of someone's life, a part of a family, a community. When a child knows he is loved, cherished, and important to his family, he will develop emotionally and spiritually healthy.

Are we aware there may be "lost coins" (Luke 15:8-10) in our homes? Lonely spouses losing their faith in God. Stressed-out children wondering if God really cares. Husbands so broken, they can't find their connection to the Father. Exhausted single mothers losing hope as they struggle with relentless financial and parenting challenges.

Let's imagine this banquet invitation represents our marriage. What is keeping us from showing up? It is not uncommon to hear spouses complaining during the typical counseling session: "I don't feel he is really here," or "Our bodies are here, but we are drifting apart, and we don't know how to stop it." Sometimes, we are just too busy to show up!

The "Empty Bed Syndrome" is a relational and psychological condition that is marring the marital experience today. Husband and wife lay in bed, feeling deep emotional disconnection and hundreds of physical miles apart. One sleeps on one side of the bed and the other on the opposite side, leaving a wide space between them that is seldom occupied.

Perhaps the banquet dinner represents a relationship with one of our children or with all our children. Maybe we just can't find a way to connect to them. Emotional connection is developed through frequent positive interactions. Perhaps we have bought the satanic lie that our growing children don't really need us, and we have busied ourselves with piles of work or church commitments.

"Our kids are *so* different"—we tell ourselves, "they think and speak another language," and we just drift apart as we watch them enjoying their friends and their lives, emotionally disconnected from us. It's just so easy to not show up!

## ILLUSTRATION

I still remember when one of my adult sons asked me if I remembered when he played with his toys next to my home office door in the hallway. Feeling ashamed, I told him that I did *not* remember. When I asked him why he would play there under the frame of my door, he said, “Mom told me you couldn’t be bothered because you were so busy, but still, I wanted to be close to you.” *Ouch!* My conference had given me a 3-month sabbatical to complete my doctoral dissertation. And I was too busy to notice my 4-year-old son playing at my door during that quarter. [Presenter can use this illustration OR something more personal].

What excuses are we giving for not showing up to the events, gatherings, and routine family moments that are critical investments in our family’s healthy development? It’s never too late to show up for your family. It’s *never too late* to become involved in your children’s lives, whether they are 2, 12, 20, or 40 years old.

Family theorists have clearly explained that it is easier for a child to develop a healthy faith in God when the parents develop a healthy emotional attachment with their children. Fowler, J. (1981). This attachment is developed through the constant, faithful, and caring presence of the caregivers. Faith development is a family matter. A child needs a role model to show the way to God, just like Jesus modeled it to his disciples, “I am the way, the truth and life” (John 14:6).

Parents are called to show their children “*the way*” because they have already found it themselves. Faith in a child originates when he sees genuine faith being lived out by the parents who have already found their identity and life mission in a saving, healing relationship with Jesus. Faith has been and always will be rooted in a community of believers.

“Christ’s love is deep and earnest, flowing like an irrepressible stream to all who will accept it. There is no selfishness in His love. If this heaven-born love is an abiding principle in the heart, it will make itself known, not only to those we hold most dear in sacred relationships but to all with whom we come in contact. It will lead us to bestow little acts of attention, to make concessions, to perform deeds of kindness, to speak tender, true, encouraging words. It will lead us to sympathize with those whose hearts hunger for sympathy.” MCP-1, 208.

## AN ALL-INCLUSIVE INVITATION

Now comes the most exciting part of the story.

<sup>21</sup> “The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’ Luke 14: 21-23 (NIV)



## THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS ALL-INCLUSIVE

When the well-to-do, the aristocrats, the people who have the money to buy, sell, and can afford a wedding, are far too busy to come, heaven pivots to the second and *most* important part of the plan and extends the invitation to the ones who *really* need to attend.

“Go out into the streets and alleys of the town and bring . . .” the widows and the orphans, the divorcees, the rejected, the marginalized, the homeless, the verbally, emotionally, physically, and sexually abused. If *they* had been invited first, the rich would not have come; so in an attempt to attract everyone—the upscale and downscale, the downtown and uptowns, the people from the valleys and the hills; Jesus began his invitation with the people that were most difficult to attract; the picky, the uppity, the learned, the “too sophisticated,” so that they wouldn’t have additional excuses not to attend.

When it comes to evangelism, nothing has changed since the time of Jesus! The message of the cross has always been more attractive to the lost, the poor, the naked, the afflicted.

“Go out into the streets” and bring the emotionally neglected, the abused and financially broke, the elderly who have been abandoned by their children. “Go to the alleys” and bring the sons and daughters that have been rejected and thrown out of their homes. Bring those young people doing drugs and alcohol in an attempt to self-medicate their empty and lonely lives. Bring those suffering from domestic abuse, those living under threat, and those attempting to give up that keep thinking of suicide.

<sup>22</sup> “Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’

<sup>23</sup> “Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.’

I just love this! Jesus’ invitation is widened. The Lord’s desire is *all-inclusive* and *all-encompassing*. No one should be left out, the marginalized all over the world, in every city, every town, every village, the invitation is given to be a part of the Kingdom of God. The financially, emotionally, and spiritually bankrupt, the dubious of character, the “losers,” the addicts, the broken, those who are truly hungry. The invitation is for *them* and for you. The table is already set!

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. <sup>2</sup>Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare. <sup>3</sup>Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David. Isaiah 55:1-3 (NIV)

“The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let the one who hears say, “Come!” Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes, take the free gift of the water of life.” Revelation 22:17 (NIV)

Nobody is rejected, and no one is conditionally accepted. If you are hungry and thirsty, the banquet invitation is for you. If you are suffering, lonely, anxious, or depressed, the invitation is for you.

## DON'T MISS THE MOST IMPORTANT APPOINTMENT

Rewind to our story. It seems like the guests forgot that attending the banquet meant they became the recipients of *all* the Host's benevolence. The gifts and honors specifically prepared for the guests were far *greater* than a mere evening of culinary pleasure. Coming to the banquet meant *becoming the recipients of a radically abundant quality of life that would permeate every aspect of their existence.*

Since the Host of the banquet is Jesus Himself, He offers Himself as *the* sustaining *Bread of Life*, the *Living Water* that quenches and satisfies the deepest needs and desires of the human heart. But like those invited guests, all too often, we are simply too busy to participate in a life-transforming celebration with Jesus.

The irony is that the first group of invited guests didn't have a clue that *this* invitation to the banquet was *the most important appointment they needed to attend.* Who buys a field without *first* looking at it? Who buys animals without *first* checking them out? Even the newly married groom could have brought his bride with him to the banquet—even if for a few hours.

They would have gladly accepted the invitation if they had understood that coming to the banquet would have resulted in all the joy and meaning their acquisitions could never have given. I wonder how much sustainable joy and meaning the piece of land and the five yoke of oxen or even the brand-new wife resulted in?

“You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.” Psalms. 16:11 (NIV)

But they were all too busy. They all believed they had something *more important* to attend to.

Unfortunately, we can be *efficient* in many things in our lives but not necessarily *effective*. When we say we're too busy, it usually means we don't have our priorities straight. We think we are busy with important matters, but unless our family comes first in our lives, we will have disordered priorities.

Ramsey Solutions (n.d.). offers a list of eight signs to confirm whether you might be too busy:

You are always trying to multi-task.

You are exhausted and overwhelmed.

You must schedule things well in advance.

You have a hard time focusing and enjoying the moment.

You never take time off.

You fell out of balance.  
You feel guilty a lot of the time.  
You're filling your calendar with things you don't even want to do.

If this is you, today is an excellent day to recalibrate your values and priorities and put your family first.

## CONCLUSION

The best dish served is not eaten at the table. The greatest banquet attended doesn't take place in a hall. The best social gathering doesn't take place in the neighborhood park or the bar. It takes place at the feet of Jesus. The best time spent is not acquiring fields, animals, or buildings—even though it's fine to accumulate wealth, as it can solve temporary financial problems and be a blessing to others.

The best place to be is not at the marketplace or the meeting place; it is in the presence of a loving God who longs to reach out to heal our broken priorities, redeem our messed-up lives, and save us from our self-centered priorities.

## THE CALL

Let's come to the supper. There is *deep* nourishment awaiting. Let's say yes to Jesus and begin an other-focused life that prioritizes the *important* things over the good things, puts people over things, and relationships over business transactions. That counts heaven's gifts as blessings and not as inconveniences. That seeks to sit at the feet of Jesus before making profitable deals.

The banquet dinner is expensive. It was purchased at Calvary. The cost was the shed blood of the Son of God because this is a matter of life or death. Let's drop what we're doing and show up!

Going after material things as the primary focus of our lives is going to leave us wanting, hungry, and thirsty. Let's say yes to Jesus' invitation, complete His plan of salvation, and enlarge his family. As individuals, as families, let's live out the words, "*I will go with my family*," and reach out to those who are in our home and those outside our home in need of a Savior. Today I invite you, come . . . show up! It's never too late to show up!

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# TURN THE PAGE

JEFFREY O. BROWN

## THE TEXT

Jeremiah 29:4-7

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this sermon is to uphold biblical standards of family life that portray the highest standards of law and the widest levels of grace. With regards to Family Ministries Objective 6, this sermon attempts to address:

1. Involvement in the community
2. Unity and Community
3. Retention of young adults
4. Respect for all people
5. Zero tolerance [what I'm *not* going to do] regarding abusing those who are different from us. This is important, but so is intentional tolerance [what I *am* going to do] regarding loving those who are different from us.

## INTRODUCTION

[NOTE: PLEASE INSERT YOUR OWN ILLUSTRATION HERE OR REFERENCE THE AUTHOR IN YOUR SERMON].

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As a student missionary from Newbold College in England, I was waiting at a bus stop in the beautiful village of Agona-Ashanti in Ghana, West Africa. After a while, I asked the group at the bus stop, “What time is the bus coming?” “Oh, don’t worry,” they said. “Soon come. It will soon come.” I waited. After some time, I turned to the group again. They were laughing and enjoying themselves. “I’m sorry to disturb you,” I said. “Is the bus coming?” “Oh, don’t worry,” they said. “It will soon come.” It got dark. I approached the group again. “I’m sorry, but for the last time. Is the bus coming?” They said, “Oh, don’t worry, if it doesn’t come today, it will come tomorrow.”

I knew from that day that if my ministry in Ghana was going to be a success, I needed to change my perspective. Turning the page means to do some things differently. Be prepared to change your approach and look at familiar things through new lenses. Babylon. Oh, we know Babylon. Appalling apostasy. Revelation 14:8, “Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.” Oh, we know Babylon. Abject failure. Psalm 137:1, “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, and there we wept when we remembered Zion.” Oh, we know Babylon. Blatant wickedness. Revelation 18:4 says, “Babylon is the habitation of devils, the hold of every foul spirit, a cage of every unclean and hateful bird, Come out of her, my people.”

So John exiled on the isle of Patmos, writes to the people of God and warns them about Babylon. They know Babylon. Where their ancestors were taken into captivity, they know Babylon. Where their 597 BC was our 911 AD, they know Babylon. Where their Nebuchadnezzar was our Osama bin Laden, they know Babylon.

But rewind the tape. As bad as Babylon is, along comes Jeremiah. He speaks to God’s people taken into captivity in Babylon and tells them to build in Babylon. Marry in Babylon. Prosper in Babylon. How do we reconcile this apparent contradiction? On the one hand, ‘Come out. Keep out. Stay out.’ And then, on the other hand, ‘Move in. Live in. Stay in?’ Maybe God is saying, ‘Move into Babylon, but don’t let Babylon move into you.’ So how do you do that? How do you get connected with Babylon but not contaminated in Babylon? How do you get incarnated with Babylon but not incarcerated in Babylon? How do you get wrapped up with Babylon but not tripped up in Babylon? Our Scripture makes it clear.

## I. EXPECT GOD’S PAIN IN BABYLON

Firstly, *expect God’s pain in Babylon*. It’s in the text. Jeremiah 29:4. “Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, unto all that are carried away captives, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem unto Babylon.”

Your sins may have caused your punishment, but I have chosen your punishment, says God. You will live in Babylon, so expect that there will be pain. You’re living among people in your neighborhood that don’t worship like you do; expect that there will be pain. Your children are in school with kids who don’t behave like yours; expect that there will be pain. You’re working at a job where people’s language and attitudes, the way they treat you, and sometimes just the way

they look at you may be painful. The Bible says, “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus, shall suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12). The rain will fall on the just and the unjust, expect that there will be pain. The wheat and the tares must grow together, expect that there will be pain. You’re not in New Jerusalem yet. In His wisdom, God has placed us in certain communities, even in Babylon, home of every unclean bird and beast. Why? Because He wants every unclean bird and beast to be saved!

So, expect God’s pain in Babylon. I don’t know what your pain is today. Sometimes, it’s the pain of depression. Sometimes, it’s the pain of divorce. And sometimes, it’s the pain of discouragement. But sometimes, ours is the pain of personal discomfort. I just don’t like people like that being so close to me. Peter understood this. Peter went up on the roof to pray. God gave him a vision of recorded in Acts 10. Peter saw a huge sheet knotted at the four corners coming down from heaven. In this sheet were every species of quadrupeds. Wild and domestic. Reptiles and fowls. Beasts, birds, and bugs. And if this was not alarming enough, Peter receives a message from God, “Arise Peter, kill and eat” (Acts 10:11). The word ‘kill’ seems to imply slaughter and destruction, but it really involves sacrifice and dedication. It is the same word Paul used when he said in Romans 12:1, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”

Up to that moment, acceptable sacrifices had always been from clean, pure animals. God was now saying, ‘Come close to the unclean.’ He was not talking about animals; He was talking about the Gentiles. He was talking about people and saying, ‘Prepare to change perspectives—even long-held perspectives.’ When the Holy Ghost starts to move, He pushes the positions that you prefer. He bulldozes the baggage that you bring. He trashes the traditions that you treasure. And He crushes the customs that you cherish. Make way for the Gentiles! Then, expect that there will be pain.

Who is Babylon for you? Who makes you uncomfortable? Maybe it’s ***people in the world who are different from us***. God may try to get your attention by bringing a sheet to a church near you. It may contain all kinds of people: tattered jeans, tattooed skin, multi-colored hair, pierced body parts, tobacco on their breath, alcohol in their hands, and drugs in their veins. Persons with alternative sexualities, addictions, criminal records, pedophiles... ‘I know it may be uncomfortable for you,’ says the Lord, ‘but guess what, I can’t clean them up if you don’t let them in.’ You say, ‘But Lord, I have never let them into my church before.’ And God says, ‘I know, that’s why I startled you, that’s why I gave you this vision!’ You say, ‘That will be too painful for my church,’ well, newflash, it’s not your church. The Bible says, “*My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people*” (Isaiah 56:7).

*Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 386, “They may be ragged, uncouth, and seemingly in every way unattractive; yet they are God’s property. They have been bought with a price and are as precious in His sight as we are. They are members of God’s great household, and Christians, as His stewards, are responsible for them.” In these last days, God is bringing in people to help Him reach people you and I don’t want to reach, to help Him touch people you and I don’t want to touch, because with or without our vote, God is going to finish His work.

## II. EXPLORE GOD'S PLEASURE IN BABYLON

Not only does the text tell us to expect God's pain in Babylon, but, secondly, it tells us to *explore God's pleasure in Babylon*. Jeremiah 29:5-7a.

“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the LORD on its behalf.”

In Jeremiah, God's people are exiled to Babylon. And the fundamental question of the prophets is, ‘How long?’ False prophets tell the people of God in Babylon that it won't be long. But from his outpost in Egypt, Jeremiah lets them know that the exile will last 70 years. So, settle down and live. Jeremiah tells the exiles not to just move into Babylon, go to school, get a career, buy a house, get married, start a family, take out life insurance, or get a retirement plan. Lord, I don't understand. On the one hand, come out of Babylon, and on the other hand, move into Babylon. Where should I be, in the world or not in the world? In Babylon or not in Babylon? The text gives us the answer. You may experience God's pain in Babylon, but you must also explore God's pleasure in Babylon. And His pleasure is that you should contribute to the welfare of your society.

You may be in Babylon, but you must explore God's pleasure for you there. What is God's pleasure? 3 John 2, “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.” Jeremiah 29:7. “Seek the prosperity of the city where I have sent you into exile” (NASB). We are called to be salt and light with people in the world. Mix with them and be a blessing to them—but prepare to be misunderstood. Some may accuse you of compromising. They said of Jesus, “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). They called Him a winebibber and a glutton. But don't let your zeal for correctness overshadow your burden for compassion. God wants us to love the least, the last, and the lost. That's our mission.

Religious educator Findley Edge said, “It is to the world to which we are called. We are not sent to serve the church but to the world as an instrument of redemption. Thus, we are not called to attend meetings in the institutional church merely to keep certain organizations alive and growing. It is the world we are seeking to save, not the institution. The church is to lose its life; as it does so, it will find that it has fulfilled its calling.” Tucker, M. R. (1975).

[NOTE: PLEASE INSERT YOUR OWN ILLUSTRATION HERE OR REFERENCE THE AUTHOR IN YOUR SERMON].

When I was president of the church in Bermuda, the media would call and ask for our stance on issues affecting families and the community because we were a major church in that country. They asked, “What is the Seventh-day Adventist position on gambling?” I gave them our position:

Society pays the escalating cost of associated crime, victim support, and family breakdown, which erodes the quality of life. Seventh-day Adventists have consistently opposed gambling as it is incompatible with Christian principles. Seventh-day Adventist Church. (n.d.).

They asked, “What is the Seventh-day Adventist position on homosexuality?” I gave them our position:

Seventh-day Adventists believe that sexual intimacy belongs only within the marital relationship of a man and a woman. This was the design established by God at creation. Sexual acts outside the circle of a heterosexual marriage are forbidden . . . For these reasons Seventh-day Adventists are opposed to homosexual practices and relationships. Seventh-day Adventist Church. (n.d.).

They asked, “What is the Seventh-day Adventist position on selling alcohol on Sundays?” I gave them our position:

Seventh-day Adventists abstain from the use, manufacture, or sale of alcoholic beverages, the use, manufacture, or sale of tobacco in any of its forms for human consumption, and from the misuse of or trafficking in, narcotics or other drugs. Seventh-day Adventist Church. (2022).

As I repeatedly gave the church’s official positions, people started writing letters to the newspaper and blogs online. They asked, ‘Why were the Adventists meddling in other people’s lives?’ They wondered why we couldn’t mind our own business. We seemed to be always negative, always disapproving, always saying no. I saw a study about how young people view today’s church. Seventh-day Adventist Church. (2022).

Boring -- 68%

Insensitive to others -- 70%

Out of touch with reality -- 72%

Overly political -- 75%

Old-fashioned -- 78%

Hypocritical -- 85%

Judgmental -- 87%

Anti-homosexual -- 91%

I decided it was time to turn the page. So, I sent a letter to the news reporter. I quoted the survey and said I was sorry for being insensitive. I said we make no apologies for our biblical standards and positions, but I said our church prefers to be known by what it is for rather than what it is against. “From now on,” I said, “I want us to be positive. I want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. We have wonderful schools, wonderful churches, and wonderful young people. We want to focus on health and well-being. We want to seek the welfare of our community.” Bell, J. (2013, November 13).

The reporter wrote back. He said,

“Thank you, Dr Brown. I’m not personally religious in the church sense, but I recall the Adventists giving out free gasoline to people a couple of years ago. I heard a lot about that simple



act of compassion, which no doubt cost your membership a pretty penny. That act meant a lot to people as you prayed with them while filling their tanks. Your church and others ensure that many people out there who don't have food get something to eat and a little community while they eat it. When the school year started, your church handed out school bags and supplies just a couple of months ago. I'm not speaking as a reporter here, just as one person to another. I appreciate the response you've sent, by the way. You certainly don't rank as insensitive in my book, for what it's worth."

The *Royal Gazette's* blogosphere had a new tone. One person wrote that this "focused on the real purpose of the church in the community instead of the small stuff." But the real heart warmer was when one of our own young people called. He had stopped going to church. He said to me, "When people don't like things in the conference, they don't hesitate to call. But you wrote something in the *Royal Gazette* that I liked, and I knew I had to call. What you wrote about the church now striving to be more compassionate in the community was so heartening to me." He concluded, "That's the kind of church I want to belong to." He came back to church, got rebaptized, got married, and now he and his wife are lay leaders in his church.

*Desire of Ages*, p. 639, "His followers are not to feel themselves detached from the perishing world around them. They are a part of the great web of humanity; and Heaven looks upon them as brothers to sinners as well as to saints."

### III. EXPERIENCE GOD'S PROMISE IN BABYLON

Not only does the text call us to expect God's pain in Babylon and to explore God's pleasure in Babylon, but finally, it calls us to *experience God's promise in Babylon*. Jeremiah 29:7, "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

God says, 'Not only have I made their salvation dependent upon how much they associate with you, but I have made your salvation dependent upon how much you associate with them.' Look at the text. Jeremiah 29:7 in the *Clear Word Paraphrase* says, "Pray for that country, because if it prospers, so will you." That's the promise! We talk so much about unity, and we think it means we should all believe the same thing or all practice the same thing, but that's not what it means. It's not about just uniting with each other; it's about uniting with the world! *Desire of Ages*, p. 641, "The love of the Redeemer will draw hearts together in unity... And when His parting words are fulfilled, 'Love one another, as I have loved you' (John 15:12); when we love the world as He has loved it, then for us His mission is accomplished. We are fitted for heaven." If it prospers, so will you!

What is it that makes you uncomfortable? For some of us, maybe it's **people in the world who are different from us**. For others of us, maybe it's **people in the church who are different from us**. Reminds me of what Jackie Lynton said. Jackie was the founder of National Change Day, sponsored by the British National Health Service and duplicated worldwide. After a long and brave fight with cancer, Jackie passed away. In a presentation

entitled “Harnessing the community” she said, “We must activate the mavericks, the radicals, the rebels, and the heretics. Because without them, the storyline never changes.” It sounds like preaching professor Brett Younger, who said, “The church does not need any more reasonable ministers. We need ministers who will set their own hair on fire for what is right. The church has more than enough predictable, conventional, cookie-cutter ministers. We need ardent, zealous, fervent, fiery, incensed, inflamed, enraged, obsessive, impassioned, hot-blooded, and fanatical ministers.” Younger, B. (2013).

Who is it that makes you uncomfortable? You see, while God requires from some of them a change in *behavior*, God requires from some of us a change in *attitude*. We may be uncomfortable with people who are different from us. We may be uncomfortable with people in the church who are different from us. Or we may be uncomfortable with **people in other churches who are different from us**. What do they have to teach us, we ask?

[NOTE: PLEASE INSERT YOUR OWN ILLUSTRATION HERE OR REFERENCE THE AUTHOR IN YOUR SERMON].

When I pastored in Toronto, one of my Apple Creek Church members had a fine tradition. Married to a Christian from another denomination, she would invite her pastor and family to have lunch with her husband’s pastor and family. In the course of our conversation, I asked him about hobbies or if he had written anything. I knew I had written one or two books, so I was ready for him. “Oh, I’ve done a little writing,” he said meekly. “What book have you written?” “Oh, I don’t write books,” he responded. “What do you write, then?” “I write hymns.” “Hymns!” I said. “What’s the name of one of your hymns?” “Oh, I don’t think you’ve heard of it.” “Try me.” He said, “Days are filled with sorrow and care, Hearts are lonely and drear; Burdens are lifted at Calvary, Jesus is very near.” I was conscious that my mouth was wide open. It’s number 476 in the *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*. I was humbled. I would gladly have exchanged all my books for just one stanza of that hymn by my new friend, John Moore.

What might persons in other churches have to teach us? Perhaps a whole lot. *Great Controversy*, p. 390, “Notwithstanding the spiritual darkness and alienation from God that exist in the churches which constitute Babylon, the great body of Christ’s true followers are still to be found in their communion.”

## APPEAL

So, should we move out of Babylon? Or should we move Into Babylon? Jesus solved the dilemma in John 17:15 when He said, “I pray not that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from the evil.” Move into Babylon, but don’t let Babylon move into you.

Don't turn your back; instead, turn the page. Do it for their sakes. And they'll tell us,

I know you read, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world" (1 John 2:15), but I'm so glad you turned the page and read, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16).

I know you read, "Friendship of the world is enmity with God and whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (James 4:4), but I'm so glad you turned the page and read, "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved" (John 3:17).

I know you sang, "This world is not my home," but I'm so glad you turned the page and sang, "This is my Father's world."

I know you preach, "Come out of Babylon," but I'm so glad you turned the page and moved into Babylon. Now, the Jesus you serve is my Jesus, too. The church you go to is my church, too. And the heaven you are going to is my heaven, too.

That is them. What about you? Aren't you glad that Jesus turned the page for you?

I know you read, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23), but aren't you glad Jesus turned the page and said, "But the gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord."

I know you read, "The thief cometh but to steal, kill, and destroy" (John 10:10), but aren't you glad Jesus turned the page and said, "But I have come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly."

I know you read, "Weeping may endure for a night" (Psalm 30:5), but aren't you so glad Jesus turned the page and said, "But joy" ... wonderful joy ... glorious joy ... "comes in the morning."

Turn the page. Turn the page. Turn the page.

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# PRAYING FOR YOUR FAMILY

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BY PAVEL GOIA

## THE TEXT

1 Sam. 12:23

## PURPOSE

This sermon shows the process of praying for our family members in the example of Hannah, Samuel's mother.

## INTRODUCTION

Most of us know that prayer is essential, especially when petitioning God on their behalf. But have you ever thought about this: It is not only a vital duty to pray for your family, it is a sin against God not to pray for them.

[NOTE: PLEASE INSERT YOUR OWN ILLUSTRATION HERE OR REFERENCE THE AUTHOR IN YOUR SERMON].

My wife, Daniela, and I are blessed with two wonderful boys: Gabriel (Gabe) and Ovidiu (Ovi). They are good-looking, like their mother, hardworking; they love Jesus, and they love us. They call and talk to us daily. They pray and study the Word, get involved in the church, and so on.

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However, that was not always the case for one son. Our older boy, Gabe, decided he didn't want or need God anymore when he was about 17 years old. He just wanted to have fun and determined that church spoiled his fun. So, he no longer wanted to attend church, pray, or study the Bible. In fact, he said, "Leave me alone with your religious stuff. It is for old people; when I retire, I will come back to church."

We educated them and raised them in love for God and the Word. And they had free will to make their own choices. Friends have such a powerful influence over children. Good friends can pull them up, while bad friends can push them down. Our son made friends that, let's just say, were not the best influence on him. He stopped going to church, started to get bad grades in school, decided to speed, and, consequently, got speeding tickets and was involved in car accidents. The list goes on.

My wife and I prayed for them both faithfully. Daniela even fasted every Wednesday. I fasted every single day, but never more than five hours consecutively!

### **TWISTING GOD'S ARM**

How long should we pray? You see, if you pray "petition" prayers, if you ask God for temporary things like a bigger house, a nicer car, a higher-paying job, an ivy-league school, better health—things related to this life—what you are doing is trying to impose your will on God. Instead of twisting God's arm to do what you ask, be like Jesus in the garden, and say, "May Your will be done," and then accept God's will and trust in His love, wisdom, and promises. Wait for His answer in His time. The Bible promise in Isaiah 40:31 refers to those who "WAIT on the Lord."

But if you pray "intercessory" prayers and plead to God on behalf of someone else's salvation for eternal things, keep praying and never stop. We cannot take anything to heaven except the people we work and pray for. God gave us freedom of choice, and He respects our choice. When we pray for someone who doesn't desire a relationship with God or has rejected God, our prayers give God opportunities to work on their heart where He is not yet invited.

### **BACK TO THE STORY**

My wife and I earnestly prayed for Gabe. We prayed every single day; we labored in prayer. We decided not to let God go before He did something about our son. We wanted to know what God wanted us to do; we didn't want to push Gabe too far, nor did we want to do nothing. We even asked God to do whatever it took to save our son; what's the benefit of having things yet having him lose eternal life?

It took more than two years of fervent, determined prayer, a time when the situation didn't seem to get better. In fact, at times, it seemed to get worse. We could not afford to get discouraged and stop praying. We said, "We will pray as long as we live."

Our son started to have all types of incidents.

One Sabbath, while waterskiing with his friends, he had an accident. While showing off, he jumped up in the air, trying to roll over, and dropped the rope the boat was pulling him with. The

handle bounced up and hit him in the back of the head. There was blood all over. The doctor said that he would have died if the handle had hit him one more inch towards the middle of his head. He called us and said he would change his life. He didn't.

Another time, he was driving home from college for Christmas vacation. It was snowing; he was speeding and fell asleep while driving. When he opened his eyes, he was just about to careen into a concrete pillar. He yanked the wheel, spun the car, flew off the road, over an embankment, and down into a swamp covered with weeds. The vehicle slowly sank into the water, and the weeds surrounded and partially covered the car.

He tried to open the door with no success. The windows didn't work either. The car had no power, lights, horn, or anything—he was stuck inside. The water started slowly filling the car. He started to pray and made God all types of promises. Instantly, the power came back on, and he lowered the window and escaped the sinking vehicle.

He promised to change. . . but he didn't. In fact, after he thought about it, he tried to explain away the miracle of the car's power being restored and vehemently asked us to stop praying for him, implying that we and our prayers were the cause of his accidents.

We kept praying.

Months later, on a Sabbath, Gabe went with his friends four-wheeling on all-terrain vehicles (ATV). Some of them tried to go up a mountain, but it was too steep, so they decided to go around. He wanted to show off, so he gunned the ATV and charged up the steep incline. He didn't get far before the ATV flipped upside down and trapped the right side of his head between it and a rock. The helmet was shattered, pieces of his skull were scattered over the rock, splinters of bone were lodged in his right eye, etc.

His friends rushed Gabe to the hospital. The doctor called us and said that the damage was bad and that our son probably didn't have much time to live. We drove the 11-hour trip in 9.5 hours. We prayed all the way. In the beginning, we prayed for God to save his life. Eventually, I was impressed to pray for his salvation. I knew that God heard our prayers, and He would ultimately make the decision. We needed to say, "Your will be done," and mean it. As parents, those were very difficult words for us to say to God. But we decided to surrender our son's life into God's hands.

Soon after that decision, we got there and waited. The doctor came and informed us that they saw no brain injury—he would make it! They later tested his eye, and the optical nerve was not touched—he would have normal vision. Gabe had plastic surgery; 5 titanium plates were put on the right side of his head to replace the missing bone.

When he woke up, his head was in bandages, except for the right side and right eye.

"Dad, am I dead, or will I die?" he asked me.

"Son, dead people don't talk, you are ok, and you will make it."

"Will I be paralyzed?"

"Unfortunately, no," I said.

"Why unfortunately?"

“Because you will still be able to do stupid stuff.”

“Do I have brain injuries?”

“That would be impossible,” I replied.

“Why?” he questioned.

“You cannot have brain injuries because you don’t have a brain. What was in your head to go up that mountain?”

“Hee, hee, hee. Please don’t make me laugh; it hurts. Dad, God saved my life again.”

“Yes, son, He did. He has been trying hard to get your attention and wake you up.”

“Dad, I want to change, but I have no power.”

“Son, who told you that you have the power to change yourself? Only God can change you. Invite God’s presence daily and continually into your life. ‘Whoever calls the name of the LORD shall be saved’ ” [Rom. 10:13]. It will be a life-long process, but as long as His presence is IN you, working with you, you are safe. Only when you separate from Him and Satan attacks you, can you not have victory. Start today, and then every day.”

We prayed together. He prayed a very simple, short prayer. From that day on, he started to daily spend quality time in communion with God to invite God into his life.

His life has changed completely. His surgery was extremely successful, with no marks. You cannot even see that he had an accident. We could not have dreamed for better. He loves God and loves us, loves his wife and daughters, works hard, gets involved in the church, and so on.

But it took a lot of persevering prayer.

## HOW DO YOU DO IT?

How do you pray for your family? Should you ever stop? It is never too late to start, and it is our duty to always pray to ask God for His Spirit in our families and His presence.

In the Bible, we have many examples of prayer. One of them is in First Samuel chapter 1. The story takes place in the early eleventh century B.C. In this story, let’s highlight the most important points related to prayer for our families.

Elkanah had two wives. Although God created one man and one woman to be together, and the Bible clearly underlines that anything outside that is sin, in time, after many generations, Israel slowly started to copy the habits of the nations around them. At that time, if you had children, people thought you were blessed by God. And if you had no children, you were considered cursed. Hannah had no children. The other wife, Peninnah, continually ridiculed, mocked, and made Hannah’s life miserable. Hannah had no joy and no peace. Her everyday life was filled with heartache.

Hannah had been praying for a while for a child, but with no results. At that time, the temple in Jerusalem was not yet built, so Elkanah and his family would travel to Shiloh once a year for Yom-Kippur, the Day of Atonement. While others were eating, Hannah was so miserable and overwhelmed that she didn't eat but went to the Tabernacle to pray.

## A WOMAN OF PRAYER

“She was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the LORD, and wept in anguish” (1 Sam. 1:10). Hannah longed for a child. She had been praying. We don't know how many years she had been praying, but we do know from verse 8 that it was years. Yet verse 10 says she *continued* to pray before the Lord. The word used for “continued” is *Rabah*, meaning many, abundant, excessively, and numerous.

We can certainly conclude that Hannah didn't just pray routinely or only in crisis, but that prayer was a lifestyle for her. People who pray a lot focus more and more on God. The more you pray, the more you focus on God. The more you focus on God, the less you think of yourself, so the more you surrender to God. Your relationship with God builds stronger and stronger.

## SHE FOCUSED ON GOD

Hannah's relationship with God, including her prayers, started changing the more she prayed.

She went from asking God for something—a child—to committing the child to the Lord. She said in First Samuel 1:11, “O LORD of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life.” She focused on God and His service, not herself and her needs. She surrendered her greatest longing to God.

## SHE IS MEEK

The next part of Hannah's story provides an insight into how prayer changes people and how it is a process.

“And it happened, as she continued praying before the LORD, that Eli watched her mouth” (v. 12). As she was pouring her heart before God, Eli, the high priest, is watching her. “Now Hannah spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, ‘How long will you be drunk? Put your wine away from you!’ ” (vv. 13, 14). This is very interesting. She was in anguish and suffering and would expect comfort and support especially from the pastor. Yet she is misinterpreted and judged, although she's innocent.

Did she get angry and allow herself to feel hurt and offended? No! In fact, with humility and kindness and in a calm voice, she says, “ ‘No, my lord, I *am* a woman of sorrowful spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor intoxicating drink, but have poured out my soul before the LORD. Do not consider your maidservant a wicked woman, for out of the abundance of my complaint and grief I



have spoken until now” (vv. 15, 16). She showed meekness, patience, and kindness. People who are in continual communication with and focus on God no longer take offense easily, judge, condemn, or criticize others; they don’t feel the need for revenge. They don’t think of themselves, as their eyes are on God.

### **SHE KNOWS GOD’S VOICE**

People who pray a lot and spend time in God’s presence also get used to God’s voice and learn to distinguish it from other voices. “Then Eli answered and said, ‘Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have asked of Him.’ And she said, ‘Let your maidservant find favor in your sight.’ So, the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad.” (vv. 17, 18).

Unbelievable! She had **no proof** whatsoever that God had answered her prayer. They had tried for many years, again and again, to have a child. She probably started a natural food diet. They went to the best doctors, prayed, and did anything they could do, with no results. And now, the pastor says, “May God answer your petition,” and she recognizes God’s voice.

### **SHE HAS STRONG FAITH**

“Then she went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad” (v. 18). Amazing, instantly Hannah goes back with joy, eats, and rejoices. Rejoices based on what? Faith. No proof, no evidence, just pure blind faith.

We see here that not only is she a woman of prayer, but she is also a woman of faith. Nothing has happened yet, and there is no human possibility for a child, no proof, yet she believes strongly that God has already answered her prayer, and she gets up and eats, although she refused to eat before, and is no longer sad. People who pray a lot get to know God, and the more they know God, the more they trust in Him, they have faith.

### **SHE HAS JOY AND PEACE**

Verse 18 says that Hannah was no longer sad. People who pray know God, focus on Him and trust in Him. Those who put their trust in God have peace and joy. Isaiah 26:3 says, “You will keep *him* in perfect peace, *Whose* mind *is* stayed on You, Because he trusts in You.” She had peace and joy, not based on circumstances but on Her close relationship with God and her trust and faith in Him.

### **SHE HAS PATIENCE**

“So it came to pass in the process of time that Hannah conceived and bore a son, and called his name Samuel, *saying*, ‘Because I have asked for him from the LORD’ ” (v. 20). People who pray much develop patience. Hannah didn’t get pregnant right away; we don’t know how long it took, yet she patiently waited in faith and joy. She knew God and had peace and joy as if God had already given her a son—like it was a done deal, past tense. She is now praising God for his answer, just patiently waiting for the delivery of the answer. To rejoice before you see it as you have already received it.

[NOTE: PLEASE INSERT YOUR OWN ILLUSTRATION HERE OR REFERENCE THE AUTHOR IN YOUR SERMON].

When my son, Ovi, was young, he really wanted a tricycle. And not just any trike; he would tell anyone who would listen that he wanted a blue tricycle with three wheels and peddles. One day, he came up to me and asked me, for what seemed like the hundredth time, if I could buy him a blue trike with three wheels and peddles. His mother and I had discussed it and decided it was time. So, I told him, “Tomorrow after work, I will go buy your tricycle.”

He was so excited! He jumped up and down and then ran around the whole neighborhood, telling his friends, “I have a trike! It’s blue, with three wheels and peddles!”

His friends said, “Wow, where is it?”

“It’s coming tomorrow at 5 p.m.”

Ovi had spent so much time with me and knew me so well that he trusted me, his father, and believed I would keep my promise to him. Therefore, he was confident and talking like he already had the tricycle.

Hannah didn’t need to see God’s answer to believe. She had spent so much time with God that she knew and trusted Him. God set into motion a miracle, and she conceived. Imagine her faith paying off! She prayed for the baby before she was pregnant, during pregnancy, and after he was born. She was always praying.

That’s what we should also do: always pray for our families. Commentator Matthew Henry stated, “It is the duty of the parents to pray for their children and the great thing we should desire is, that they may be kept in covenant with Him, and may have grace to walk before him in uprightness.” Henry, M. (1834).

We don’t have a lot of time to pray and work for our children and families, so we should use that time wisely. And even if we have not prayed much up to this point, it is never too late to start praying diligently for them!

## COMPLETE SURRENDER

Hannah vowed before the Lord that the child would be given to Him. “Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with three bulls, one ephah of flour, and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD in Shiloh. And the child *was* young” (v. 24).

Samuel was about six years old. It is heartbreaking for a parent, moreover a mother, to be separated from their child so early. We have cell phones now, but Hannah didn’t. She would only see him once a year.

First Samuel 1 verses 25 through 27 say, “Then they slaughtered a bull, and brought the child to Eli. And she said, ‘O my lord! As your soul lives, my lord, I *am* the woman who stood by you here, praying to the LORD. For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition which I asked of Him.’ ”

You would think that maybe Hannah would be so sad to leave her only son that she would cry in a corner and pray something like, “Lord, give me strength, help me, it is not easy to let go of my son...”

We should also look at the context in which the child was to live. Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were absolutely corrupt (1 Sam. 2:12, 17). The Bible says that all Israel knew about them. So, Hannah had many reasons to be concerned and not leave Samuel there. But she made a covenant and knew God enough to trust Him. In fact, she trusted in God more than in herself. She knew that God would do a better job than she would. Notice how she prays, “And Hannah prayed and said: ‘My heart rejoices in the LORD; My horn is exalted in the LORD. I smile at my enemies, because I rejoice in Your salvation’ ” (1 Sam. 2:1).

She didn’t focus on herself or the child. She didn’t say, “Oh Lord, it is going to be really hard for me. . . and the influence around little Samuel will be so bad. . .” She surrendered Samuel into the service of Eli and fulfilled her promise to God.

It is our duty to daily surrender our families to God. Whatever we keep, we lose. We don’t have the power to preserve and protect. Whatever we surrender and give to God is what we save. Only He can protect, preserve, and bless. To give your family to Him is the best thing for them.

## NEVER STOP PRAYING

But she never stopped praying. First Samuel 2 verses 18 and 19 say, “But Samuel ministered before the LORD, *even as* a child, wearing a linen ephod. Moreover, his mother used to make him a little robe and bring *it* to him year by year when she came up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice.” What did Samuel have as a constant reminder that his mother never stopped praying for him? She made a coat that he would cover himself with when he would go to serve and pray. The message was clear, “Samuel, you are covered with prayer.”

Author Ellen White stated, “From the earliest dawn of intellect she [Hannah] had taught her son to love and reverence God and to regard himself as the Lord’s. By every familiar object surrounding him she had sought to lead his thoughts up to the Creator. When separated from her child, the faithful mother’s solicitude did not cease. Every day he was the subject of her prayers. Every year she made, with her own hands, a robe of service for him; and as she went up with her husband to worship at Shiloh, she gave the child this reminder of her love. Every fiber of the little garment had been woven with a prayer that he might be pure, noble, and true. She did not ask for her son worldly greatness, but she earnestly pleaded that he might attain that greatness which Heaven values—that he might honor God and bless his fellow men.” White, E. G. (1890).

She didn’t say, “Lord be with me and my son,” or, “Lord, bless him and help him to get a good education and a good job.” She prayed that he would love and serve God, not that he would be blessed but that he would be a blessing to others.

She had been praying constantly for him, and she continued to pray. She never stopped. Prayer for our families is a duty, a blessing, and a privilege. God calls us to pray daily for our

families. To ask for His protection and presence daily, for His Spirit to fill them and lead them, to cover them in prayer.

Will you be a Hannah? Will you be in constant communication with the Lord, pleading for His will to be done in the lives of your children and your family members?

“If the Savior of men, with His divine strength, felt the need of prayer, how much more should we feeble, sinful mortals feel the necessity of prayer—fervent, constant prayer. . . . He committed Himself to God and, through earnest prayer and perfect submission to the will of His Father, came off conqueror. Those who profess the truth for these last days, above every other class of professed Christians, should imitate the great Exemplar in prayer.” White, E. G. (1938).

We are living in the last days of this earth’s history. We must grow our relationship with God by constantly connecting with Him, just like Jesus did. Prayer is a process! Less than 10 percent of prayers answered in the Bible were answered instantly. Keep your family before the altar daily and leave them in God’s hands joyfully.

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# CHILDREN'S STORIES

— Use *Children's Stories* for the special family Sabbaths. Please feel free to use props and materials that are easily available to you. The objective is to engage the children in your church family.

# HAPPY BIRTHDAY EVERYONE!

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BY ELAINE OLIVER

## TEXT

Psalm 139:14

## PROPS

Happy Birthday banner, birthday hat, birthday blowers, or anything available. Before story time begins, assign two older children or adults to hold up the birthday banner. Put on a birthday hat and blow blower as you start story time if acceptable.

## STORY

*(Begin the story by saying),* “HAPPY BIRTHDAY!”

I know something exciting! Somebody has a birthday today! *(If someone or several children respond, acknowledge them, and wish them a happy birthday by name).* How did I know that someone had a birthday? Because someone, somewhere in the world, has a birthday today, and someone will have one tomorrow and the next day and the next day!”

*(Of course, by now, the children will usually be engaged and volunteer unsolicited responses such as, “My baby brother has a birthday today, or my grandma has a birthday next week.” Try to engage the children a little without allowing any one child to monopolize the conversation. Allow several children to*

*participate while controlling the story. You can respond by saying, “That’s wonderful, how exciting, wow, next week!” Then, move on to your following sentence without stopping to have an entire dialogue with one child).*

You’ve guessed it! Everybody has a birthday, whether you’re small, tall, young, or old. Most people think their birthday is extraordinary and we usually celebrate with cake and sometimes balloons. Your birthday is important (*point out to the children*); my birthday is important. Our birthday is important because it celebrates the day we were born. It is the day of your birth! That’s why we say birthday!

The Bible tells us in Psalms that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Do you know what that means? It means that God, the Creator of the Universe, also made us. We were created by God and for a specific purpose. Every one of us is special to God. There is no one else on the entire earth who is just like you! You are precious to God! There isn’t anyone like you that was born before, or that will be born after you. Sometimes, you may see someone who looks like you or that you look like, maybe your mother or father, sister or brother or aunt or uncle, or perhaps someone you’ve never seen before. But no one is exactly like you. You are uniquely designed by God, which makes you very special.

And just as you are very special, so are all the people around you that God created. Look around you and see all the special people God created. It doesn’t matter if they don’t look like you, talk like you, or even act like you. They are made special by God too. Sometimes, when you see someone with straight hair, curly hair, light skin, dark skin, skinny, chubby, in a wheelchair, or wearing glasses, you may think they look different than you. And guess what? They may think you look different than they do. But then you remember that we are uniquely designed by God, and all are very special to God. God celebrated our birthday because we were all created in His image. And because we were created in the image of God, we want to be more like Jesus every day. How do we do this? By treating one another with kindness and respect. We can look at one another and say, “Happy Birthday.” God created you, so you are special! *Encourage the children to tell one another: Happy birthday, you are special!*

## PRAYER

Dear Jesus, thank you for making each of us special. Help us know that just as you made me special, you also made others special. Teach us to love one another as you love and celebrate our birthday. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

# LESSONS FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA

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BY DAWN JACOBSON-VENN

## THE TEXT

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, Proverbs 27:17

## PROPS

Pictures of the Pistol Shrimp and Goby Fish

What is the best thing about having a friend? (Let children respond). Good friends are helpful. Sometimes friends are good at something we are not good at, so together we make a great team!

TODAY, I want to tell you about an unusual but extraordinary friendship between the Pistol Shrimp and a Goby fish. Look at this little guy (show a picture of a Pistol Shrimp).

Being called a shrimp is not usually considered a compliment, and being teased for being small is no fun. The Pistol Shrimp is tiny, about the size of your finger. Many would say that this little sea creature does not matter much.

But God made the Pistol Shrimp with many possibilities, including a mighty weapon built right into their one oversized snapper claw. This claw can grow to be half the size of its tiny body. The Pistol Shrimp communicates by snapping his claw. Not only that, he also shoots bubbles by snapping his claw, which makes a big, massive bang that is louder than a firecracker! Besides giant whales like the Sperm Whale and the Beluga Whale, this tiny Pistol Shrimp is one of the loudest creatures in the sea!



Those tiny bubbles that the Pistol Shrimp shoots are also very hot. What's the hottest thing you can think of? (Let children respond) The Pistol Shrimp shoots bubbles up to four times hotter than lava! Lava is over 4,000–degrees Celsius or more than 8,000 degrees Fahrenheit. Almost as HOT as the SUN!!!!

As impressive as that is, these tiny shrimps are also very vulnerable to predators because of their poor eyesight. They are nearly blind!

Now look at this Goby fish (Show a picture of the Goby fish). If the Pistol Shrimp snaps its giant claw together so tightly that a jet of water shoots out like a bullet, why would the cute little Goby fish willingly go near them? Because God created us to work together! We can see the potential of others and see our differences as possibilities!

Through the partnership with the Goby fish, who, it turns out, has excellent eyesight, they can thrive! The Goby fish uses its good eyes to help the Pistol Shrimp. But the Goby fish, who has good eyes, can't dig a hole to hide from its enemies or make its home at the bottom of the sea.

So, the Pistol Shrimp and Goby fish team up (show a picture of them together). The Gobies act as seeing-eye fish for the shrimp by keeping their tail fins in contact with the shrimp's antennae. So, whenever they are outside their burrow, the fish can quickly signal when danger is near. In return, the Gobies get free access to the Pistol Shrimps' burrows so that they can both hide from predators. The Pistol Shrimp digs and cares for these tunnel houses that they share! The Goby fish is a watchman and shares its' good eyesight with the Pistol Shrimp! Isn't God amazing?

We can see in this example from the bottom of the ocean how we are all uniquely created by God and that God designed us to help one another because each of us is gifted, needed, and treasured! The Pistol Shrimp and Goby Fish make a great team! Instead of looking at each other's weaknesses, they focus on the possibilities! We have a creator God who sees the possibilities in us. Let's ask God to help us do the same with others!

Close with prayer

## NOTES

Learn more Search for Pistol Shrimp and Goby fish pictures at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>

Learn more about the Pistol Shrimp's claw [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pistol\\_shrimp\\_claw\\_mechanism.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pistol_shrimp_claw_mechanism.svg)

# LIFE SAVER

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BY MARILYN CÁEZ-SCOTT

## THE TEXTS

Matthew 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41, and Luke 8:22-25.

## PROP

Life Jacket

Have you ever had to cross a large body of water? Like a river, lake, or ocean? You might've been on a cruise, a boat, a canoe, a kayak, or a paddle board (use examples of watercraft).

Have you ever had to swim from one place to another? How many of you can swim?

Before you could swim, you needed assistance to help you stay afloat. Otherwise, you would sink. A life jacket or PFD (personal flotation device), such as this one [show the life jacket], helps you stay above water until you learn to swim. Life jackets are intended for safety; they provide buoyancy and are designed to keep the head and mouth above water.

We all need a little help. Especially when things get rough. Sometimes, life can seem like an enormous, scary ocean, and we can't see how to get to the shore or safety because of what is happening. And we keep sinking.

It reminds me of a time when Jesus did something unique in a large body of water—it was an incredible miracle! If you want to read it later, the story is found in Matthew 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41, and Luke 8:22-25.

Jesus was teaching a big crowd near a great big lake with his disciples. After working all day, Jesus and the disciples got on a boat to the other side of the lake. Jesus was so, so tired and fell asleep. All of a sudden, the weather changed. It started raining, and a mighty rushing wind hit the water. The wind was whooshing, and the waves were pounding over the boat. So much water was everywhere, and the boat was filling up and bobbing uncontrollably.

Now, let me **PAUSE** here for a moment. Some of the men on the boat were fishermen, right? Didn't they know how to handle a boat and ride out the waves? What do you think? But then again, this was an enormous storm with lots of rain and waves. Maybe they hadn't experienced anything like this storm before. I wonder if any of them got sick? Do any of you get seasick? [Show the life jacket—I don't think they had life jackets like this one!]

**UNPAUSE**—The disciples got terrified and thought they would die. They didn't know what to do, and you won't believe what happened next. They ran to Jesus, woke him up, and shouted, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown? He got up, scolded the wind, and ordered the sea, 'Quiet! Be Still!' The wind died down, and all was calm." **WAIT, PAUSE AGAIN.** Did you hear that? Jesus ordered the storm to stop, and it did!! Wow, can you believe that? Jesus did care, and He kept his friends safe. The disciples did have a lifesaver, after all. This is how mighty God is.

Nothing is too complicated or too big for God to handle. Maybe you've dealt with a situation that feels like you're crossing a rough sea: like losing your best friend forever, and you don't know how to get to calmer water. Or maybe, it's like moving to a new neighborhood; you leave the familiar shores of your previous home and enter unknown territory. A new place with different settings: a new school, bus route, church, or scouting club—can be scary. Or maybe, you have to work through a disagreement with your mom or dad, and reaching a solution seems impossible, right?

You know, without Jesus, we can't see how to get to the shore. We can feel like we're losing control, and our emotions are all stirred up. It is like a storm is brewing. But when we know Jesus and what He can give to us, it's like having someone throw us a life jacket to wear. He is the safety net. We can float, find a path, and swim to shore. Before Jesus, we are lost and drowning, but when we trust that Jesus can save us, we can keep still and calm. This doesn't mean you won't ever be afraid, but we can wait for Him to help us get to the other side.

Jesus offers support in challenging times, and isn't it incredible that He is in the boat with us? We just learned that Jesus can control the weather with a simple command. He can keep you above water—floating. His word, the Bible, is like a flotation device to help you deal with the storms of life. Trust in Him for strength to bounce back from problems and adjust to changing conditions, allowing you to stay afloat and navigate life's challenges.

When we feel like sinking, we can call out to Jesus.... He is more powerful than our fears. He can handle any situation you're dealing with. Isn't it amazing that we can have that security? It's like putting on a life jacket.

Let's thank Jesus for His incredible love for us and ask Him to help us trust Him no matter what. Let's pray.

# SEMINARS

— *Seminars* are designed to be used during Christian Home and Marriage Week. Please read the seminars thoroughly to get familiar with the content and technical terms. To download a PowerPoint® presentation file visit: **[family.adventist.org/2024RB](https://family.adventist.org/2024RB)**

# A CHURCH COMMUNITY'S ROLE IN SUPPORTING FAMILIES OF NEURODIVERGENT CHILDREN

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BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

## THE TEXTS

Jeremiah 1:5

Psalm 139: 13, 14

Matthew 25:34-36

Matthew 25:40

“Then He will also say to those on the left hand, Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’ Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You? Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as

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you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Matthew 25:41-46 NKJV

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE AND DESIRED OUTCOMES

This seminar explores the multifaceted ways in which church communities can provide comprehensive support to parents of neurodivergent children, encompassing ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), and various behavioral disorders. We examine the potential benefits of a nurturing spiritual environment and consider practical strategies for creating inclusive spaces. We hope to encourage the importance of education, awareness, acceptance, and accommodation in fostering a supportive church community. Each participant should walk away committed to being a committee of one in ensuring that families with neurodivergent children feel supported and feel welcome in the church community.

*Note for presenter: To humanize the experience, we recommend that prior to presenting this seminar, the presenter have a conversation with a parent or guardian of a neurodivergent child, preferably from your own congregation. Listen to their story and ask what their experience in church has been. Glean ideas from them on how to make the workshop most relevant for families of neurodivergent children. Use their answers to personalize your seminar and help you create a safe and non-judgmental environment that respects the diversity of your audience.*

## INTRODUCTION

In today's society, neurodivergence is gaining increasing recognition and relevance. The local church can play a pivotal role in supporting parents with a neurodivergent child. Neurodiversity encompasses a range of conditions such as ADHD (Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), Autism, Dyslexia, and more, as outlined by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). There is a spectrum of neurodivergent experiences, and a need exists to address the stigmas and misconceptions surrounding them.

Families of neurodivergent children face unique daily challenges, and every community of faith should be interested in making every family member feel welcome and supported in the church family. The church has the transformative potential to support neurodivergent families. We emphasize the importance of creating a welcoming environment, fostering acceptance, and promoting understanding.

## UNDERSTANDING NEURODIVERGENCE

Neurodivergence is a multifaceted concept encompassing various neurological conditions and differences that deviate from neurotypical or typical neurological functioning. Within this

spectrum, some of the most well-known conditions include Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and Dyslexia. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that neurodivergence extends beyond these examples and includes other conditions like Tourette's Syndrome, Sensory Processing Disorder, and more. This diversity highlights the complexity of neurodivergent experiences and the need for a nuanced understanding. It's important to note that these conditions often coexist and manifest differently in each person, emphasizing the unique nature of neurodivergent experiences.

The spectrum of neurodivergent experiences is broad and heterogeneous. Individuals within this spectrum may have many strengths, challenges, and unique perspectives. Some may excel in specific areas like mathematics, art, or music while facing social interaction or communication difficulties. Others might display heightened sensory sensitivities or exhibit exceptional attention to detail. Understanding neurodivergence necessitates recognizing and celebrating these differences, as they contribute to the rich tapestry of human diversity. By acknowledging the spectrum of neurodivergent experiences, we can foster an inclusive and supportive society and church community that values and accommodates the unique strengths and needs of neurodivergent individuals.

## CHALLENGES FACED BY FAMILIES WITH NEURODIVERGENT CHILDREN

Families raising neurodivergent children encounter many challenges, often beginning with the pervasive stigmas and misconceptions that persist in society. These stigmas can create isolation and shame for parents and children alike. Misconceptions about neurodivergent conditions can lead to unfair judgments and stereotypes, perpetuating the idea that these children are inherently flawed or less capable. Such negative perceptions hinder social acceptance and impede access to vital support and resources.

In addition to the societal stigma, daily life for these families can be filled with unique caregiving challenges. Neurodivergent children may require specialized care, therapies, and educational accommodations. Navigating a complex web of appointments, therapies, and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) can overwhelm parents. The financial burden of these services can be substantial, further compounding the stress on families. Moreover, the unpredictability of neurodivergent conditions, such as meltdowns or sensory sensitivities, can make daily life challenging, impacting family routines and relationships.

*(If relevant, the presenter can insert/share excerpts from conversations held with neurodivergent families before the seminar or ask if any attendees, especially neurodivergent family members, would like to share some challenges.)* Understanding families' challenges with neurodivergent children is the first step in fostering empathy and support within communities, particularly the church, as they play a vital role in mitigating these challenges and offering solace to these families.

## THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN SUPPORTING THESE FAMILIES

Let's look at what the Bible says about our responsibility to one another in society, particularly the church. Matthew 25:40 states, "And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.' Jesus says this will be said to the righteous who will inherit the kingdom because they "gave me food...took Me in...visited Me..." (Matthew 25:35, 36). Jesus is equally concerned about what will happen to those who do not care for those around them. Continue reading Matthew 25:41-46, "And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

The church holds a profound and influential role in supporting families with neurodivergent children, beginning with creating a welcoming environment. Inclusivity should be at the core of a church's mission, extending a warm embrace to all members of the congregation, regardless of their neurodivergent status. This welcoming environment encompasses physical accessibility, sensory considerations, and a culture promoting acceptance and understanding. It is a space where neurodivergent individuals and their families feel valued, respected, and free to participate fully in the church community.

Acceptance and understanding are vital pillars in the church's support for these families. By fostering a culture of acceptance, the church sends a powerful message that every individual, regardless of their neurological differences, is a cherished member of the community. Understanding goes hand in hand with acceptance, as it involves educating congregants about neurodivergence, its various facets, and the unique challenges these families face. Recognizing the diverse spectrum of neurodivergent experiences and the strengths that come with it is essential in promoting a culture of empathy and inclusion.

Understanding the characteristics of neurodivergence is vital for creating a supportive environment within the church. Do you know why the four-year-old boy in your child's Sabbath School class wears headphones or flaps his arms incessantly (autism spectrum)? Do you get irritated when the 14-year-old girl only stares at you when you speak to her (sensory processing or social anxiety)? The church can become a sanctuary where neurodivergent children and their families can find solace, camaraderie, and spiritual nourishment on their unique journeys.

## PRACTICAL STEPS FOR CHURCHES

To effectively support neurodivergent families within congregations, churches can take practical steps that promote awareness, inclusion, and a sense of community. Firstly, educating the congregation is paramount. Hosting awareness events or workshops that shed light on neurodivergence, its various conditions, and the unique challenges these families face can enlighten church members. These events serve to dispel misconceptions and foster empathy.

By drawing from the insights of experts and sharing personal stories, congregants can gain a deeper understanding of neurodivergence. This seminar is the beginning of creating awareness; consistent awareness activities are essential to keeping the church family aware and remaining intentional about creating an inclusive church home for neurodivergent families.



Specialized resources play a crucial role in providing support. Churches can create or highlight existing support groups specifically tailored to the needs of neurodivergent families. These groups offer a safe space for parents to connect, share experiences, and exchange advice. They also serve as platforms for emotional support, resource sharing, and building a strong sense of community within the church.

Adapting Sabbath school, Youth, and other programs is another vital step. Ensuring these programs are inclusive and accessible to neurodivergent children is essential for their spiritual growth. This may involve modifying teaching methods, providing sensory accommodations, and offering one-on-one support. Inclusivity in church programs ensures that all children can actively engage with their faith regardless of their neurological differences.

Fostering connections within the congregation is also essential. Encouraging mentorship and peer-support programs for neurodivergent children and their families, also pairing parents/guardians with other families who can provide companionship and support. These connections promote social integration, boost self-esteem, and help neurodivergent children and their families feel valued members of the church community. Suppose churches earnestly seek to implement these practical steps effectively by following these measures. In that case, they can not only provide crucial support to neurodivergent families but also demonstrate their commitment to creating inclusive and welcoming faith communities.

## **COLLABORATING WITH PROFESSIONALS**

For churches to provide adequate support to neurodivergent individuals and their families, it is imperative that church leaders collaborate with experts in the field of neurodiversity. These professionals bring specialized knowledge, research-backed strategies, and practical insights that can significantly enhance the church's ability to meet the unique needs of neurodivergent congregants. By forging strong partnerships with experts, church leaders can access a wealth of resources and guidance to create more inclusive and accommodating environments.

One critical aspect of this collaboration is incorporating feedback from neurodivergent individuals and their families. Actively seeking input and listening to their experiences can lead to developing evidence-based strategies that genuinely address their needs. The feedback process fosters a sense of agency and belonging within the community, allowing neurodivergent individuals to actively shape the church's support initiatives. This collaborative approach ensures that the church's efforts are well-intentioned, directly relevant, and effective.

Research underscores the profound impact that religious communities can have on the well-being of individuals, including neurodivergent individuals. By leveraging the expertise of professionals and actively involving neurodivergent individuals and their families in the process, churches can play a pivotal role in enhancing the overall well-being and quality of life of this unique and diverse population.

### GROUP EXERCISE

Break up into groups of 5-6 people. Discuss and write down your answers to the following questions:

1. Discuss the various neurodiversity conditions (ADHD, Autism, etc.). Be sure to include conditions that were not covered previously.
  2. What are some of the challenges faced by neurodivergent children/teens/adults and their families?
  3. In what ways has your local church marginalized or included neurodivergent families?
  4. How can our church implement some of the strategies discussed in this seminar immediately? Within the next month, quarter, year?
  5. How does the parable in Matthew 25 compel or encourage us to do more for those who need greater inclusion, compassion, and empathy?
  6. If time permits, the presenter should debrief the exercise. Ask one representative from the group to share a summary of their answers to the questions – only allow answers to one question at a time to allow for as many groups to share as possible.
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### CONCLUSION

Supporting neurodivergent children and their families within the church community is not only a compassionate endeavor with far-reaching societal implications but also has eternal significance. When churches commit to creating inclusive environments, fostering acceptance, and providing tailored support, they contribute to a more equitable, empathetic society and represent Jesus to these families and the community. By valuing and accommodating neurodivergent individuals, churches enrich their communities and set an example for others to follow.

Neurodivergent children and their families often face isolation and discrimination in a world that does not always comprehend their unique needs. The church, as a source of spiritual guidance and community, has the potential to offer solace, belonging, and a sense of purpose to these individuals and their families. As we collectively strive for a more inclusive and compassionate society, local churches must rise to the occasion, championing the cause of neurodiversity and affirming the inherent worth of every congregation member. In doing so, they not only fulfill their spiritual mission but also make a profound and lasting impact on the lives they touch.

“By this, all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:35. In a world where there is so much chaos and darkness, may we, Christ’s disciples, shed the light of Jesus to those around us.

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## HELPFUL WEBSITES:

- National Collaborative on Faith and Disability - They offer resources, webinars, and information on supporting people with disabilities in faith communities.
- Autism Faith Network - Provides resources and stories related to autism and faith communities.

# HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN (OR ANYONE) ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY (LGBTQ+): A SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

## THE TEXTS

Isaiah 43:1

Jeremiah 1:5

Psalm 139:14

## NOTE TO PRESENTERS:

Please present this seminar precisely as it is written. Before making this presentation, please read the Seventh-day Adventist statements and guidelines on alternative sexuality, which are

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at the back of this resource book. Pay close attention to the tone of the statements and guidelines and the language used. Understand the difference between homosexual practice and homosexual orientation, compassion, empathy, and affirmation. Be sure to allow the fruit of the Spirit to shine through you in your presentation so that it is evident that God is love and that the Seventh-day Adventist Church worships a God of love. We are not against anyone; we are simply for what is in God's Word, the Bible.

We recognize the ever changing and expansion of inclusivity defined in the acronym LGBTQ+, which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual identities which exist and want to be as inclusive and sensitive as possible. However, for purposes of this seminar we will use only LGBTQ to incorporate all peoples covered under this umbrella.

Lastly, please do not add personal stories or testimonies while presenting, which we typically encourage with other seminars in this resource book, however, not this time. The editors realize that given this sensitive topic, participants may want to share their stories and experiences; so to allow for some flexibility, be prepared to manage the audience and keep all participants from monopolizing or changing the direction of the intended purpose and framework of this seminar. Aim to provide a safe, loving, and non-judgmental space for parents/people to learn, ask questions, and grow in their understanding of their LGBTQ child or friend.

To best facilitate this, we recommend that you ask participants to hold their questions and comments until the end of the seminar unless it is a point that was just presented and needs clarification. When answering questions, please do not rely on your own opinions, and do not argue or become defensive. Always show empathy to the participants and use only the information provided here. Lastly, if you are a local church leader presenting this seminar, please get authorization from your pastoral team before scheduling and presenting this seminar.

## **BEHIND THE ACRONYM ARE PEOPLE THAT WE KNOW AND LOVE**

According to a recent Gallup poll, the percentage of U.S. adults who identify as something other than heterosexual has doubled from 3.5 percent in 2012 to 7.1 percent in 2022.<sup>1</sup> This increase is primarily due mostly to the high LGBTQ self-identification, particularly as bisexual, among the Generation Z adults who are ages 18-25. For GenZ, more than 1 in 5, or 21 percent identify as LGBTQ. Globally, on average, 80 percent identify as heterosexual and 20 percent identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, asexual, or other.<sup>2</sup>

Undeniably, we are living in a time of what is known as sexual fluidity or non-binary expression of gender. Fluidity means that gender can or does change over time, and non-binary means that some people believe they may not fit neatly into the category of being either male or female. As these sexual trends shift globally, so too will trends shift in the church. Thus, we are likely to see more young people—in our families, schools, and churches questioning their sexuality, their identity, and the biblical sexual ethic they've been taught or sadly never taught. While it is said that

values are caught not taught, sexuality is a topic that requires intentional conversations, and these should begin from birth.

With these veritable truisms, what remains at the heart of these trends and the LGBTQ conversation are people—real people with real feelings, attractions, and a yearning to love and be loved. Most people reading or listening to this seminar know someone who identifies as LGBTQ, a friend, neighbor, co-worker, distant relative, parent or child. So, to begin to understand LGBTQ, we must first stop saying “those people” and making a distinction between “them” and “us.” We ALL long for belonging, a yearning to be loved, and a deep desire for intimacy. ALL humankind wants to be treated with respect and dignity. If we keep this in mind, the rest of this seminar will be easier to comprehend.

As a community of faith and disciples of Jesus Christ, we have no choice but to love like Jesus. We are compelled to spread the good news of the gospel to everyone and to lead people by our words and actions into a saving knowledge of the One who died so that we all have abundant life. The same God who promised Israel freedom from bondage, despite their rebellious nature and infidelity, still intends to keep His promises of a hopeful future and restored identity to us today.<sup>3</sup> “But now, thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine.” Isaiah 43:1. We are the conduits through which all people may find freedom and a new identity in Christ, including those who identify as LGBTQ. All have sinned and are inadequate to receive God’s grace, but His love is steadfast, and He provides new mercies every morning. (*Romans 3:23, Lamentations 3:22*)

## **DIGNITY AND COMPASSION FOR ALL: UNDERSTANDING THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST POSITION ON HOMOSEXUALITY**

So, what is the position of the Seventh-day Adventist Church on the topic of Homosexuality? It is essential to know what the church’s statements say and how we can share our position in a positive and winsome manner. Equally as important is knowing that it is from the word of God, and the heart of it is love for God’s people. SDA Statements and guidelines are developed with much prayer, thought, study of God’s word, and study of various disciplines on the intended topic by the theologians from the SDA Biblical Research Institute and, depending on the topic, may include SDA physicians, sociologists, psychologists, ethicists, and other relevant professionals. These statements and guidelines are not based solely on one person’s opinions with a group of supporters who endorse that person’s opinion or scholars from other denominations or the latest evidence-based findings. Personal biases are put to the side as much as is humanly possible, and there is a deep search for divine guidance from the Bible. These statements and guidelines reflect a biblical worldview and not a contemporary popular secular worldview. As people of faith, we should always seek to, first and foremost, use a biblical worldview as our framework for understanding even contemporary issues. The Bible is relevant for all ages.

### GROUP EXERCISE:

Presenter: Display the *Seventh-day Adventist Position Statement on Homosexuality* on the screen (you will need to put it on a slide in the presentation). Read aloud the statement and ask participants to follow along with you. After reading, spend 5 minutes debriefing with the audience, pointing out the emphasis on the dignity of all human beings. Also reiterate that the SDA church does not in any way support or endorse mistreatment, bullying, or condemnation of LGBTQ people. The statement specifically speaks to homosexual practice and recognizes that there are many homosexual and heterosexual people who abstain from sexual practices that do not align with God's plan for humankind. While this seminar does not permit a review of all the statements, please encourage participants to read the other statements pertaining to marriage and sexuality:

- <https://family.adventist.org/resources/real-answers/statement-of-concern-on-sexual-behavior/>
  - <https://family.adventist.org/people/couples/an-affirmation-of-gods-gift-of-sexuality/>
  - <https://family.adventist.org/resources/real-answers/seventh-day-adventist-response-to-same-sex-unions-a-reaffirmation-of-christian-marriage/>
  - <https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/statement-on-transgenderism/>
- 

## UNDERSTANDING LGBTQ

Throughout the years, various words have taken on a different meanings and new terminology has emerged especially regarding LGBTQ people. Here we will share a list of key terms<sup>4</sup> that are essential to understanding the current dialogue. It is by no means an exhaustive list, but it will help you begin to understand and engage in the conversation. Some of the language may make you uncomfortable or you may have some concerns about using such language, just know it is okay for you to sit with this discomfort. Using the language or understanding it doesn't mean that you condone behavior, it just gives us a better grasp of how we can engage with the LGBTQ community in a more Christ-centered way. Please keep in mind that we are not endorsing any activity that does not align with God's word, however, we are simply hoping to increase an understanding of language and encourage sensitivity as we listen and speak. Most of you will most likely never have use all these words, however, it is beneficial to know and understand the terminology.

- **Sexual Identity:** Term a person uses to describe their sexuality or sexual orientation.
- **Homosexual:** A person who is attracted to the same sex/gender. In society at large, this word is now considered derogatory and offensive, the word **queer** is the preferred term. While the word homosexuality is used in the Scripture, when referencing LGBTQ

people, it is best to use language that people use to define themselves. If it does not compromise your core beliefs and values, even if you are uncomfortable with it, you can honor the request. To be sure, it is always safe to say LGBTQ, if you prefer not to use queer.

- **Straight/Heterosexual:** A person who is attracted exclusively to the opposite sex/gender.
- **Queer:** An umbrella term referring to LGBTQ people. In the past it was considered a derogatory term but has recently been reclaimed as an empowering identifier. It is used interchangeably with LGBTQ.
- **LGBTQ+:** Acronym that means Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning (+Intersex, Asexual, etc.)
- **Homosexual orientation:** an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to members of one's own sex (same-sex attraction). To be differentiated from homosexual practice. A person may have a same-sex attraction but not engage in homosexual practice.
- **Homosexual practice:** sexual practices between people of the same sex.
- **Cisgender:** Term that is used to describe people whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth as opposed to transgender, one who changes their biological sex.
- **Coming out:** A lifelong process of self-acceptance which may include public sharing, to parents, friends, coworkers, etc. but doesn't have to.
- **Bicurious:** A person is exploring whether or not they are attracted to people of the same gender as well as people of different genders.
- **Gender dysphoria:** psychological distress that can result from an incongruence between one's assigned sex at birth or biological sex and one's gender identity. Gender dysphoria is no longer treated as a mental illness.
- **Gender identity:** A person's internal, deeply held sense of their gender. For trans(gender) people, their sense of sexual identity does not match the sex they were born with.
- **Nonbinary:** People who experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as falling outside the categories of man and woman; could be somewhere in-between man or woman or totally different than these terms.
- **Asexual:** Experiencing minimal to no sexual attraction to other individuals.
- **Intersex:** A person born with male and female genitalia. Commonly and derogatorily referred to as hermaphrodite.
- **They/their/them:** Pronouns used for someone who identifies as neither male nor female (for example: nonbinary).
- **Same-sex Attraction:** Used primarily by those who want to share about their attraction toward the same sex/gender without labeling themselves as LGBTQ. This is considered offensive to many LGBTQ people because it is usually connected to ex-gay people, and they believe it diminishes their sexual identity. (Note: As we've discussed, everyone wants to be respected and addressed by terminology that honors them, as such, those who choose



not to call themselves LGBTQ should have their definition of identity respected. There is no hierarchy of respect; we all need to respect one another.)

- **Ally:** A straight/heterosexual/cisgender person who supports and advocates for LGBTQ people.

The terms and definitions listed above are defined by the APA or LGBTQ advocates. In many organizations, employees are required to use these terms appropriately or there are negative repercussions. Again, while we may not believe or endorse LGBTQ practices, we believe that where possible, we should allow space for where we can honor these terms as a form of respect to how LGBTQ persons choose to be addressed. It is also critical to understand these terms so that as a community of faith we fully understand how to convey our own beliefs.

Here are a few definitions of terms<sup>5</sup> that Seventh-day Adventist believers should incorporate into our understanding and conversation of LGBTQ people.

- **Compassion:** A feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering.
- **Grace:** favor or goodwill. Theology—the freely given, unmerited favor and love of God.
- **Empathy:** The psychological identification with or vicarious experiencing of the emotions, thoughts, or attitudes of another.
- **Acceptance:** An honest acknowledgement of the reality of a situation. Acceptance does not inherently mean agreement or feeling comfortable with a situation. It is the ability to practice unconditional love.

These words, however, should not be used or understood to mean *affirmation* of LGBTQ practices

- **Affirmation:** The assertion that something exists or is true; confirmation or ratification of the truth.
- **Law definition:** A solemn declaration accepted instead of a statement under oath. (Dictionary.com)

Despite many plausible assertions from scientific inquiry about identity formation and psychological development, our identity comes from being created in the image of God. Sexual identity is only part of our identity. Yes, it is a large part of our identity since our gender is a significant part of who we are. However, regardless of one's sexual orientation, all human beings have a sinful orientation, which means the goal is not so much about heterosexuality as it is about holiness. Whether one has an LGBTQ orientation or a heterosexual orientation unless one's sexuality is under the Lordship of Jesus Christ—which means a determination to honor God in all one does—one is in a dangerous place. The good news is, as Jesus said: “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” John 10:10 ESV. This is God's promise to everyone who determines to do His will.

## HOW DO WE HELP OUR CHILDREN UNDERSTAND LGBTQ

At the beginning of this seminar, we discussed the reality that most of today's children/youth, and we would dare to say, a large percentage of older adults, believe that LGBTQ is a non-issue. Our youth see themselves as allies or advocates (refer to definitions above) of LGBTQ people. They believe that God is love and that God would not hate anyone. This is true! God is love! God does not hate anyone! And yes, God desires that we would obey Him in the way that He has commanded (Deuteronomy 12:31). All truth, but the topic must be approached with much sensitivity, empathy, compassion and grace and genuine unconditional love for our children and those they seek to protect and defend.

LGBTQ youth are facing many challenges, and our children see them as the “least of these” that Jesus speaks about. As parents, we regularly encourage our children to show kindness and look out for those who need help, so youth today see this as their issue. Some of these issues include mental health issues, bullying and discrimination, and identity development issues. LGBTQ youth are at a higher risk of experiencing depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. The root of these issues often lies in external societal pressures, family rejection, or bullying. This can have long-lasting psychological effects on them and lead to physical harm. LGBTQ youth also struggle with their identity because sexual identity is so closely tied into our overall identity, it may lead to feelings of isolation and confusion.

Parents and families can play a pivotal role in helping children understand their own sexual identity and what the Bible has to say about who we are as God's creatures. Ideally, parents should begin a dialogue of sexuality from birth, verbalizing that God, the Creator made us male and female, in His image. Genesis 1:26: Then God said, “Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...” Parents can use many teachable moments, while changing a diaper, describing body parts, discussing friend relationships, to talk about God's plan for our sexual identity. This conversation does not make us heterosexually biased or discriminatory; it is our biblical worldview and deserves to be respected as any other worldview. However, as we have consistently said, this does not mean we should speak disparagingly about any group of people, specifically LGBTQ as we are discussing here. “Christ Himself did not suppress one word of truth, but He spoke it always in love. He exercised the greatest tact, and thoughtful, kind attention in His intercourse with the people. He was never rude, never needlessly spoke a severe word, never gave needless pain to a sensitive soul.” (White, 1940, p. 353)

Here are some guidelines to use when discussing LGBTQ with your children (teens, adults, anyone):

**Listen, Listen, Listen.** Practice active listening. This means listening first for understanding before speaking. Put yourselves in their shoes, try to empathize with their feelings and concerns. Don't feel that you must have all the right responses right away. Sometimes, you may just say, “I hear you and understand, can I take some time to respond, and can I give you a warm hug while we both take time to process this.”

**Educate Yourself.** Become familiar with the terms shared, especially those you haven't heard before or fully understood. Having this knowledge helps to dispel previously held myths and prejudices.

**Know What You Believe.** Are you convicted about a biblical worldview? Do you believe what the bible says and what the SDA church espouses? For instance, did you know that The Seventh-day Adventist Church does not believe in conversion therapy. However, we do believe in spiritual conversion and transformation through the power of God, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror, the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord." 2 Corinthians 3:18. This is not against the law. Rather, this means believing God can do anything. Again, we don't know what that conversion and transformation will look like, but we leave that up to God. But it will be difficult for you to explain this your child if you are not convicted in your belief of a mighty omnipotent all loving God.

**Stay away from pithy cliches.** Conversations about sexuality have long been a topic of discomfort which often pushes people to make trivial comments or awkward jokes such as "God didn't make Adam and Steve." Although, we know subconsciously know these jokes might be hurtful, we laugh, mostly out of our nervousness and discomfort. Even the saying "love the sinner, hate the sin" although true is very offensive to our youth and LGBTQ people. It is best to engage in a genuine and sincere dialogue with your youth and ask God for wisdom to give you words that will encourage openness and trust. Remember that "Pleasant words are like a honeycomb sweetness to the soul and health to the bones." Proverbs 16:24.

**Don't lecture or be argumentative.** Take a position of learner rather than lecturer. Be humble and pure in heart. "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger." James 1:19, ESV. Take advantage of the opportunity to build trust with your child and listen to their heart. Be proactive and don't react to statements that are theologically false; truth is important, but your child won't be able to hear truth if they don't feel they have been heard.

## GOD'S APPROACH TO DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Much of the information shared in this seminar about the biblical position on LGBTQ is for clarity and understanding of what the Bible has to say and to become more educated about terminology most of your youth already know. We then shared some tips on how to have an open dialogue with your child or anyone else on LGBTQ. While this seminar may provide some counsel on how to talk to your child if they "come out" to you, that conversation falls outside of the scope of this seminar. However, every interaction we have with our children on any topic should always reveal the unfailing, immeasurable love of God. As such, the essence of every conversation about LGBTQ is to keep God at the center.

The apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 5:8 that, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Pray deeply and earnestly for God's power and guidance as you dialogue with others especially regarding LGBTQ. Every conversation with your youth will either push them closer to you and to God or push them away. God is always trying to draw

us closer to Him, “The Lord has appeared of old to me, saying, “Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you.” (Jeremiah 31:3). Let’s be sure to be conduits of God’s love and light to one another.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/329708/lgbt-identification-rises-latest-estimate.aspx>
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.ipsos.com/en/ipsos-lgbt-pride-2021-global-survey>
- <sup>3</sup> Andrews Study Bible Notes. Isaiah 43:1–28 God’s love for Israel and His faithfulness to the covenant are central elements to understanding the paradoxes of the book of Isaiah: oracles of judgment and salvation, threats of destruction, and promises of preservation of a remnant that will carry on the identity and mission of God’s people.
- <sup>4</sup> American Psychological Association (APA). Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion: Inclusive language guide, 2nd ed., [apa.org](http://apa.org)
- <sup>5</sup> [Dictionary.com](http://Dictionary.com)

# BECOMING POWERFUL BY EMPOWERING

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BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

## TEXT

Jeremiah 31:3

## THEME

In the Old and New Testaments there are four elements that characterize healthy, Godlike relationships: Covenant, Grace, Empowerment, and Intimacy. All of these traits come together to form a true covenant relationship that represents the kind of relationship God intends for His people.

## OBJECTIVE

In this seminar we will focus primarily on empowerment. The primary objective is to identify a model of power that comes through empowerment for healthier relationships.

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## FORMAT

This workshop can be presented as one workshop with two parts or two separate workshops.

Part One: Power and Control in Relationships

Part Two: Empowering One Another

## PART ONE: POWER AND CONTROL

The will to dominate is one of the strongest human tendencies—to not only be in control of ourselves but also to control others. Power is a dimension found in all human relationships. (Balswick & Balswick, 2007)

In domestic violence there is always a power imbalance or misuse of power. Domestic violence is characterized by fear, control, and harm. One person in the relationship uses coercion or force to control the other person or other family members. The abuse can be physical, sexual, or emotional. (Fortune, 2002)

There are several reasons why abusers or batterers may choose to abuse their power:

1. He thinks it is his right, that is, part of his role.
2. He feels entitled to use force.
3. He has learned this behavior in his past.
4. This behavior works.

In most reported cases of abuse the abuser is male; hence, throughout this workshop the abuser will be referred to primarily as male. However, keep in mind that abusers can also be female. It doesn't matter who is doing the abusing, there is no acceptance of abuse in healthy, Godly relationships.

Abusers assume they have the right to control all members of their family. This willingness to use violence to accomplish this control is from things that he has learned. From various sources, the abuser has learned that is appropriate for the person who is bigger and stronger (usually a male) to hit others "for their own good" or because he "loves them."

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## AGREE-DISAGREE EXERCISE

To start the group thinking about power and control in relationships, invite them to respond to the following agree/disagree statements. Do not discuss the statements now or offer your opinion. (They are designed to be somewhat ambiguous and controversial, and to get people to start thinking about their own behaviors and where they learned them. Tell the participants to put their thumbs up if they agree, and down if they disagree.

Agree/Disagree	Spare the rod and spoil the child.
Agree/Disagree	Power in the family must reside with the father.
Agree/Disagree	Parents must show their teenagers who is boss.
Agree/Disagree	Husbands must give their wives a little push sometimes to maintain authority.
Agree/Disagree	The Bible teaches that wives must submit to their husbands no matter what he does.

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### WHAT ARE POSSIBLE SOURCES OF LEARNED BEHAVIOR OF ABUSERS?

- Observing parents
  - Peers
  - Misinterpretation of biblical teachings
  - Media – jokes, cartoons, soap operas, movies that portray control and abuse in an intimate relationship as normative.
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### PARTICIPANT EXERCISE

- All abusers have learned to use force through experience. When abusers first used force to control a family member, there were no negative consequences—no one objected, no one stopped them; no one questioned their behavior.
  - Can you think of any situation where this could happen either unconsciously or on purpose? (Give participants a few seconds to respond. Discourage participants from sharing personal experiences.)
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Since there were no negative consequences, the abuser learned that violence worked; it got him what he wanted—either the submission or compliance of their spouse or other family member. Paradoxically, they learned that home and family was a safe place in which to exercise violent behavior. On a very cognitive level, they know that this behavior would have very negative and serious consequences if used in the workplace. If they hit their boss when they were angry, they would most likely be fired or arrested. Hence, abusers are rarely violent at work.

### FACTS ABOUT ABUSER'S NEED FOR POWER

1. Battering is not the result of an abuser (or batterer) being out of control; it is the attempt of the batterer to stay in control. He gets to choose his behavior.
2. The abuser's need to control family members appears to increase with stress in his life.

- Stress may be internal (inability to communicate with spouse, child is not doing well in school, parent died, dinner is late). He may feel disappointment with his family but mostly with himself.
- Stress may be external (gets laid off from work or doesn't get a promotion, community football team lost season championship).
- All these events may lead to emotions that may not be considered "masculine" (disappointment, anxiety, grief, etc.).
- He uses anger to express or cover real emotions, seeking to regain control of his life.

Note: This cycle of anger could be experienced by anyone, not just males. Often individuals use anger to express their true feelings and emotions. It is important that one learn to identify true feelings such as hurt, disappointment, discouragement, insecurity, grief, etc.

### MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ABUSE:

1. ***Abuse is not caused by alcohol or drugs.*** While there might be some correlation, abuse is not *caused* by the use of drugs or alcohol. It is important to remember that alcohol or drug treatment will not (in most cases) stop violence. This treatment may be a first step, but the abuser still needs to treat the specific problem of using violence as a form of power and control.
2. ***Abuse is not caused by the relationship.*** While there may be some aspects of the marriage or other familial relationship that may be stressful to the abuser, (i.e. lack of communication, financial problems, sexual dysfunction, parenting problems), this does not cause violence in the relationship. There are other relationships that have the same problems, yet violence is not a part of their solution. Abusers must learn that violence is not the way to solve problems. Abusers must treat their violence issues, and then, if it is safe, work on the marriage and family relationship.
3. ***The victim does not cause abuse.*** The behavior of the victim does not cause the abuser's violence. Helping a victim to change their behavior such as wearing prettier clothes, cooking nicer meals, losing weight, will not stop the violence. It is the abuser, not the victim, who is in control of the violence.
4. ***The Abuser is not an ogre.*** He may be a good provider, a good father, an upstanding member of the church and community. He may be very charming and outgoing. His wife may love him and be emotionally dependent on him. Sadly, this does not mean that he is not abusing members of his family. It is sometimes difficult to believe a woman who tells how violent and abusive her husband is at home when at church he behaves like the nicest, kindest, and most reliable member. Her story contradicts what everyone in the public arena has witnessed; hence the tendency is to trust one's own experience and to disbelieve the horrible story. However, it is important to understand that in most cases, women and children do not lie about their abuse. Remember, most cases of abuse go unreported.



## WHY DOES A VICTIM STAY IN AN UNBEARABLE SITUATION?

- Emotional dependency
- Economic dependency
- Need for a father (or other parent) for the children
- Urging by other family members to stay
- Religious values
- Having no place to go
- FEAR—the primary reason why most women stay or go back

*The real question is how does a victim of abuse get her life together and leave. The most important resource needed by victims and survivors is a means to break the silence and isolation and to find support.*

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### GROUP EXERCISE

If the group is large, divide participants into groups of 4-5 and have participants discuss in small groups. Give groups 10-15 minutes to discuss the following questions, then share ideas as an entire group.

1. One of the possible traits of a victim of domestic violence is their distorted view of God and spiritual issues. What might some of these inaccurate ways of thinking be, and where might they have begun in their story of domestic violence. What or who might have influenced them to think in these inappropriate ways, and how might they affect the life of the victim?

**Note to Presenter:** Skip part 2 of this group exercise if you are continuing on to the second part of the workshop. If you are only doing the “Power and Control” segment, then continue to part 2 of this group exercise.

2. Consider the following passages: Psalm 27:14; Psalm 29:10, 11; Exodus 3:11; Exodus 4:1-4; 2 Chronicles 14:11; John 1:12; 2 Corinthians 12:9; Nehemiah 8:10; Philippians 4:13; Ephesians 1:17-19. What conclusions can you draw about empowerment from a biblical perspective?
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## PART TWO: EMPOWERING ONE ANOTHER

Since the beginning of history there have been power struggles between family members. There was Adam and Eve against God. The first act of aggression in the Bible was Cain killing his

brother Abel out of jealousy. These power struggles remind us of the distortion that has occurred in human relationships since the fall. Everything that God created perfect has been corrupted and distorted by the evil one. (Balswick & Balswick, 2007)

However, the message of restoration and renewal is seen throughout the Old and New Testaments. God has provided a way for us to lead lives of empowerment and service through His resurrection and the empowering of the Holy Spirit. We are called to build each other up; this is the privilege and opportunity of the empowering process.

### **TYPES OF POWER**

Authority vs. Dominance

Legitimate power is authority

Illegitimate power is dominance

Legitimate power is usually sanctioned by society and thus possesses authority. For example, parental power is considered legitimate power. Most societies grant parents authority over their children until the children reach a legal age of maturity. This age differs from culture to culture.

Dominance is power that is taken without being sanctioned by society; therefore, it is considered illegitimate. For instance, some parents may go beyond their boundaries of legitimate power or may neglect their responsibilities and will have their legitimate power taken away from them by society, e.g., child abuse or child neglect.

Power that is gained through dominance or intimidation is the opposite of the empowering model that is represented in the scriptures.

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### **ASK GROUP**

What is Empowerment?

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Webster's Dictionary defines "empower" as "to give power to; authorize; to enable."

Balswick and Balswick say this about empowerment:

Empowerment is born out of God's covenant love and the incredible grace we find in Christ Jesus. The Spirit of God empowers us to empower others. And when mutual empowerment occurs among family members, each will be stretched in the extraordinary ways of servant love and humility. Family members will grow in the stature of Christ as they mature into the character of Christ in their

daily interactions...It has nothing to do with having power over others but rather involves taking great delight in building up one another to become all God wants us to be. (Balswick and Balswick, 2014, p. 29)

1 Corinthians 8:1b (ESV) expresses it thus: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

**GROUP EXERCISE**

Consider the following passages: Psalm 27:14; Psalm 29:10, 11; Exodus 3:11; Exodus 4:1-4; 2 Chronicles 14:11; John 1:12; 2 Corinthians 12:9; Nehemiah 8:10; Philippians 4:13; Ephesians 1:17-19. What conclusions can you draw about empowerment from a biblical perspective?

**MODELS OF FAMILY POWER**

	Basic Assumption
Traditional Patriarchal	God has determined that ultimate power resides in the role of the husband
Democratic Exchange	Power does not reside in any one individual, but rather in the family as a whole operating as a democracy.
Hedonistic Self-Interest	Each family member watches out for self.
Empowerment	Family members use their gifts and resources for one another.

\*Balswick and Balswick (2014)

**BASIC MODELS OF FAMILY POWER**

**PATRIARCHAL MODEL**

The patriarchal model still exists in most societies today. In many Christian homes, the belief is that where the Bible speaks of the man as head of the home, it means the man should be the “boss” and that submission means the wife has no authority in the home. However, it’s important to note that that scripture also speaks about mutual submission and the suffering servant role modeled by Christ (Ephesians 5: 21; Philippians 2:5-8).

Note: Please do not allow participants to begin a discussion on headship and submission. Keep them focused on the theme of empowerment.

### Ellen White Speaks of Individuality in Marriage

God requires that the wife shall keep the fear and glory of God ever before her. Entire submission is to be made only to the Lord Jesus Christ, who has purchased her as His own child by the infinite price of His life. God has given her a conscience, which she cannot violate with impunity. Her individuality cannot be merged into that of her husband, for she is the purchase of Christ. It is a mistake to imagine that with blind devotion she is to do exactly as her husband says in all things, when she knows that in so doing, injury would be worked for her body and her spirit, which have been ransomed from the slavery of Satan. There is One who stands higher than the husband to the wife; it is her Redeemer, and her submission to her husband is to be rendered as God has directed--"as it is fit in the Lord."

Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 116

### DEMOCRATIC EXCHANGE MODEL

The democratic exchange model is based on the assumption that power resides in the family unit as a whole. Family policy is determined by negotiation and bargaining. The exercise of power allows a voice to all family members, but since parents have more resources, they have more bargaining and negotiating power. Hence, parents have the final say in the decision making process. (Balswick & Balswick, 2007)

### THE SELF-INTEREST MODEL

Society today is filled individualistic materialism and self-interested hedonism. "What's in it for me?" is the major concern of many. In this model "I" is number one, and personal interests and needs come before the interests of the larger system. In this model, everyone vies for a place of authority. This leads to a very chaotic system. Family members are disengaged and find very little support.

### EMPOWERMENT

The empowerment model assumes that the task of the more powerful family members is to build up or lift up the less powerful family members. The concept of empowerment as a family model may not be found in the scholarly literature; however, it is exemplified in the best of Christian family life.

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### GROUP EXERCISE

*How can we empower one another?*

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Divide participants into groups of 3-4 people. Have them list ways in which Paul wants us to empower one another in our relationships.

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*“Thee lift me and I’ll lift thee and we’ll ascend together.”—Quaker Proverb*

In empowered families, family members are living out the principle of love as expressed in 1 Corinthians 13. It is love in action. It is about paying attention to the little things because the little things really are the big things. We empower one another and lift each other up when we show kindness to one another, rather than dominance and control. Empowered families look for opportunities to lift one another up.

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## GROUP EXERCISE

### **Empowering Words**

Ask participants to close their eyes and think of a time when someone said something kind or nice to them. How did that make you feel? (*Give participants time to reflect*). Ask a few participants to share their memories.

Then have participants think of a time when they said something kind or nice to their husband, child, or other family member. Push them to remember how that family member responded. (*Give participants time to reflect*). Ask a few participants to share their memories.

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When we empower one another in the family, we build high trust in the relationship. When we misuse power by dominance and coercion, we tear down trust. Trust is the key in the empowering process. (Covey, 1997)

Parents who empower their children and prepare them for responsible interdependence will provide their children with the skills necessary to live as healthy adults and build and maintain healthy relationships. When parents use unhealthy forms of power and control with children, the children will grow up detached from their family and learn negative ways of using power and relating to others.

God’s covenant love and the incredible grace we find in Jesus Christ empower us to empower others. When mutual empowerment occurs among family members, each will grow exponentially in humility and servant love. Indeed, family members will begin to grow more into the likeness of Christ. His power is promised to us as we seek to become Christlike in all our relationships.

“I can do all things through Him who gives me strength.” Philippians 4:13 NIV

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Please note that the Leadership Resource: *No Excuse for Abuse in the Family*, is related to this seminar.

# BALANCING THE PRACTICE OF TIME-OUT AND TIME-IN: TWO EFFECTIVE DISCIPLINE STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS

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BY BRYAN CAFFERKY

## WORKSHOP STATEMENT OF PURPOSE AND DESIRED OUTCOMES

This parenting workshop aims to explore and equip parents with two effective discipline strategies: Time-Out and Time-In. By understanding the underlying principles, relational benefits, and emotional considerations of each method, parents can develop a balanced approach to discipline that prioritizes self-regulation and then co-regulation, which promotes positive behavioral responses to distress and strengthens the parent-child relationship. Through interactive presentations, discussions, and roleplaying, participants will gain valuable insights and tools to implement Time-Out and Time-In strategies in their parenting journey.

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### UPON SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF THIS WORKSHOP, PARTICIPANTS WILL:

- Understand the similarities/differences, outcomes, and benefits of Time-Out and Time-In responses to a distressed child.
- Evaluate which response (Time-Out or Time-In) would be most suited to their child(ren) and their parenting style.
- Apply the Time-Out or Time-In Decision Tree to prepare for predictable child dysregulation scenarios.
- Internalize the importance of practicing self-regulation techniques and co-regulating with their child.

*Note:* It is recommended you have a lead facilitator with expertise in child development and/or parenting to conduct the workshop effectively, accompanied by facilitators for each of the breakout groups (if possible, ~12 per group). The workshop duration and specific activities can be tailored to suit the available time and the needs of the participants. It is essential to create a safe and non-judgmental environment for open discussions, respecting the diverse perspectives and parenting styles of the attendees.

### RESOURCES NEEDED:

- One facilitator per group (~12 parents for each breakout group)
- Printouts (or drawn on a chalkboard) of “Dr. Cafferky’s Time-Out or Time-In Decision Tree” for parents responding to dysregulated children.

### WORKSHOP OUTLINE (~3 HOURS)

#### 1. Introduction (10 minutes)

- Welcome, prayer, and introduction to the “Balancing the Practice of Time-Out and Time-In: Two Effective Discipline Strategies for Parents workshop
- Brief Icebreaker activity to create an inclusive atmosphere
- Setting expectations and objectives
- Random group assignment (~12 per group) in preparation for eventual Breakout Groups

#### 2. Understanding Time-Out (45 minutes)

- Definition and principles of a Time-Out response to a distressed child
  - Ask participants to share what they know about Time-Out.
  - Time-Out is actually best used for parents because we have difficulty handling our own big emotions that are triggered by the child’s big emotions.
- The Opportunity: Creating space, boundaries, and clear expectations with the child
  - “When you choose to do ‘this,’ you are also choosing ‘this’ consequence.”
  - “My first job is to keep you and others safe, so we need to...”



- Strategies for effectively communicating and implementing Time-Out while maintaining a positive relationship (including parents who are willing to apologize when upset)
- Breakout Groups: Role-playing and practical application of Time-Out
  - *Leader: notice typical flat-affect or upset face and tone during their role-playing, which the child would perceive as a threat*
- Reflections and Observations: What did you notice? What if it were you?
- Addressing concerns and misconceptions about Time-Out
- Benefits and advantages of Time-Out in response to a distressed child
  - Take the child to a safe place so they can experience a different “sensory palate.”
  - The child has a chance to briefly “pause” before they reflect (but are not abandoned by their caregiver(s)/community!)
  - Time-Out is not about changing behavior. Instead, it is an opportunity for the parent to calm down before re-engaging the child in order to help the child calm down—then the parent and child can discuss what transpired.

[10 MIN BREAK RECOMMENDED]

### 3. Understanding Time-In (45 minutes)

- Definition and principles of a Time-In response to a distressed child
  - Ask participants to share what they know about Time-In.
  - Time-In is an opportunity for the child to co-regulate with a calm parent so that the parent shares their calmness with the child (anxiety can be shared, just like calmness can be shared) in order to teach the child their big emotions are not too big for the parent.
  - Frustration/Anger is a shield, a secondary emotion -> Usually some combination of sadness, loneliness, or fear is usually behind that frustration/anger outburst.
  - “Do you want comfort, or do you want space?” Offer children a chance to decide what they think they need.
- The Opportunity: Building empathy, co-regulation, validation, and emotional connection
- Effective communication techniques during Time-In
  - Calm demeanor, soft voice, non-anxious presence, empathetic facial expression, get down on their level, sit in your lap, phrases like: “Yeah, that makes sense why you were feeling ‘X’ that was disappointing/frustrating/unfair/hurt/etc...” and “I believe you, I’m so sorry that happened to you.”
- Breakout Groups: Role-playing and practical application of Time-In
  - *Leader: notice their attempts at empathy, connection, and validation compared to their posture during the Time-Out role play.*
- Reflections and Observations: What did you notice? What if it were you?
- Addressing concerns and misconceptions about Time-In

- Benefits and advantages of Time-In in response to a distressed child
  - Teaching emotional regulation (instead of suppression)
  - Sense their feelings are validated and that they are valuable.
  - Time-In is not about changing behavior. Instead, it is an opportunity for the parent to provide calm so that the child can learn to regulate (through co-regulation) their emotional experience. Then, the parent and child can discuss what happened.

[10 MIN BREAK RECOMMENDED]

#### 4. Preparing Yourself for Time-Out and Time-In (45 minutes)

- Recognizing the strengths and limitations of each approach in different scenarios
- Navigate and apply the “Time-Out or Time-In Decision Tree” to common situations (see Figure 1)
- Awareness of the child’s temperament, neurodivergence, and developmental considerations
- Adapting these techniques to fit current parenting styles and underlying values
- Survey of self-regulation techniques (with the child during the Time-In or by yourself during the Time-Out—meant to help you regulate yourself before returning to the child)
- Modeling self-regulation and self-reflection for children (includes parent apologizing when the parent got too loud or demonstrative)
- Q&A session and sharing of personal experiences

#### 5. Conclusion and Takeaways (15 minutes)

- Recap of key concepts and insights regarding Time-Out and Time-In
- Notice how these approaches (especially Time-In) could benefit other familial relationships (between spouses, among siblings, etc.)
- Provide additional resources and references and encourage ongoing learning and support.
- Closing remarks, including the reading of the accompanying Scripture verses -> invite participants to listen to these verses in the context of what we have been learning and practicing today regarding how a parent can respond to a dysregulated child.

***Roleplay and Reflection Instructions:*** In breakout groups of ~12, have leaders facilitate the roleplaying of a parent and child interaction (~1-2 minutes), where the parent responds to a dysregulated child using the Time-Out (then later in the workshop, the Time-In) response to a dysregulated child. Have participants in the breakout group rotate into the parental role, then the child role, and observe the roleplayed interactions.

After everyone has completed this roleplay, have participants reflect upon what they observed:

- What did you notice about the overall posture of the parents?
- What about their facial expressions?
- What was the tone and volume of their voice?

- What was the height and distance from the child?
  - What was the parent communicating through their body language?
  - How could you tell whether the parent was calm or dysregulated themselves?
  - If you were the child, how would this make you feel?
- 
- What did you notice about the overall posture of the children?
  - Their facial expressions?
  - Tone and volume of their voice?
  - Height and distance from the parent?
  - What was the child communicating through this body language?
  - How could you tell whether the child was calm or dysregulated?
  - If you were the parent, how would this make you feel?
- 
- What was different between the Time-Out versus Time-In?
  - Discuss any other observations from the roleplay that could be helpful for them when using a Time-Out (or Time-In) response to a dysregulated child.

### MAIN POINT

The Time-Out and Time-In responses to a dysregulated child are techniques primarily focused on learning and practicing emotional regulation (for the parent and for the child).

### TIME-OUT

Time-Out is a disciplinary technique where a dysregulated child is temporarily separated from a situation or activity in response to their misbehavior/emotional outburst (Morawska & Sanders, 2011)—but hopefully not with the message that they are a “bad” child. Traditional “Time-Out” is when a child has what the parents view as a “negative” emotional outburst (Wong et al., 2008; Wong et al., 2009), and they are punished and sent to a designated space (such as a chair or corner) and are required to sit quietly and alone for a specific period of time. The traditional purpose of a time-out is to provide a consequence for the child’s behavior, give them an opportunity to calm down and reflect on their actions, and ultimately learn to self-regulate and make better choices. Yet what often happens is that this punishment of emotional outbursts can result in the child adopting maladaptive coping skills and increased anxiety (Cabecinha-Alati et al., 2020).

Children’s emotional outbursts are a form of communication: “I’m out of control! Help me!”. The child is not throwing a tantrum; rather, the tantrum is throwing the child. So do we really expect a dysregulated child to go into a corner indefinitely and magically figure out a way to calm down—which would be a difficult task for adults to do on our best days?

Many adults assume that when we mature, we have learned emotional regulation techniques, but most of us probably learned emotional suppression—so that we could survive our

families and not get punished for our big emotional outbursts. When this happens, these adults feel very uncomfortable with other people's big emotions (including a child's big emotions) because we have difficulty handling our own emotions—and there's a natural resonance within the emotional field of our families. Because the anxiety/frustration quickly spreads from person to person within that emotional field, the parent reacts to this perceived negative emotional outburst (Hurrell et al., 2015). Therefore, the easiest and most immediate way for an adult to feel calm is to remove the person who is not calm.

However, a more adaptive use of Time-Out is not to provide a consequence for the child's behavior, but instead, view Time-Out as offering the newly-upset parent a chance to calm themselves down! The Time-Out does not need to be long, just long enough for the parent to calm their own autonomic nervous system. Why? Because a parent is usually upset when they put a child on Time-Out and never has an upset parent been able to calm down an upset child. Calmness is not necessarily about the total absence of frustration/anger/sadness; it is more about the regained ability to choose what you say and how you behave instead of operating out of a fight/flight/freeze/fawn survival response.

Next, the calm parent returns to the dysregulated child in order to share their newly-found calmness. Then, after the child has calmed down, the parent and child can reflect on what sparked these big feelings and what they can do the next time this scenario occurs.

### **PROS OF TIME-OUT:**

- A space for calm: Time-out removes the child from a stressful (or over-stimulating) environment and provides a new sensory palate, whether that means going inside/outside or away from noise/light/wind/etc. This sensory shift can help reset the child's autonomic nervous system for them to regain self-control. But more importantly, Time-Out provides a brief opportunity for the parent to calm themselves down before re-engaging with the dysregulated child.
- Clear boundaries: Time-Out establishes clear boundaries and expectations for handling our emotional outbursts and inappropriate behavior. This can help children understand the importance of practicing feeling and dealing with their emotions in a safe environment.
- Consistency: Time-Out can be implemented consistently across different environments and caregivers, promoting a sense of structure and predictability.
- Importance of pausing: Parents can model to the child that a little "pause" or "breath" away from the chaos can help them self-soothe and shift to a safer emotional state.

### **CONS OF TIME-OUT:**

- Overuse or misuse: If used excessively or inconsistently, Time-Out may lose its impact and become less effective as a disciplinary technique. Also, parents may decide not to calm themselves down and never co-regulate with a distressed child. In these situations, there is never an opportunity for the child to practice emotional awareness and regulation. When this happens, the child feels

typically punished for having emotional outbursts and will learn to suppress their emotions and that it is not safe to talk about emotions with their caregivers.

- **Limited teaching opportunities:** If a parent using Time-Out primarily focuses on punishing the child rather than removing the child from the situation to create an opportunity to calm down and explore alternative behaviors or develop problem-solving skills, then the child misses out on the chance to co-regulate and reflect on their emotional experience.
- **Potential resentment:** A child may only view Time-Out as a punishment, leading to resentment or defiance, which can strain the parent-child relationship—especially if the parent does not attempt to connect with the child emotionally.
- **Lack of connection or understanding:** If the parent never re-engages with the child, then the child may not fully comprehend the purpose of Time-Out or make the connection between their behavior/outbursts and their consequences.

## TIME-IN

Time-In focuses on positive reinforcement, empathetic validation, nurturing understanding, and a parent's emotional connection with the dysregulated child—rather than punishment or isolation. It involves a calm parent spending emotional energy and quality time co-regulating with the dysregulated child. Co-regulation is one of the most powerful things we can do for our child's autonomic nervous system (Erdmann & Hertel, 2019). The parent's calmness provides security for the child (Stelter & Halberstadt, 2011) because if the parent is not scared away by the child's big emotional outbursts (e.g., "I know that being a kid is difficult sometimes."), then maybe the child can learn to regulate their own emotions (Cabecinha-Alati et al., 2020).

Thus, the effectiveness of the Time-In technique is not measured by the number of times it is implemented but by the patterned positive impact on the child's ability to emotionally regulate themselves—continually modeled and shared by a calm, co-regulating parent. It can be beneficial to establish a consistent routine of using Time-In as a tool for nurturing and guiding a child (Havighurst et al., 2010). Still, the specific frequency and duration will vary based on the child's age, neurodivergence, developmental stage, temperament, safety, and other surrounding circumstances.

Ultimately, the goal of the Time-In technique is to practice self-regulation skills, foster a strong parent-child relationship, practice empathy, and promote emotional intelligence. Indeed, Time-In is more about connection than control. Furthermore, because research has shown that parenting styles predict children's ability to emotionally regulate (e.g., Hirschler-Guttenberg et al., 2015), this Time-In approach places greater importance on the parent's ability to self-soothe and regulate their own emotions before they can successfully do Time-In with their dysregulated child.

### PROS OF TIME-IN:

- **Emotional connection:** Time-In allows parents to build a strong emotional connection with their child by addressing their behavior and emotions in an open, supportive, and

empathetic manner, fostering a sense of safety and security. Children learn they are not judged or condemned for having big emotions.

- **Teaching opportunities:** It provides a chance for parents to teach emotional regulation, which fosters the child's emotional and social development and pursuit of problem-solving skills. A parent's curiosity (instead of condemnation) about why the child suddenly had big feelings helps the child also become curious about their emotional experience. Learning the practice of self-soothing takes priority over rudimentary behavior modification.
- **Positive reinforcement:** Time-In emphasizes positive reinforcement and modeling desired behavior, which can help children understand the impact of their actions and make better choices in the future. This can boost self-esteem, confidence, and emotional competence in the child. Parents need to remind themselves they are probably "catching" their child's frustration/sadness/anger, and they are allowed to have a different emotional experience from their child.
- **Communication skills:** Time-In encourages open and honest communication between parents and children. By first creating a safe space for conversations, children learn to express their needs, concerns, and emotions effectively. They also develop active listening skills, empathy, and the ability to resolve conflicts constructively. These communication and conflict-resolution skills are invaluable for navigating difficult situations in the future.
- **Long-Term Relationship Building:** Time-In parenting fosters a foundation for long-term relationship building between parents and children. By prioritizing connection, understanding, and teaching, parents lay the groundwork for ongoing communication and support throughout the child's development. This can contribute to a strong and resilient parent-child bond as the child grows into adolescence and adulthood.

#### **CONS OF TIME-IN:**

- **Time-consuming:** Time-In requires a significant investment of time and energy from parents (or caregivers) to address emotional dysregulation and behavioral outbursts. It takes tremendous time and emotional energy to find calmness repeatedly, share that calmness with a dysregulated child, followed by meaningful discussions, and then repeat this the next day. Time-in is not a quick fix, and it can be challenging to find the time and energy for these interactions, especially during busy or stressful periods of life.
- **Lack of Immediate resolution:** In situations where immediate consequences are necessary, Time-In might not provide an immediate resolution—because it focuses on teaching emotional regulation rather than immediate changes in behavior.
- **Emotional strain:** Time-In can be emotionally challenging for parents, particularly when dealing with repeated misbehavior or difficult behavioral issues that require ongoing discussions and guidance. Staying calm when a child is dysregulated is one of the hardest things for a parent to do—often made more difficult by previous patterns of suppressing their feelings when they were a child!

- Difficulty identifying root causes of the child's distress: Understanding the underlying reasons for a child's dysregulation can be difficult to ascertain (especially for younger children). Children may not always recognize why they are upset—their outbursts may have been triggered by an unpleasant event that occurred hours ago. It might require careful observation, effective communication, and sometimes trial and error to identify the root causes of the misbehavior. This process can be challenging, especially if the child struggles to articulate their emotions or their behaviors are influenced by external factors.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, please listen to these bible verses in the context of what we have been learning and practicing today regarding how a parent should respond to a dysregulated child:

### **Luke 6:38**

Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.

### **Philippians 4:6**

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.”

### **Proverbs 22:6**

“Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it.”

### **Psalms 103:13**

“As a father pities *his* children, So the LORD pities those who fear Him.”

### **Galatians 5:22-23**

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.”

### **1 Peter 5:2-3**

“Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”

### **Proverbs 25:15**

“By long forbearance a ruler is persuaded, And a gentle tongue breaks a bone.”

## POTENTIAL ONLINE RESOURCES TO CONSIDER

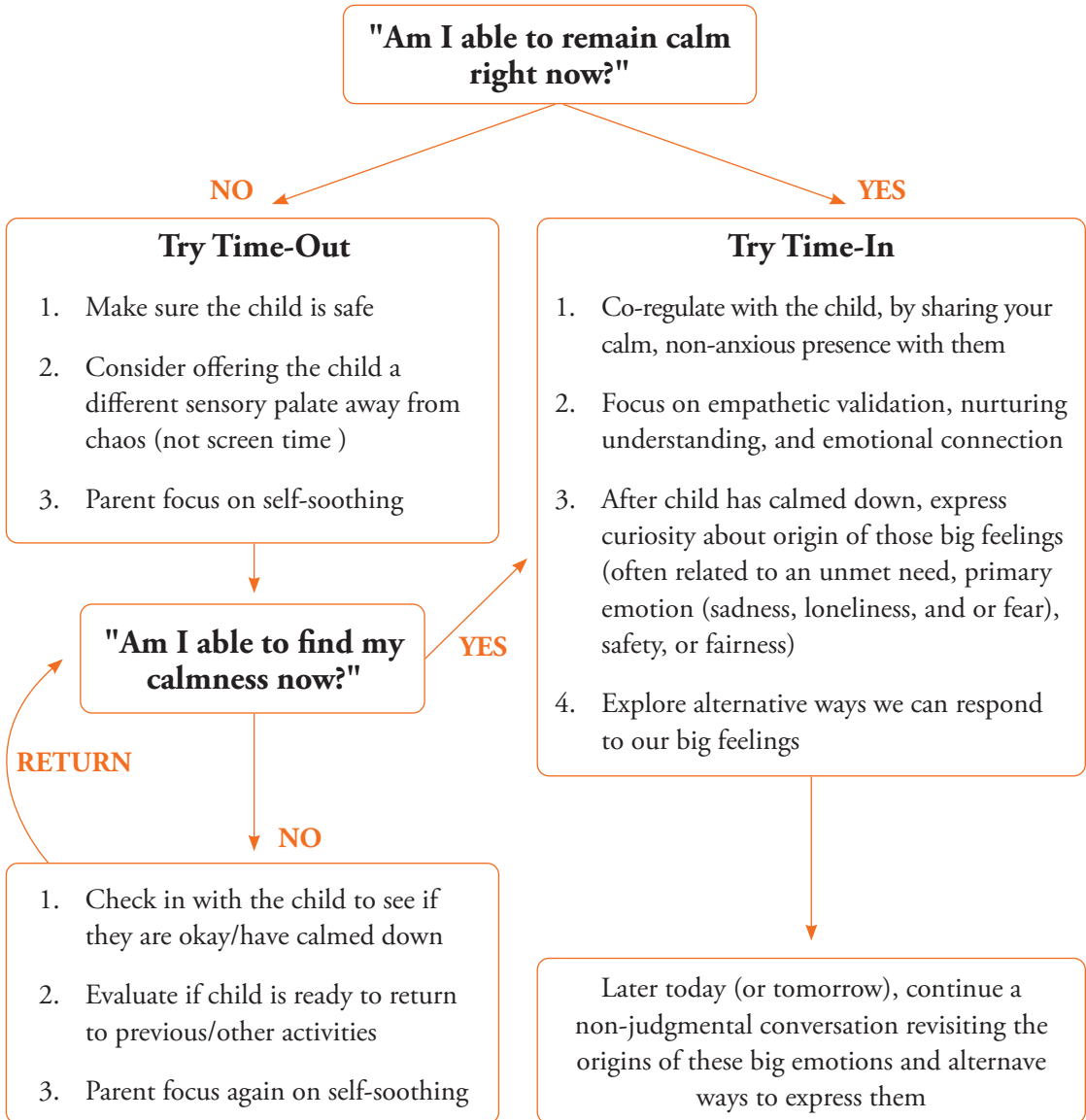
- <https://www.parenthelp.org.nz/time-in/>
- <https://hes-extraordinary.com/time-in-vs-time-out>
- <https://www.traumaresourceinstitute.com/ichill>
- <https://nurtureandthriveblog.com/feeling-break-time-in/>
- <https://onetimethrough.com/time-in-a-positive-alternative-to-time-out/>
- <http://ndl.ethernet.edu.et/bitstream/123456789/22728/1/172.pdf#page=64>
- <https://time.com/5700473/time-outs-science/#:~:text=Unlike%20a%20time%2Dout%2C%20which,same%20room%20with%20a%20parent>

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**FIGURE 1**



*Dr. Cafferky's Time-Out or Time-In Decision Tree for Parents Responding to Dysregulated Children*

# MANAGING DIFFERENCES IN THE FAMILY

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BY ALINA M. BALTAZAR

## THE TEXTS

Genesis 1:27

I Corinthians 12:13

Colossians 3:11

Romans 12:16

Galatians 5:14

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This seminar aims to help the audience better understand differences within the family and how to manage any conflict that may arise from these differences, especially concerning modern societal issues. This seminar also addresses how to improve empathy and communication skills that may help resolve conflict related to these challenges.

## MATERIALS NEEDED

Laptop, projector or large Smart TV, PowerPoint software

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## DIFFERENCES IN THE FAMILY

Human beings are all different. Everyone was created in the image of God, so our differences reflect the beautiful dimensions of our creator. “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created him.” Genesis 1:27. People differ in many ways: personality, age, hair color, eye color, height, hair texture, gender, skin color, interests, abilities, sexual attraction, physical and mental health, limitations, body size/type, opinions, etc. Look around at your family and you will see several of these human variations. Many of these differences are biological, and some can be influenced by the environment and life experiences.

Our cultures often value some of these characteristics over others. In some cultures, certain body types are valued over others, whereas another culture could be the opposite in the type of body that is valued. As a result, some children may look down on others and other children internalize those lower opinions of themselves.

This can lead to conflict in the family. We may treat certain members of the family poorly due to their perceived lower value in society. Those who aren't treated well may act out or withdraw from the family all together, which can reinforce some of those low opinions of the other person.

One of the roles of parents is to talk about these differences to lessen the harm that can happen to a developing child's self-esteem and to improve empathy for those who are different from themselves. These conversations aren't always easy. It starts by developing a close relationship when our children are young. When there is a close relationship, kids feel like they can talk to their parents about difficult topics and know they won't feel judged (Baltazar, Dessie, & McBride, 2020)

Empathy is a great way to smooth over problematic differences in the family. In a sinful world, empathy does not develop naturally. Parents play a powerful role in children developing empathy. Harvard University (2023) has a Making Caring Common project that has shared the following tips to cultivate empathy in children.

- 1. Empathize with your child and model empathy for others.** When a child experiences the benefits of empathy, they will want others to have those benefits as well. Once we empathize with our children, it helps them develop trust in others and have a more secure attachment with their parents. This can be done by being aware of our children's physical and emotional needs and understanding and respecting differences in themselves. If there is a closer attachment between parent and child, they are more likely to internalize the values they are taught. If there is closer attachment and we role model empathy towards others, children are more likely to emulate that behavior.
- 2. Make caring for others a priority and set high ethical expectations.** Kids need to hear from their parents that caring for others is a top priority. Think about what Jesus teaches, “And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matthew 22:39,) which was originally an instruction from God to the new Israelite nation in Leviticus 19:18. This is a big part of the Christian faith.

3. **Provide opportunities for children to practice empathy.** God created us with an innate capacity for empathy, but like sharing, it needs to be nurtured and given opportunities to be practiced. When children complain about a peer or sibling, parents can help their child understand the other person's perspective and why they may have acted a certain way. A great way to develop empathy skills is to volunteer in the community, especially if they can work with a diverse group of people to address community problems.
4. **Expand your child's circle of concern.** It is easy to have empathy for our family and friends. Jesus challenged his followers to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." Luke 6:27. It begins with really listening to other people's stories. Origin stories are popular in modern entertainment. Every human has an origin to their behavior, good or bad. Many bullies were either bullied themselves or abused in their homes.
5. **Help children develop self-control and manage feelings effectively.** It is also important to keep in mind that what often blocks children from showing empathy towards others is their own negative emotions. It is hard to think of others when we are angry, ashamed, or envious. Helping children learn how to manage these emotions will release them to be able to have empathy towards others.
  - This begins by helping our children be aware of and identify problematic emotions. It helps to be cognizant of where and how we feel certain emotions in our bodies. It is easier to notice physical sensations before we are aware of strong emotions. For example, some feel anger as a burning in their stomach. When these sensations are noticed, it is time to activate coping tools to manage the emotion.
  - Another way to manage negative emotions is to slow our breathing down to increase calm. Generally, these exercises begin with breathing in through the nose slowly, holding our breath for a bit, and then breathing out even more slowly through our mouth, like breathing out through a straw. A way to remember this is to breathe in for four seconds, hold for six seconds, then breathe out for eight seconds. This may seem unnatural at first, so it helps to do it before a distressing situation, like during slightly stressful times throughout the day. Let's practice this exercise now.
  - A great breathing exercise for kids is "pizza breathing." Most kids love pizza and how it smells. So have your child pretend they are holding a piece of pizza in their hand and then breathe in the wonderful smells through their nose, but then pretend the pizza is too hot, so they need to blow on it to cool down. Let's practice this exercise now.

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Think back to when you were a teen. What was the best part about that time in your life?
- What were some of the challenges you faced during that time?

- Was there anything your parents did or said to you that was helpful during your teen years?
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## HOW TO TALK SO YOUR TEEN WILL LISTEN AND LISTEN SO YOUR TEEN WILL TALK

Adolescence can be a challenging time for many parents because this is a time when teens are working on developing their identity. They are deciding what parts of your teachings they will internalize, fitting them into their unique personality in a world different from the ones their parents grew up in.

This can lead to conflict between parents and teens when a teen starts to experiment with or take on an identity the parent(s) disagree with and are afraid it may lead to a path of destruction physically and/or spiritually. Though teens are increasingly turning to their peers and media for guidance, parents still play a powerful role. Parents often don't know how to approach their teen, who seems resistant to any guidance, or how to avoid a teen thinking they are being judged or disrespected.

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### DISCUSSION QUESTION

Let's explore ways we are almost guaranteed to turn most kids off. Get into a discussion group and think of some typical scenarios you have had with your kids and identify ways you have or think you would get a negative response.

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The authors of the well-known book *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* also wrote a book specific for parents of teens (Faber & Mazlich, 2005). These authors give guidance on six approaches that will help parents communicate better with teens.

1. **Deal with feelings.** Instead of dismissing feelings, acknowledge them. When a teen seems distressed, help them identify the thoughts behind those emotions and what emotions are being expressed at that moment. It is good to acknowledge those feelings and verbalize an understanding of why they may feel that way. You don't have to agree with them.
  - Try to correct any incorrect thoughts they may be having by asking questions to help them think it through on their own. Here is a technique from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to address incorrect thoughts without the other person getting defensive (Beck, 2011). In a situation where a teen thinks her friends "hate her," ask,
    - "Where did this idea come from (*the evidence*)?"
    - "Is there any evidence that your friends really do like you (*evidence against*)?"
    - "Is there an *alternative explanation* for your friend's behavior?"

- “*What if they really don’t like you, what can you do?*”
  - “*What would you say to a friend in this same situation?*”
  - Then try redirecting their attention to something else that could improve their mood.
2. **Getting a teenager’s cooperation.** Instead of ordering a teen to do or not do something, you can;
    - Describe the problem.
    - Share how you feel about the problem.
    - Give information as to why you believe it is a problem.
    - Offer a choice to decrease the possibility of butting heads.
    - Clearly state your beliefs and expectations so they better understand your perspective.
  3. **To punish or not to punish.** Grounding is a common way to punish a teenager, and sometimes that is appropriate if they are irresponsible with a privilege, they should lose that privilege for a specific period of time. When that doesn’t fit “the crime,” there can be other approaches to try.
    - The parent should begin by stating their feelings about the situation. This may appeal to the teen’s empathy they learned when young.
    - Clearly state expectations for their behavior and how their current behavior is not meeting those expectations.
    - Give them a choice on how they should make amends for the mistake.
  4. **Working it out together.** A parent may think a teen’s behavior is a problem that a teen doesn’t feel is an issue, such as a messy room. A good approach is to;
    - Invite your teen to give his/her point of view,
    - State your point of view
    - Invite your teenager to brainstorm with you to solve the problem by writing down all of the ideas,
    - Review the list and decide the best option you both can agree on.
  5. **Get to know your teen.** Try having a conversation with your teenager to better understand their perspective and what it is like being a teen these days. Some suggestions include (Faber & Mazlish, 2005, p. 118-122);
    - *What do you think is the best part of being your age either for you or your friends?*
    - *What are some of the things kids your age worry about?*
    - *Is there anything parents do that is helpful to teens?*
    - *Is there anything parents do or say that is unhelpful?*
    - *If you could give advice to parents, what would it be?*
    - *If you could give advice to other teenagers, what would it be?*
    - *What do you wish could be different about your life at home, in school, or with friends?*
  6. **Healthy expression.** It is important to express our concerns and appreciation towards our teens and for them to do that to us, but some ways may lead to better outcomes.
    - *When expressing concerns,* the teen or parents should say how they feel about the situation and then say what they would like/need and/or expect instead.

- *When expressing praise or appreciation*, describe what the person did and how that makes you feel.

## HOW TO TALK ABOUT DIFFICULT ISSUES

We may often think we have to choose a side that is the opposite of someone else. In reality, both sides may want the same thing, and they just have different ideas on how to get them. We have more in common than we realize. Generally, all humans want love, acceptance, safety, and freedom. As Christians, we want to show we love and care for others. Based on our culture and personal experience, we develop different ideas on how to get these desires met. When these differences lead to conflict in the family, it helps to really listen to the need or desire behind what the person is saying. Try to avoid taking offense at what is being said, be cordial instead.

There may be times when you genuinely believe the other person is wrong. It helps to state the facts, realizing they may disagree with the reliability of those facts. How many Christians question the reliability of evolutionary science? Citing Bible verses may not help either. Some Christians doubt the reliability of the Bible, thinking a book that old has changed so much from the original that it is no longer accurate, that it was only applicable to the culture of the time and place it was written, or those who wrote the Bible didn't understand enough about human behavior or the brain.

It helps to ask questions to understand the other person's perspective better. Doing so may help them see the error of their thinking without being embarrassed over their erroneous thinking. Remember what the Bible says, "Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion." Romans 12:16 We all have things we can learn from each other.

Look for what you do agree on and build from there. If you still sincerely believe the other person is in the wrong, but they refuse to see it, you don't need to end the relationship. For your own spiritual sake, you may have to distance yourself from the other person, though. Continue to pray for the other person and your relationship with them.

Resolving differences without hurting the other person's feelings can be challenging, thus damaging the relationship. As a result, we often avoid talking about problems, or we just don't express ourselves directly. There are ways to communicate our needs without making the other person defensive.

- *Aggressive communication* clearly states the issue but does so without regard to the other person's feelings. This can lead to defensiveness or resentment.
- *Passive communication* avoids conflict but can also lead to resentment when the distressed partner doesn't get their needs met.
- *Passive aggressive communication* is a combination of them, where one person lets the other person know something is wrong without clearly stating the actual issue. This can also lead to resentment in the passive-aggressive communicator when they aren't understood and

frustration by the receiving party since they often don't know what they did wrong or how to correct the problem.

- *Assertive communication* is the best way to approach discussing difficult family issues. As mentioned earlier, talking about feelings is a way to express ourselves without offending the other person since the issue is often not about the other person but about the person's feelings about the situation. Here is an example of an assertive communication script that may be challenging to follow at first but will become more natural with practice.
  - "I feel \_\_\_\_\_." First, we need to know what our feelings are. Psychologists vary on what our core emotions are, but generally, when we are upset about something, we are experiencing some variation of disgust, sadness, anger, or fear.
  - Do not say, "I feel that \_\_\_\_\_" That is an opinion, not a feeling. It can cause the person to get defensive, which can then escalate to conflict.
  - "About \_\_\_\_\_" Describe what you are concerned about without using the word "you" if possible. The other person isn't necessarily the problem, but the situation is.
  - "Because \_\_\_\_\_" Why is this situation causing you distress? How have childhood or past experiences led to your beliefs about the situation?
  - "I need \_\_\_\_\_" Clearly state what the other person can do to help you with the problematic situation. When you request assistance from the other person, it can lead to a more positive response. The other person may not be able to meet that need the way you are requesting, so then be willing to negotiate where both parties are more likely to get their needs met.

In a situation where a wife is upset at her husband for inviting friends over without checking in with her first, an assertive conversation will go like this; "I feel disregarded when friends are brought over without checking with me first because it reminds me when my parents wouldn't listen to me when I tried telling them I didn't want to do something. I need you to check in with me before you invite people over."

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### APPLICATION EXERCISE

Now practice assertive communication. Think of a regular point of conflict with a family member that you would like to improve your communication around. Either write down what you would say using the script presented or practice with the person you came with or someone else you'd feel comfortable with. The other person should try to take on the role of that other person, guessing how someone would react. Work on your negotiation skills. If you aren't comfortable talking about a personal issue, then choose a more generic point of conflict common within families.

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## WHAT TO DO WHEN CONFLICT ESCALATES

Sometimes, conflict escalates very quickly, and both parties are not thinking clearly enough to resolve their conflict without causing harm to the other person and/or the relationship. When individuals get flooded with strong emotions, it can be hard to think clearly enough to be able to resolve the conflict. It is important to recognize that the conflict has gotten out of hand and know when to walk away.

Generally, in the average person, when their pulse is over 100 beats per minute when arguing, they may not be able to think clearly enough to resolve the conflict. Nowadays, with so many people wearing smart watches or fitness tracking devices on their wrists, it is easy to check pulse rates. If not, think about how and where you feel distress in your body when you “lose it .” That is the time to walk away. When one person walks away from conflict, it can cause the other person to feel they are being abandoned or what they are trying to say is being disregarded, so it helps to plan ahead.

Give yourself some time to calm down. Preferably at least 20 minutes, up to 24 hours, but it shouldn't be longer than that, according to Dr. John Gottman, a well-known couple researcher (Gottman & Gottman, 2014). During that time, avoid thinking about the situation because it can make you even more upset. Think ahead of time about what types of things help you calm down after a fight. Then, when in a calmer mood, come back to resolve the conflict. It helps to realize that according to Dr. Gottman's research, 70% of couple issues are unresolvable, so most of the time, you will not be able to resolve the issue completely, but you can at least come to some sort of agreement.

Christians often think they shouldn't go to bed angry, so they may feel conflict has to be resolved before going to sleep. The later the fight goes into the night, the harder it will be to resolve the problem. The people involved in the conflict can agree to resolve the problem the next day after getting some rest. It may be harder to sleep, so pray for the Lord's guidance to resolve the conflict. The main point is not to let anger continue and fester.

## CONCLUSION

God created humanity in his image. The differences we see in society are a reflection of God in us. We are all His children, part of the family of God. The Bible reminds us, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free – and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.” I Corinthians 12:13

Conflict within the family is inevitable in a sinful world. There are some societal issues that are intensifying these challenges. The Lord has given us guidance in the Bible and direction through others with expertise in these areas. Remember, we have more in common than we realize. These issues are not new; there were differences in the early Christian church too. “Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.” Colossians 3:11

God has called us to share the good news of salvation through His son, Jesus Christ. Who will listen to that good news if it isn't shared out of love?

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# LEADERSHIP RESOURCES

— *Leadership Resources* are carefully selected to assist you in addressing current and relevant family issues with your local church.

# CLERGY AND CONFIDENTIALITY: BEST PRACTICES FOR MINISTRY

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BY MARLON ROBINSON

I have heard stories where individuals were devastated when pastors disclosed their confidential information without permission in sermons or in discussions with peers, supervisors, and administrators. Is it appropriate to disclose confidential information? Are there limits to confidentiality?

Clergy members serve in various settings, but regardless of their work context, they have an ethical, professional, and sacred obligation not to disclose confidential information about their *care recipients* who seek their services. Due to the unprecedented amount of physical, psychological, and spiritual pain related to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the services of clergy members are in greater demand.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, to safeguard confidentiality, clergy members need to have a good working definition of confidentiality, know what information is classified as confidential, be aware of the benefits and limits of confidentiality, and follow best practices.

## PRIVATE, RESTRICTED, CLASSIFIED

Confidentiality has to do with information a person has divulged in a relationship of trust, where the person expects such information will not be shared with others without authorization and handled in ways in opposition to the understanding at the time of disclosure.<sup>2</sup> Confidentiality can

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also be defined as involving clergy members' ethical duty not to divulge information about a care recipient without permission.<sup>3</sup> Simply put, confidentiality is about identifiable information that is based on an agreement, implicitly or explicitly, between the confider and the confidant on how such information should be handled.<sup>4</sup> In research terms, "confidentiality refers to a condition in which the researcher knows the identity of a research subject, but takes steps to protect that identity from being discovered by others."<sup>5</sup> Clergy members have a confidential situation at hand when they are dealing with information that is personal, restricted, intimate, secret, private, or classified and based on a set of preexistent or current rules or a promise that limits the discussion and public presentation of such information.<sup>6</sup> This is the alarm system of confidentiality.

Interestingly, confidential information and confidentiality also extend to "certain intimate relationships, discussions, communication, events and personal behaviors that are not only to be withheld from public access but also desired to be kept secret between the confider and the confidant."<sup>7</sup> In other words, confidentiality is a combination of the clergy-care recipient relationship, the personal information shared within that relationship, and a commitment that limits the discussion and public presentation of such information. Therefore, confidentiality is essential because clergy members owe a sacred trust to care recipients. Unethical disclosures are pervasive among clergy and have resulted in several lawsuits.<sup>8</sup> Congregational church pastor Elizabeth Audette states, "Given the complexity and pervasiveness of confidentiality issues in the church, clarity about clergy practice . . . is important."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, "there are many reports of pastors who breached the trust of individuals who have spilled their guts under the expectation of confidentiality."<sup>10</sup> Clergy leader Michael Kane attributes these breaches to a lack of understanding when he reports that "fewer respondents [clergy] understood that information received in spiritual counseling or spiritual direction must be maintained."<sup>11</sup> Consequently, ministers have a sacred duty to protect confidentiality because it is the ethical thing to do, and it is linked to several benefits.

## BENEFITS AND POTENTIAL LIMITS

Confidentiality is associated with personal, organizational, and societal benefits.<sup>12</sup> When confidentiality is made a priority, care recipients and clergy are more likely to feel they have a place or someone to turn to during crises.<sup>13</sup> This sense of safety is crucial to the clergy-care recipient relationship and will likely encourage care recipients and clergy to seek guidance, education, and referrals for additional support. In addition, upholding confidentiality respects human dignity and gives care recipients "the confidence that shameful disclosures will not become public."<sup>14</sup>

Regarding organizational benefits, Professor Carey and colleagues found that confidentiality encourages honesty without fear of reprisal and opens the way to proactively assist individuals to obtain the help needed before their circumstances get worse. These findings are especially true when dealing with moral and doctrinal issues related to clergy.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, safeguarding the private information of others has societal benefits because it "encourages individuals to participate in socially desirable activities, including research and

public health activities.”<sup>16</sup> Protecting confidentiality also fosters trust between society and organized religion.

While confidentiality is a universal ethical duty,<sup>17</sup> there are limits to safeguarding certain information. The potential limits to confidentiality surround the idea of privilege, generally claimed by attorneys and clergy,<sup>18</sup> but these are not applied or recognized in the same manner in each jurisdiction<sup>19</sup> or country. Privileged communication is “a doctrine of some faiths, [and] clergy must maintain the confidentiality of pastoral communications.”<sup>20</sup> Privileged communication is also defined as “a statutory protection that enables a member of the clergy to receive certain communications in the context of his/her pastoral capacity, and being immune from testifying to the same in a court of law.”<sup>21</sup> However, it is essential to note that privilege *may not be absolute* because mandatory reporting statutes sometimes “specify the circumstances under which a communication is ‘privileged’ or allowed to remain confidential.”<sup>22</sup> Some countries and jurisdictions have mandatory reporting laws that require clergy to report “criminal activity, that may result in serious harm or danger to individuals and the public.”<sup>23</sup> These activities may include but are not limited to child abuse and exploitation of persons with disabilities. Consequently, it is vital for clergy to *know and adhere to the limits of confidentiality* mandated by national or jurisdiction laws.

## BEST PRACTICES

Confidentiality is essential for building trust in the care recipient-clergy relationship, and it is invaluable to effective ministry. Due to the vital importance of confidentiality to ministry, here are seven best practices to help clergy maximize the benefits of confidentiality and limit potential liabilities.

1. *Make a personal commitment to confidentiality.* Violating confidentiality may expose clergy to liability because of defaming a person and intentionally inflicting serious emotional,<sup>24</sup> relational, or material harm on a care recipient. Consequently, it is essential that clergy pledge to protect the confidential information of care recipients unless otherwise mandated by law. This commitment is not merely to avoid liability but, more importantly, is a sacred trust clergy members owe to care recipients and God.
2. *Follow your organization’s protocols.* Adhere to the confidential practices of one’s faith group, employer, and professional association. These protocols are generally implemented to ensure that clergy members operate based on the highest ethical standards and thus protect themselves from liability and their care recipients from harm due to inappropriate disclosures. The protocols may include absolute and professional confidentiality. Absolute confidentiality is privileged communication, whereas professional confidentiality is where clergy members are not allowed to discuss the care recipient “personally or his/her case with anyone except another professional who in the practice of his/her profession is given the protection of privileged communication.”<sup>25</sup>
3. *Model the Good Shepherd.* Jesus is the ultimate confidant, and clergy members need to follow His example. The psalmist declares, “It is better to trust in the Lord than to put

confidence in man” (Ps. 118:8). Therefore, following the example of Jesus is salient to developing credibility with care recipients. In His life and ministry, Jesus modeled how undershepherds should conduct themselves in relation to confidentiality.

4. *Avoid using counseling cases in sermons.* Clergy members who embrace their sacred duty and ethical responsibility will refrain from using counseling cases in their sermons or presentations. In fact, “any hint of verbal indiscretion”<sup>26</sup> can render their ministry ineffective due to loss of credibility.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, pastors need to find alternative illustrations for their sermons and presentations.
5. *Seek permission.* Seek permission from care recipients before divulging confidential information. Explicit consent is needed before referring to other pastoral counselors and mental health professionals and prior to using care recipients’ information in a presentation or case study. If permission is granted, judicious steps must be taken to deidentify the information so that care recipients’ identity and parish are concealed.
6. *Know the limits in your jurisdiction or country.* Research the limits of confidentiality in your country or jurisdiction. When clergy members know these limits, they can proactively share them with those seeking counsel before any confidential information is shared. Knowing these limits will help reduce the risk of harm to care recipients, the public, and harm to oneself due to loss of credibility and liability related to inappropriate disclosures.
7. *Live by the five core principles of ethics.* Clergy members need to subscribe to the five core principles of ethics: *non-maleficence*, do no harm; *beneficence*, do good; *autonomy*, the right to self-determination; *justice*, fair treatment; and *fidelity*, the quality or state of being faithful.<sup>28</sup> These five principles are the bedrock of safeguarding confidentiality and, when implemented, are likely to protect clergy from harming others and themselves.

Confidentiality is invaluable to ministry and must “be respected and protected at all times.”<sup>29</sup> The current information is provided to the reader for educational purposes and is not intended to be legal advice. It is *intolerable* to disclose confidential information except when permission is given or disclosure is mandated by law. Consequently, these seven best practices are likely to increase the credibility of clergy and thus contribute to personal, organizational, and societal benefits.

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- <sup>25</sup> Carey, Willis, Krikheli, and O'Brien, "Religion, Health and Confidentiality."
- <sup>26</sup> Carey, Willis, Krikheli, and O'Brien, 681.
- <sup>27</sup> Lassiter, "Clergy Confidentiality."
- <sup>28</sup> *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "fidelity," accessed May 18, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fidelity>.
- <sup>29</sup> Carey, Willis, Krikheli, and O'Brien, "Religion, Health and Confidentiality," 684.



# HEALTHY BOUNDARIES FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERS

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BY CÉSAR DE LEÓN

Leaders in Christian circles do not typically talk about the topic of power among leaders and much less about the abuse of power. Someone once said that the way a person manages power is the true test of their character and leadership. Unfortunately, we are reluctant to talk about power and the abuse of power until the news breaks out with a new scandal about the fall of another spiritual leader. Thankfully, this silence is being shattered as we have witnessed the rising of movements like #MeToo coming through the walls of our churches and schools, which have empowered the voices of those deeply hurt by people in secular and denominational leadership. The movement #ChurchToo has formed a platform facilitating an audience for people who had been hurt by their spiritual leaders.

Our North American Division launched the EndItNowNAD campaign to encourage our churches and communities to be intentional about breaking the cycle of abuse because they recognize that abuse deeply affects children, women and men not only outside but within our church and school communities. I thought it would benefit our NAD pastors if I shared some bullet points of the seminar I was invited to present recently (for the Spanish track) at the annual NAD EndItNowSummit on coaching pastors and teachers on how to create and maintain appropriate personal and professional boundaries.

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One of this year's scandals illustrated perfectly how the failure to set intentional healthy personal-professional boundaries can result in situations that create ideal circumstances for the abuse of power through inappropriate sexual conduct. Andy Savage, a respected teaching pastor from the High Point mega church in Tennessee was accused of sexually abusing a 17-year-old girl more than twenty years ago, while he was a youth pastor. This claim prompted Andy to resign from his responsibilities saying, "He had committed sexual sin and had sinned against God."

In one of the most unexpected scandals of the year, Bill Hybels, lead pastor of the world-famous Willow Creek Church in Chicago, announced to his congregation that he would accelerate his planned retirement by six months and step aside immediately for the good of the church. Though he continued to deny the multiple allegations of sexual misconduct, he did publicly acknowledge, "I too often placed myself in situations that would have been far wiser to avoid." It is evident that as spiritual leaders, we must take the time to reexamine our personal and professional boundaries in the context of the innate power our ministry positions incorporate. I trust that the following ten suggestions I will share will help you navigate through the issue of abuse of power and with God's aid, will help you to be more intentional about preventing and avoiding falling into sexual misconduct that leaves behind a tragic trail of personal, familial and community destruction.

### **BOUNDARY #1: BE AWARE THAT YOUR POSITION CARRIES POWER.**

In his writings about pastors and boundaries, Peter Scazzero reminds us that there is authority embedded into your role as a leader. Spiritual leaders must think about and intentionally process power, especially because they possess great positional power, personal power, "God factor power," projected power, relational power, and cultural power. These powers exert a tremendous amount of influence on the thinking process and behavior of others. Unfortunately, most people inside our circles of influence relate to our authority with courtesy and kindness and seldom are confrontational. Our society and denominational culture have taught our female members to accept male leadership authority without questioning whether this leadership is healthy or unhealthy.

### **BOUNDARY #2: YOUR AUTHORITY AND POWER WILL BE TEMPTED.**

Just as Jesus' authority and power were tempted in the desert, your authority and power will also be tempted, and the enemy has a thousand and one ways to do so. One of his specialties is to use the dynamic of transference and counter-transference in relationships to facilitate a fall. Who you are, what you do, and the way you look, dress, and speak will create a profound emotional impact on someone else's life. People in leadership will inadvertently trigger emotional cords in someone's life and will either remind them of someone meaningful in their lives or someone they don't want to remember. Either way, people will unconsciously transfer onto you their emotional

material in the way of kindness, acceptance, and affection if you remind them of someone dear in their lives; or with opposite responses if you are a non-grata persona. Counter-transference is the other side of this phenomenon in which the emotional transference you have received makes you unconsciously behave, react or say things as a response to the emotional responses/treatment you are receiving. When these responses are of a flattering or romantic nature, they can quickly create a retro-feeding cycle and can easily morph into a situation that can be seductive and dangerous. It is imperative that these two dynamics be clearly understood because spiritual leaders have always been and will continue to be the object of precarious transferences and counter-transferences throughout their ministry life. You will feel attracted to someone; and someone will feel attracted to you. These attractions or transferences and counter-transferences, if not dealt with appropriately, in a spiritually wise manner, can and will destroy your professional and family lives as well as the lives of the involved persons in positions of less power.

### **BOUNDARY #3: THE SPIRITUAL LEADER MUST BE AN AGENT OF SAFETY AND HEALING.**

People that seek our ministry assistance can be emotionally troubled and may be suffering the impact of years of trauma and pain. This can, of course, also be true for men and women serving in positions of power. Often, personal boundaries have been violated and the trauma suffered has conditioned them for unhealthy actions and behaviors. Emotionally/spiritually broken people can sometimes express their unprocessed pain by sexually acting out their trauma. However, these behaviors are “a cry for help” and should never be interpreted by leaders as invitations to continue violating their boundaries and taking advantage of their vulnerability, pain, and powerlessness.

On the contrary, when offering counseling or helping a member or student we need to remember that we are there to offer a safe and secure place of healing where they are able to trust someone with anything that they may be experiencing, including acting out sexuality. By responding in an ethically healthy manner and by establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries, a leader can empower hurting individuals to seek healthier and more appropriate ways to deal with their pain and tragedy instead of taking advantage of their vulnerability by continuing to use, abuse, and victimize them further.

### **BOUNDARY # 4: YOUR CORE EMOTIONAL CONDITION AND DEGREE OF EMOTIONAL CONNECTION CAN BE PRECIPITATING AGENTS FOR SEXUAL MISCONDUCT.**

If you are single and not being emotionally nourished by healthy relationships or if there is significant emotional distancing in your meaningful relationships to the point that you are feeling under-

appreciated, lonely, emotionally disconnected, and meaningless, or if you are married, but you are not experiencing emotional and/or sexual connection with your spouse, you are vulnerable to falling into boundary breaking, inappropriate sexual behaviors. Spiritual leaders must be continuously working through their own emotional baggage, establishing and maintaining a healthy, emotionally connected life, and must aggressively work to create and maintain an emotionally connected marriage (if married) or create and maintain emotionally healthy relationships with the significant people in their lives, if single. Never lose sight of who you are and the role you play in the lives of those you serve. You are not only a child of God, redeemed by Him to be an heir with Jesus. (Galatians 4:4-7), but you are also a spiritual leader called by God to serve as an agent of healing, not as a destroyer of His flock. A lack of emotional and sexual intimacy with your spouse could be an indicator of unresolved marital issues. Be proactive and talk with your spouse about this subject. It is imperative that this critical area of your life and ministry be addressed: “Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control” (1 Corinthians 7:5). Honesty and transparency regarding this topic and everything else that is going on in your life emotionally will help you establish a more emotionally healthy, authentic, and connected life (and marriage) which will help keep you emotionally/spiritually fortified and will also help you to be more intentional about addressing potential vulnerabilities you may not have addressed before. Remember, battles are rarely won alone. Every leader needs to be accountable to someone. We all need people who can give us counsel, support and most importantly people who will commit to praying for us while keeping us accountable.

Among other key factors that can precipitate the vulnerabilities commonly present with sexual misconduct are: chronic unhappiness, boredom, burn out, stress after or before a crisis, and transitional periods in your life. Additional personal factors that can intensify a leader’s vulnerability to sexual misconduct and abuse of power are: Low self-esteem, addiction to adrenaline rushes, sexual abuse during one’s childhood, marriage infidelities in one’s family history, an inability to connect and establish emotional intimacy, narcissistic (self-centered) tendencies and the tendency to deny the reality of one’s brokenness.

## **BOUNDARY # 5:** **AVOID SITUATIONS AND PLACES WHERE YOU CAN BE TEMPTED.**

Let’s return to the two pastors discussed in the introduction. Andy Savage was driving his automobile accompanied by a 17-year-old girl who was a part of his youth group. He was 22, and single. He suddenly stopped his car and asked her to perform oral sex on him. She assumed that this was his way to let her know that she was the one he had chosen to be his wife. However, after a few minutes, he got out of the car, knelt on the road, cried, and confessed his sin to God, and asked her not to tell anyone.

Bill Hybels, a world traveler, would travel with this team and his personal assistant who would stay close to him at the hotels in order to work on ministry projects. They spent a lot of

time together in the church office, as well as on the road. One broken boundary led to another broken boundary, which led to yet another, and he ended up abusing his power and engaging in inappropriate sexual behaviors with her and several other women over decades of his ministry.

I can still remember the time when, during my tenure at a conference where I was the Ministerial Director, my newly hired administrative assistant, a young single woman, asked me to give her a ride to our conference grounds, a three-hour trip. She was being required to work at the campground where camp meeting would take place, and since she didn't know too many people in the office at that time (and after getting negative responses from others who were unable to take her for various reasons) she asked me if I could give her a ride since I was going to the same place. I felt bad, my good Samaritan heart was telling me to give her the ride. I knew that if she didn't make it to camp meeting, she might lose her position. On the other hand, I had already established personal and professional boundaries and had discussed these with my wife. My previously constructed, protective boundaries alerted me that regardless of the way I felt about this situation, I needed to say no, so I did. She did finally manage to get a ride from a relative and I felt relieved. Colleagues, we must intentionally create and commit to uphold our protective boundary policies, even when they seem inconvenient or ridiculous.

### **BOUNDARY # 6: BE CAREFUL WITH HOW YOU USE SOCIAL MEDIA.**

The way we communicate with other people now days can be potential triggers for inappropriate sexual behaviors. The internet, texting, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others, are all powerful tools to help communicate efficiently and productively, however they can become dangerous weapons that can also facilitate undue familiarity that lead us in a direction that we haven't planned to go. Technology has given us tremendous access to a world of anonymity, secrets, inappropriate content, illicit connections that are being abused by all kinds of people including leaders and teachers who may be living in spiritual, emotional, relational, and marital bankruptcy.

### **BOUNDARY # 7: AVOID DUAL RELATIONSHIPS.**

Someone said, maintain a clear definition of all your relationships. This is a simple but powerful recommendation. Systematically define all your relationships and know who is who, why are they are in your life, and what role they play in your ministry vision. Once these roles have been clearly defined, commit to not combining professional relationships with personal ones.

Treat the people on your team as people on your team and nothing else, especially if they are of the opposite sex. Treat your members or students as such and nothing else,

especially if they are members of the opposite sex. Treat your secretary as your secretary and nothing else. Monitor your relationships and identify those that have the potential to develop into a dual relationship and be proactive in avoiding it. Do not become engaged in private extracurricular activities with these individuals. Don't ask for special favors that will compromise or threaten your personal/professional boundaries. Don't engage in any type of business with them or accept expensive gifts from these individuals, as these activities create emotional connections that can quickly develop into something else. Remember that at the end of the day, you, as the person in power, are the one ethically and professionally responsible to keep your boundaries intact, not the other person, even if they are the ones to initiate inappropriate behaviors.

## **BOUNDARY # 8**

### **BE QUICK TO IDENTIFY DANGER AND BE HONEST ABOUT LISTENING TO THE WARNING SIGNS.**

Self-deception is a cultural phenomenon; we are living in the Laodicean era where the tendency to deny our true emotional and spiritual state is common. The Bible says, "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 3.17). Our emotional and spiritual radars that detect danger have been affected by more than six thousand years of sin. They are atrophied and cannot detect our realities or perceive truth in full sense of the word. We are calling evil good and good evil, light darkness and darkness light; we desperately need the guidance of the Spirit to be able to discern our true condition. Emotional and spiritual authenticity can only be obtained and maintained by intentionally cultivating and maintaining a rich and flourishing relationship with the God of heaven, through a life of constant self-reflection with a passionate prayer life.

#### **ADDITIONAL WARNING SIGNS THAT NEED TO BE IDENTIFIED, ADDRESSED AND RESOLVED APPROPRIATELY ARE:**

- Feeling attracted to another person
- Seeking physical or emotional closeness with the wrong person
- Seeking visual contact and frequent interactions with this person
- Seeking physical touch, even if it's very subtle.
- Feeling compelled to see pictures, send texts and be in the same social networks as the other person
- Experiencing the impulse of buying "gifts" for the other person
- Using lies to cover up your true intentions, feelings and actions

**BOUNDARY # 9:  
REMEMBER THAT THE RESPONSIBILITY TO ESTABLISH LIMITS AND  
KEEP THEM INTACT FALLS ON THE PERSON WITH THE GREATEST  
POWER.**

There may be individuals in the places where we serve who will manipulate situations and conversations in order to seek proximity with us. Some people may take liberties to be inappropriate with us, even to the point of acting out sexually; but we can never forget that the responsibility to do what is right, always falls on the person with the most power. God has entrusted us with a significant amount of power, authority influence, but along with these gifts, He has given us the responsibility to care for his sheep, especially for the weak, vulnerable, and wounded.

**BOUNDARY # 10:  
MEDITATE ON THE LIFE OF JESUS AND  
HOW HE TREATED PEOPLE.**

Notice how Jesus dealt with the abandoned, the marginalized, the broken. Contemplate on how sympathetic and kind He was to the suffering, socially discarded and neglected. His love, compassion and sensibility were evident in His treatment of women in particular. He never took advantage of the sorrowful and broken. When people came looking for him with the wrong ideas and motives, He reprimanded them with love without destroying their identity or humanity. Jesus elevated humanity in every one of His encounters; He offered acceptance and friendship in the purest and correct manner. His final purpose for every individual that He met was to bring them back to the Father's love; and we are called to do the same.

Taking the time to process the topic of power and the abuse of power takes character and determination; I invite you to make decisions that will help you to navigate your life and ministry with integrity and with intact personal boundaries.

This will only be possible to the degree that you make decisions beforehand that will prepare you for the moment of truth:

- Propose to live and serve with financial, professional, relational, and marital integrity.
- Propose to not demonstrate any attention or affection that can be questioned.
- Propose to not see people in counseling of the opposite sex without someone else being present or unless you are in an open space where others can see you.
- Propose not to make a ministry home visit to a person of the opposite sex.
- Propose not to go out or have dinner with a person of the opposite sex, if you are married.
- Propose not to be alone in your car with someone of the opposite sex if you are married.
- Propose to not watch pornography. If you can't stop, seek assistance.
- Propose to be careful with the way you use your oral or written communication with people of the opposite sex.

- Propose to seek professional help when you identify areas of brokenness in your life that have left you feeling broken and vulnerable.

I recently read a story told by Pastor Dan Serns, while writing on this same topic. A king who lived many centuries ago was looking for a new chauffeur for his carriage. As he interviewed three potential candidates, he asked them the same question: “If you were driving me through a mountainous terrain, how close to the cliff would you be willing to drive without going over. The first candidate answered, “Ten feet”; the second “Five feet”; the third said, “I would stay as far from the cliff as I could.” The third individual got the job.

We live in an increasingly complicated world, and Paul told Timothy that “in the last days, we will have dangerous times” (2 Timothy 3:1). Those times are here. Pray that you will be granted an abundance of humility, teachability, and spiritual discernment in order to be able to identify danger and have the courage to do the right thing.

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Serns, Dan, “Three steps to setting healthy relationship boundaries. Or: How far from the cliff?” *Ministry*® International Journal for Pastors, September 2006.

*<https://www.enditnownorthamerica.org/healthy-boundaries-for-spiritual-le> This article first appeared in Best Practices for Adventist Ministry.*



# NO EXCUSE FOR ABUSE IN THE FAMILY

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BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

## INTRODUCTION

In February 2013, people around the world were watching their televisions closely to hear the outcome of the famed Paralympic and Olympic Games runner, Oscar Pistorius. He was found guilty of shooting to death his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp; he claimed he mistook her for an intruder in the apartment they shared.

We don't know whether Oscar Pistorius was defending himself or had planned to kill his girlfriend. What we do know is that violence has invaded our society, and there are many cases that will never make the headlines. Families are being torn apart by senseless violence right in their own homes, as many people are choosing violence as the primary means of interacting with each other. The impact of these choices is incredibly far-reaching and very destructive to individuals and families.

While we may not be able to control the violence around us, the good news is that through the power of God, there is an unlimited supply of self-control available to those who request and accept it. God's word is filled with counsel on how to build healthy and strong relationships, especially in our families.

We will briefly look at the destructive nature of violence and abuse in the family, and we will review God's original intent and perfect plan for our relationships and families. We will also explore

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the elements of healthy, Godly relationships. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is committed to “Ending It Now,” to stopping the violence and preventing violence by equipping individuals and families with skills and insights needed to have wholesome relationships.

## A QUICK LOOK AT ABUSE OF THE BIBLE AND RELIGION

While the basic message of the Bible is Love, it is evident from the pervasive incidents of abuse in our homes today that we are far removed from God’s ideal for human relationships. There are many who profess to be Christians—disciples of Christ—but who possess none of the characteristics of Christ.

Unfortunately, in too many situations, abusers have misused scripture and theology to justify their abusive behaviors. In addition, other well-meaning helpers have also misused the Bible to convince victims to accept continued violence in their families. This misuse of scripture can be dangerous and even lethal to the victims involved. The religious community can no longer remain silent. This silence continues the lack of understanding of issues of domestic violence and does not lead to change. The church can help families stop abuse and can help create healthier environments for children, teenagers, and adults.

## BRIEF OVERVIEW OF VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

We are living in an age of violence. Our senses are bombarded by violence in the news, music, television, and other media outlets. Many people are the target of violence, and the victims that touch our hearts the most are the children. Anyone can be a victim of violence; however, statistics tell us that women and children are the primary targets. Men are also victims of abuse and violence, but in smaller numbers (this may be due to lack of reporting). Regardless of who the victim is, domestic or family violence is incompatible with God’s Word.

### WHAT IS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

Let’s first look at some definitions and general information about domestic violence. Domestic violence includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. To be sure, there is no hierarchy of abuse; each one is equally destructive.

**Physical abuse** may include behaviors such as pushing and kicking and can escalate into more injurious attacks. It can start with minor bruising but could end in murder.

**Sexual abuse** can include inappropriate touching and verbal remarks. Rape, molestation, and incest are also included in this category.

**Emotional abuse** includes behaviors that consistently degrade or belittle the individual. It can include verbal threats, episodes of rage, obscene language, demands for perfection, and invalidation of character and person. Extreme possessiveness, isolation, and depriving someone of economic resources are all psychologically and emotionally abusive.

## GENERAL FACTS ABOUT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE<sup>1</sup>

There is no one profile of abusers or victims. Both may come from all age groups, ethnic groups, socio-economic classes, professions, and religious or non-religious communities. Abuse and violence may take several forms: physical, sexual, or emotional. In the case of the elderly and children, it may also include severe neglect. *[The following statistics are primarily for the US. Presenters should research stats from their own territory to be most relevant.]*

### THE VICTIMS:

- 1 in 4 women will experience domestic violence, also known as intimate partner violence, during her lifetime.
- Women are more likely than men to be killed by an intimate partner.
- Women between the ages of 20-24 are at the greatest risk of becoming victims of domestic violence.
- Every year, 1 in 3 female homicide victims is murdered by her current or former partner.

### THE FAMILIES:

- Every year, more than 3 million children witness domestic violence in their homes.
- Thirty to sixty percent of children who live in homes where there is domestic violence also suffer abuse or neglect.
- A recent study found that children exposed to domestic violence at home are more likely to have health problems, including becoming sick more often, having frequent headaches or stomachaches, and being more tired and lethargic.
- Another study found that children are more likely to intervene when they witness severe violence against a parent. This can place a child at great risk for injury or even death.

### THE CONSEQUENCES:

- Survivors of domestic violence face high rates of depression, sleep disturbances, and other emotional distress.
- Domestic violence contributes to poor health for many survivors.
- Without help, girls who witness domestic violence are more vulnerable to abuse as teens and adults.
- Without help, boys who witness domestic violence are far more likely to become abusers of their partners and/or children as adults, thus continuing the cycle of violence in the next generation.

### MORE IMPORTANT FACTS:

- Most incidents of domestic violence are NEVER reported.
- Victims rarely lie. Experts agree that children ordinarily cannot describe experiences they have never had. We must listen and respond appropriately.<sup>2</sup>

In domestic violence, there is always a misuse of power. Domestic violence is characterized by fear, control, and harm. One person in the relationship uses coercion or force to control the other person or other family members. The abuse can be physical, sexual, or emotional.

There are several reasons why abusers or batterers may choose to abuse their power:

1. He thinks it is his right, that it is part of his role.
2. He feels entitled to use force.
3. He has learned this behavior in his past.
4. This behavior works.

In most reported cases of abuse, the abuser is male; however, keep in mind that abusers can also be female. It doesn't matter who is doing the abusing; there is no acceptance of abuse in healthy, Godly relationships.

Abusers assume they have the right to control all members of their family. This willingness to use violence to accomplish this control is from things that he has learned. From various sources, the abuser has learned that it is appropriate for the person who is bigger and stronger (usually a male) to hit others "for their own good" or because he "loves them."

Abusers learn abusive behavior from various sources including observing parents and peers, misinterpreting biblical teachings, and from the media (jokes, cartoons, and movies that portray control and abuse as a normal part of relationships). Sometimes victims think they are the cause of the abuse. But this is not true. The behavior of the victim does not cause the abuser's violence. The abuser is in control of the violence, not the victim.

These facts are not pleasant and remind us of the brokenness of the world we live in. The wonderful news is that God has not left us alone. The Bible presents the true picture of how human relationships should look. Human beings are created by a loving and relational God who created us to be in a relationship with Him first and then with others. Because we are created in His image (Genesis 1:27), all of our relationships should be a reflection of Him and His love. Of course, unlike God, we are not perfect, and because of these imperfections we will struggle in our relationships. Therefore, we must seek God's guidance for grace and strength to be more loving, kind, patient and exercise self-control in our relationships.

## HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

God has provided a way for us to have healthy relationships. We are called to build each other up; this is called empowering. When we empower one another in the family, we build high trust in the relationship. When we misuse power by dominance and coercion, we tear down trust. Trust is the key to the empowering process.

Parents who empower their children and prepare them for responsible interdependence will provide their children with the skills necessary to live as healthy adults and build and maintain

healthy relationships. When parents use unhealthy forms of power and control with children, the children will grow up detached from their family and learn negative ways of using power and relating to others.

Empowerment is love in action. This is the characteristic of Jesus Christ that our family members must emulate most. If we are able to practice empowerment in our families, it will revolutionize the view of authority in Christian homes. Coercion and manipulation are the opposite of empowerment. They are a distortion of what true power is. Empowerment is about mutuality and unity.

It is God's love and grace that gives us the power to empower others. When mutual empowerment occurs among family members, each will grow exponentially in humility and servant love. Indeed, family members will begin to grow more into the likeness of Christ. His power is promised to us as we seek to have healthy relationships.

## CONCLUSION

Many today find themselves outside of this model of healthy family relationships. In homes where abuse has infiltrated, we encourage you, starting today, to strive towards making your home and relationships abuse-free. We implore you to recognize the abuse and seek counsel and professional help as soon as possible and begin the healing process.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) factsheet. *Domestic Violence Facts*.

<sup>2</sup> Faith Trust Institute, *FAQs about child abuse*. [www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org).

# RETHINKING COMMUNITY IN THE ADVENTIST CHURCH

BY CLIFFORD OWUSU-GYAMFI

The Christian church, since its inception, has long been characterized as a community of believers. Many members meet to discuss their faith, while others find the church to be a family to which they belong. Without a doubt, the church community has especially been a driving force in reaching out to individuals who need a family. That is how the church derives its social identity.

However, as with all other social units, today's social dynamics are heavily influenced by individualism and the pervasive use of digital technologies.<sup>1</sup> It has led to a shift in how people relate to each other, both in their personal lives and within communities. Individualism, the concept that emphasizes individual achievements and self-interests, has challenged the traditional sense of community that has been the backbone of many societies for years.<sup>2</sup>

The rise of individualism has created a sense of fragmentation and disconnection among people, making it difficult for individuals to maintain denominational loyalty.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the advent of digital technologies has resulted in increased virtual communication and the creation of new social spaces. While it has enabled people to connect with others who share similar interests and beliefs, it has also produced a decline in face-to-face interactions, which are vital for building meaningful relationships. The use of digital technologies has led to a decrease in attendance at traditional worship services as people opt for virtual services or seek alternative ways to connect with the church.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the question arises, How can the church position itself to meet the current social landscape?

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## MEANING OF COMMUNITY

*Community* has been defined as a “self-organized network of people with common agenda, cause, or interest, who collaborate by sharing ideas, information, and other resources.”<sup>5</sup> Such a definition presents three motives for establishing a community: (1) to be a self-organized network of people; (2) having a common agenda, cause, or interest; and (3) to collaborate by sharing ideas, information, and other resources.

Several studies have shown that human beings are inherently relational.<sup>6</sup> We exist in relation to God the Creator and to each other as children of God. Genesis 2:18 contains a social identity theory that illustrates that life is a community rather than individual species: “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’”<sup>7</sup> The fellowship we enjoy with each other is thus good in God’s sight.

Additionally, social interaction allows humanity to better appreciate the values of life. The degree to which individuals become conscious of such relationality determines the extent to which a harmonious relationship develops within a certain community and its impact on others.

## THE EARLY CHURCH AND COMMUNITY

Early Christians adopted many communal customs and themes, as detailed in Acts 4:32–35. The passage describes the church as united in “heart and mind,” with members sharing their possessions and no one experiencing need due to the distribution of funds from selling land and homes. The powerful testimony of the apostles regarding the resurrection of Jesus and the presence of God’s grace among them further strengthened the communal structure.

Although the first-century church faced its own obstacles, it strived to create a model church community that redistributed wealth among its members while addressing internal conflicts (Acts 6:1–7). The phrase “all the believers” (Acts 4:32) highlights their social capital and the fairness within the community. Those early Christian communal practices still serve as a blueprint for the ideal Christian community today.

The concept of community includes several key elements, such as communality and individuality.<sup>8</sup> Communality refers to the level of harmony and cohesion within the community, such as a sense of belonging and an environment that encourages active participation. Individuality, on the other hand, is a divine endowment. People come together in groups with unique personalities, attitudes, manners, talents, and social needs. Their combined efforts contribute to the church’s growth, as it is written, “there are many parts, but one body” (1 Cor. 12:20). Individuality describes you as yourself, with your noncoerced convictions and adherence to the ideals of the community. While communities strive to achieve common goals, they should not neglect to improve the standard of quality that distinguishes their members.

Contrary to popular belief, community and individuality can sometimes conflict. We can see this from Joshua 7 in the story of Achan whose covetousness ultimately led to the defeat of Israel by their enemies. Similarly, in the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), their deceitful actions

threatened to disrupt the harmony of the early Christian community. It's important to recognize that individuality should be valued and protected, but anomalies must be addressed to protect the community as a whole. As the book of Philippians advises, "Not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4). Achieving a healthy balance between community and individuality is crucial for the growth and success of any group.

## COMMUNITY IN COMMUNION

Now let's focus on the community in communion. Communities thrive better in an atmosphere of common values. In the past, societies have used such shared concepts to justify nationalism, tribalism, and ethnocentrism. However, that is not supposed to be the case. Community in communion does not signify that people are more equal among themselves than toward others. Rather, it means that their shared values keep their aspirations and actions in alignment.

Existence does not occur in isolation, and interaction serves as a mechanism for individuals to reconcile with the larger group.<sup>9</sup> Communication, information, relationship, and cooperation will foster communal ethics, thus promoting freedom of expression, a listening atmosphere, and concern for one another.

Jesus said, " 'Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another' " (John 13:34, 35). Love is the highest degree of Christianity's identity, and genuine beauty can be found where there is perfect love. The psalmist says, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" (Ps. 133:1).

Love is essential for building any human relationship. If we prioritize love in our marriages, homes, friendships, church communities, and all other social groups, it will leave little room for division, gossip, divorce, loneliness, individualism, insecurities, and cold-heartedness. Love gives human existence its meaning. A community united in love is a divine blessing, and the church should be a model for the rest of the world.

## WAYS TO IMPROVE CHURCH COMMUNITY

Community ideologies play a significant role in shaping daily life in some regions, often affecting how church life is conducted. However, that is not always the case in other parts of the world. Regardless of one's social background, actively working toward a stronger church community should be a deliberate and integral aspect of spiritual growth. Here are some effective strategies for achieving this:

*Encourage a connection with Jesus.* Church community begins with Jesus. He is the central cord that binds the church together. Christ's presence in the heart is His presence in the church. We are to connect with His Word because He is the Word. Each day, we are to ask ourselves, "Is Christ still the life of the church?" A healthy connection with Christ will always shine through our interpersonal interactions.



*Encourage community service.* Help members get involved in church community outreach by participating in activities, events, and volunteer opportunities. Our congregations in Geneva have collaborated with ADRA to serve food to people experiencing homelessness every Sunday. Participation rotates among the churches, and members get the opportunity to serve others who are unlike them. Such events inspire them to overcome parochial self-centeredness, which frequently looms over us and is often the result of our inability to inspire service to others within the church and the wider community.

*Encourage social activities.* Plan regular events, such as potlucks, picnics, and get-togethers, to bring members together in a relaxed and informal setting. Our church community in Geneva organizes regular potlucks after the services. It provides an opportunity to interact with one another and get to know our visitors, and it encourages members to stay for afternoon programs. A group from our church organizes trips to visit tourist sites. Occasionally unchurched people have joined the outings. Look around you to find what suits your community. Every social event, small or big, can unite and encourage members to know each other better.

*Encourage small group formation.* Form small groups of 3 to 12 people within the church in which members can connect with others. Years back, we had a small group that began with a song service, then prayer, a passage for group discussion, and finally, a meal. Some members were non-Adventists. God used the group to convert two drug addicts who are now serving in different church capacities. Small groups enable members to connect and disciple others. Pray God to show where small group ministry can help your church connect, grow, and evangelize.

*Encourage effective communication.* Keep members informed about upcoming events and other important news through regular newsletters, emails, and social media updates. In today's social media technologies, effective communication must use multichannel approaches: Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, and other social media. I have a WhatsApp broadcast list to communicate with my church members. With just the press of the send button, every member with a phone gets updates on upcoming events. Through our social media outlets, former church members can still connect with the church community.

*Encourage church leadership care.* Provide pastoral support and encouragement in times of need, such as through home or hospital visitation. Recently, a friend revealed to me his plan to switch Adventist congregations because he felt unsupported by his current one during a time of loss. I have heard similar stories. Our congregation has organized occasional Zoom bereavement services to provide a valuable resource during the difficult process of loss and grief. Effective pastoral care teams should provide a listening ear, comforting presence, and guidance through faith or spiritual practices to help individuals cope with their struggles and restore trust and confidence in the church community.

*Encourage united prayer.* Help members pray for one another and the church community as a whole. Prayer shows that the church is dependent upon God. At times hearts will fail, leading to a lack of involvement in the church community. The church must come together to pray for and with such persons. Once a quarter, members of our church join in a time of fasting and prayer to seek

God's guidance and blessings. And we have tried to maintain our midweek prayer meetings because prayer brings church members together and keeps them united.

## PRIORITIES

In conclusion, the church has long been a source of community and social identity for its members, providing a sense of family and connection. However, in the current social landscape, characterized by rampant individualism and digital technologies, the church must take steps to remain relevant and engaging to its members. To do this, it must focus on creating an environment conducive to fostering meaningful relationships and community.

Emphasize the importance of personal devotion to Christ, community outreach programs, pastoral care, and united prayer, and provide opportunities, such as small group gatherings and social events, for members to engage in meaningful conversations. Additionally, the church should also embrace digital technologies and use them to reach those who may not have access to the church itself. By embracing the current social landscape, the church can remain a vibrant source of community and social identity for every member.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Daniel Miller et al., "Individualism," *How the World Changed Social Media*, 1st ed. (UCL Press, 2016), 181–192
- <sup>2</sup> Yuriy Gorodnichenko and Gerard Roland, "Individualism, Innovation and Long-Run Growth," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 108, supplement 4 (2011): 21316–21319, <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1101933108>
- <sup>3</sup> Richard Rice, "The Challenge of Spiritual Individualism (And How to Meet It)," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 43, no. 1 (2005): 113–131
- <sup>4</sup> Randall Koops, "Technology and Religious Decline," *The Banner*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.thebanner.org/columns/2022/02/technology-and-religious-decline>
- <sup>5</sup> Business Dictionary online, s.v. "community," accessed May 3, 2023, <https://businessdictionary.info/definition/community/>
- <sup>6</sup> Susan M. Andersen and Serena Chen, "The Relational Self: An Interpersonal Social-Cognitive Theory," *Psychological Review* 109, no. 4 (Oct. 2002): 619–645; Susan Goldberg, Roy Muir, and John Kerr, eds., *Attachment Theory: Social Developmental and Clinical Perspectives*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016)
- <sup>7</sup> Scripture in this article is from the New International Version
- <sup>8</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 154
- <sup>9</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1969), 108.

# TAMING THE SOCIAL MEDIA BEAST: TIPS FOR ACHIEVING BALANCE

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BY SAMANTHA GONZALEZ

In a crowded room, all is silent. Heads are bent, eyes fixed on a mobile device as fingers scroll endlessly through videos and images. Every now and then a chuckle or mutter can be heard while a child watches a cartoon loudly on their tablet. There is minimal conversation apart from a person showing a companion the latest viral video or post. Another person pulls on their screen over and over, refreshing their social media feed for more content to engage with. Does this scene sound familiar?

During the past two decades, social media has become an integral part of the lives of most Americans. Statista estimates that as of 2023, 308.2 million Americans regularly use a form of social media. The United States has the third-largest social media audience, following China and India. The number of social media users in the U.S. is projected to peak at 331 million by the year 2028.<sup>1</sup>

Humans by nature are social, and it is undeniable that social media platforms have impacted the way we navigate and interact with the world. Following the inception of Facebook in 2004, social media platforms have expanded our ability to connect with people across the globe.

It has allowed individuals to challenge cultural barriers, interact with other belief systems, and challenge ideas of identity. Society is seemingly more connected than ever before; fellowship with others is only the click of a button away. Platforms have even implemented

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computer algorithms that tailor a person's social media feed to their unique interests. People have more freedom of expression, producing and even marketing their creations.

With all these benefits, you may wonder, What's the harm in consuming media without limitations? Of course, in theory there's no harm in watching some funny videos or commenting on a friend's post. Social media use becomes a concern when it impacts one's ability to attend to their responsibilities or affects their mental health. Like many things in life, social media can be a double-edged sword.

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND CHILDREN

America's youth have never known an age without the Internet and smartphones. Media is now consumable in a variety of ways, such as video games, social networking sites, and television. Unlike their parents, today's youth can access information by inputting a few keystrokes.

A study conducted by Pew Research Center in 2022 estimated that 95 percent of American teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 engage with social media platforms, with 35 percent of teens reporting using social media "almost constantly."<sup>2</sup> They discovered that teenagers' daily use of devices averaged five and a half hours, owing in part to the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic. While social media has increased learning and creativity among today's children, it has had several detrimental impacts on their mental and physical well-being.

A study conducted by the International Journal of Adolescence and Youth<sup>3</sup> showed that the popularity of Internet usage has led to the rise of sedentary behavior. Children and adolescents who previously would be seen at local parks playing sports with their peers now choose to stay home connecting with their friends through video games or social networking.

As children have become less physically active, childhood obesity has risen in the United States, with an estimated 17 percent of children and adolescents classified as obese by their physicians. The lack of exercise also increases the risk of physical health conditions as well as being correlated with increased psychological distress.

Because of minimal vetting of age, children and adolescents can easily join social media platforms. Children today can easily find dangerous, harmful, or inappropriate content. Whether through computer algorithms or unwanted messages, children can be exposed to images of substance use, violence, or derogatory behavior. Exposure to harmful media has been linked with increased anxiety, depression, and potential substance use disorders.

## CONNECTED YET DISCONNECTED

Despite the connectivity of social media, Americans have moved away from face-to-face interactions and toward superficial relationships. Many Americans today prefer texting to phone conversations, which increases the physical and emotional disconnect from others. Physical interaction has been replaced with liking an individual's social media post or sending them an instant message. Online activity creates a false sense of connection—individuals can engage with

many “friends” on social media and in reality be socially isolated. Social networking has removed the emotional labor of developing relationships and has led to the breakdown of interpersonal skills.

The anonymity of social platforms has also led to the rise of the hateful behavior dubbed “cyberbullying.” It is a digital form of aggression in which individuals harass and threaten victims through social media, cell phones, email, or other electronic technologies. Individuals can mask their physical identity and contact their victims at all hours as a result of the Internet’s 24/7 availability.

Cyberbullying has risen among young people, with 45 percent of adolescents having experienced at least one form of online harassment. Adults experience cyberbullying as well, with up to 24 percent having been a target of harassment as determined by the *Journal of Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Pew Research Center,<sup>5</sup> cyberbullying can be defined as offensive name calling, spreading false rumors, receiving explicit images, sharing of explicit images without consent, physical threats, and persistent questions about their activities or whereabouts. Cyberbullying has been linked with psychological distress, suicidal ideation, and suicide because of persistent online harassment.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Unlimited access to the Internet via computers and smartphones has exposed our brains to a constant stream of visual stimuli. This is in part because social media is designed to be addictive. As we receive a like or comment on social media, our brain secretes dopamine, the chemical associated with reward or reinforcement of behaviors.

More interaction with social media creates a feedback loop or self-perpetuating cycle. For example, some people will close an app on their phone only to open it moments later and continuously refresh their feed, looking for the next exciting post. How can one break free?

### FOR ADULTS

Be mindful of your time. Do you know how much time you are currently spending on social media? Certain apps and phones have ways to monitor social media usage. By increasing our awareness of the total time spent on apps, we have a starting point for reducing our use.

Create opportunities for technology-free moments. Put your phone down during social gatherings, reconnect with old hobbies, start new hobbies, or go for a walk. Silence your app notifications to minimize distractions.

Set time limits. Set a timer as a boundary for using social media apps. Set aside a certain time of day to put the phone down. Following dinner, for example.

Reduce or even delete social media apps. Yes, it’s possible to live without them!

### FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Foster communication and expectations for social media usage. Together, families can come

up with boundaries and rules and adhere to them. For example, limiting the use of technology one hour before bedtime.

Model healthy social media engagement. Children learn how to navigate the world through the way their caregiver operates. Parents can provide an example by limiting their own social media use, being mindful of the content they interact with, and the way they behave on social media.

Increase your awareness of what your child is consuming. Caregivers can limit the harm a child experiences by constantly communicating about the sites a child is engaging with and the types of posts or videos in their feeds.

Teach kids about the risks and benefits of social media. Empower children to be responsible with technology by educating them on the ways they can protect themselves, such as implementing privacy settings. This can look like setting a child's media profile to "private," which limits outside messages from individuals they do not know. Educate children on such dangers as cyberbullying, harassment, and inappropriate adult behavior.

### FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Be mindful of what you share with others. The Internet is forever; our public information can be accessed and stored easily. Limit the amount of information you share publicly with those you don't know. If you are unsure a post is appropriate, ask a parent or trusted adult. Block messages and friend requests from people you do not know.

Balance. Limit the use of devices to one hour before bedtime, because screen time is linked to disrupted sleep quality. Foster meaningful personal relationships by putting your phone down. Instead, make in-person interactions a priority to create relationships that last.

Ask for help. Reach out to a safe adult or close friend if you experience cyberbullying, harassment, or inappropriate social media interactions. Abuse lives in silence; reach out for support or contact the 988 Mental Health Crisis Lifeline. Reducing one's social media use does not mean never using the Internet again. It is about becoming more intentional about the content you engage with and the priority it has in your life. Life is about balance. We can still find new content to interact with and have time for the important things.

Read more at: <https://adventistreview.org/magazine-article/taming-the-social-media-beast/>

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278409/number-of-social-network-users-in-the-united-states/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02673843.2019.1590851?needAccess=true&role=button>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/shame-nation/201911/adult-cyberbullying-is-more-common-you-think>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/12/15/teens-and-cyberbullying-2022/>

# WHEN GRIEF IS YOUR COMPANION

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BY AUDREY ANDERSSON

They were simple questions: Date of birth? Age? I looked at the form and felt paralyzed. I wanted to write born October 23, 2016; age, 6½. Anyone looking at me would tell me not to be so ridiculous. I am clearly a middle-aged woman. However, both facts are true. I am middle-aged, and I am also 6½. A split-second accident six and a half years ago killed my husband. His life ended, and my life changed completely. Life as I knew it and the future we had taken for granted disappeared in that instant. A new life began. A life I had never anticipated. A life I definitely didn't want began. I had to learn to negotiate a new world, where I didn't know the rules.

Six and a half years on I realize that this is a journey in which there are no quick fixes or magic solutions. It is a journey that will last for the rest of my life. An unwanted journey watered with tears and blessed by the sunshine of God's grace. A journey in which I have learned to know the goodness of God in new and amazing ways.

## A UNIQUE JOURNEY

Everyone's experience of significant loss is unique. Two siblings mourning the loss of a parent will experience it differently. Their personality, life experience, and relationship to their parent will determine how they respond to the death.

Following my husband's death, someone said, "Welcome to the club no one wants to join." I didn't understand. She explained that once you have experienced significant loss, it changes you. After a while you recognize others who have shared that experience. One becomes sensitized

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to loss and resonates with it in others. It may be the death of a spouse after a long illness, or sudden, traumatic loss. The death of a child, born or unborn. The gradual loss of a parent through Alzheimer's or dementia, until death finally completes the process. Significant loss comes in many different forms.

Although everyone's journey is unique, there are commonalities—experiences that seem to cut across all kinds of significant loss and resonate with others. For example, a friend whose husband died recently commented to a colleague that her brain felt as if it were enveloped in fog, and she was permanently exhausted. The colleague immediately understood what she was talking about. Her experience was very different. Her son committed suicide, yet she understood the foggy brain syndrome and was able to offer comfort and understanding. Very different situations, but there was a touchpoint where they connected. The acknowledgment that someone else had gone through this and survived gave her courage, and assured my friend she was not going mad. Being vulnerable and open to share brings benefits and blessings.

## LIFE ON HOLD

In the immediate aftermath of death, everything seems to go into a state of suspended animation. Some immediate decisions need to be made about the funeral. Decisions that cannot wait. Days pass in a blur. People come and offer condolences and support, sending flowers and cards. The day of the funeral comes, and afterward people drift back to their everyday lives. The only problem is you can't. The life you want to go back to no longer exists.

At this stage people often offer fake comfort: "I know it doesn't feel like it, but time heals all things." Death is not an illness, something to be cured, or that you get over. Grief is not a process that you go through, and once you have ticked off all the stages you are able to continue as though nothing has happened. Loss is something that you learn to integrate, to live with, but you don't get over it.

## LOVE DOESN'T DIE

Grief has been described as "love that has nowhere to go." Death cuts off our ability to interact with someone. Suddenly it is not possible to share the trivial happenings of the day, ask for their advice, go for a walk, or do all the things that make a relationship meaningful. Death doesn't change the fact that we love someone, but it changes the way that love is expressed.

When you love someone, you talk about them. You tell others about your experiences together and share memories. Initially others indulge you, whispering, "It's all part of the grieving process." As time progresses there is less understanding. It is not uncommon to hear "You really mustn't dwell in the past; you need to look forward" or "It's not healthy to keep talking about...; you need to move on."

They are correct: talking is one way of processing, but that is only part of the picture. Those shared experiences are part of who you are. Yes, that part of your life is finished, but that doesn't



change the fact that it is part of who you are. Acknowledging the past is one way of integrating that love and moving forward.

## REDRAWING THE MAP

Although life and plans changed when my husband died, there were some things that we had talked about that seemed important to continue: delivering a promised birthday treat for a sibling; arranging a trip to England for my mother-in-law. It wasn't the same, as he wasn't there; but doing things that I knew would have given him pleasure provided a breathing space.

Inevitably the day came when there were no more joint plans and projects. I was on my own. Sometimes I asked myself then, If Lars were here, what would he suggest? My imaginary conversations helped me redraw the map. Again, it provided a breathing space.

As time passes, the distance between our lived experience and my current situation is so significant that I recognize those decisions must be made by me. One of the hardest lessons on this unwanted journey is to reach out and ask for help. People are willing to help; they just don't know how.

## CHANGED RELATIONSHIPS

Death impacts all our relationships. In the immediate aftermath of significant loss, there are people you believed that you could count on no matter what happened, yet when the unthinkable happens, they are not there. There are many reasons, but the most common is that they feel uncomfortable, afraid that they might say the wrong thing or hurt you by reminding you of what you have lost.

People you didn't know well take a more prominent role in your life, providing support and understanding. Often they are people who have either experienced significant loss or have seen it at close quarters. Some of these people may come for only a short while; others become friends for life.

As time progresses, social networks will change. Couples often feel uncomfortable inviting a widow or widower. Some things that could be done with a spouse cannot be done alone, creating a natural change in companions or activities.

Learning to let go of friendships that no longer work is difficult. Holding on and trying to make something work creates additional pain. Finding ways of celebrating what was and being open to creating new friendships and networks is an essential tool in integrating loss into your new life.

## MULTIPLE LOSSES

Death is the largest and most significant loss that anyone can face. In the case of the death of a spouse, the surviving spouse suddenly must face life alone. Life patterns and plans change at every level. From small habits, such as who takes the garbage out, to life-impacting decisions regarding housing or retirement.

As time progresses, other losses emerge. The inability to share significant life events, such as graduations, weddings, or the birth of grandchildren. Their absence is felt more keenly on these occasions. However, the grief is not just for their absence; it is also for the life that they did not get to live. All the dreams that they did not get to fulfill. In death there are no winners, only losers.

## RECURRING LOSS

When someone dies, everyone talks about the first year. The first birthday, Thanksgiving, and Christmas without them. The first birthday they didn't get to celebrate. It sounds like if one can only get through that first year, everything will be better. You will have "gotten over the worst of it"; you will have "moved on." When the first anniversary or deathiversary arrives, there is a sense of relief at having survived the year of firsts, only to realize that there is a year of seconds, and thirds, and . . . the years stretch out.

With each passing year loss and grief change. The raw pain of immediate loss recedes. The heart-shaped hole that someone leaves behind remains and becomes part of the landscape of our lives.

As we move forward, events will happen, forcing us to revisit and reprocess our loss. Recently I moved to the United States. Having moved many times, I didn't anticipate that this would be any different from any other move. It was. I had made all the other moves as part of a family or with my husband. Suddenly all the decisions were mine, and I found myself having to take time to sit and reprocess and remember that I was only 6½ and didn't have all the answers. Sometimes being 6½ in an adult world can be exhausting; at times like this, be kind to yourself. Give yourself the compassion that you would offer to someone else.

## A DAMAGED BLUEPRINT

According to God's original blueprint, we were created to live forever, enjoying ever-deepening relationships with Him and each other. When human beings chose to listen to the serpent, sin damaged the blueprint, and death entered our world. Ever since, humanity has struggled to deal with the pain of separation from God and those we love.

## MOVING FORWARD

Easter Sunday, six months after my husband died, I stopped to admire a beautiful cherry tree on my morning walk. As I looked, I remembered that nine months earlier we had had a bad storm, and a very large branch (almost half the tree) had been ripped off. My husband and I had noticed it on our morning walk, and he had stated quite categorically that they would need to cut the tree down. It couldn't possibly survive. But here it was in full bloom.

As I looked at the tree, I saw the scar where the branch had been. Yes, the tree was misshapen; yes, there was a scar; but the tree was still beautiful. Even the scar had a beauty—cherry wood has

a lovely reddish grain. It was one of those moments it seemed as though God tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Yes, you are scarred, but some scars are beautiful. They remind you of love and loss. The scars make you who you are; be proud of them and what they represent. However, don’t focus on the scar. Remember the abundant blessings I have given you. Blossom and flourish and draw strength from what has been.” There will be times you’ll feel that everything is fine, and at the most unexpected moment a sight, smell, word, or action will make your loss feel unbearably heavy. In joy and grief God is there. Moving forward after loss is the work of a lifetime: learning and relearning about the goodness of God and how to recognize it in the most unexpected places. In my experience God has never failed in the past. He is with me today, so I have nothing to fear as I look to the future.

Read more at: <https://adventistreview.org/magazine-article/when-grief-is-your-companion/>

# WHEN HEARTS ARE BREAKING

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BY KAREN HOLFORD

The phone rings. The news is shocking and devastating. Someone you know has lost a loved one. You want to let them know you care, but where do you start? How can you bring God's love and care into the lives of those who are bereaved? Before you walk alongside a grieving friend, prayerfully reflect on your own beliefs about death, grief, and comfort. Have you ever experienced a bereavement? What emotions did you experience? How did you manage those feelings? What did people do and say that comforted you, and what made you feel worse? How did your relationship with God comfort you? Which Bible verses soothed your pain?

Perhaps you grew a protective shell around your heart to stop it from being hurt. Is it difficult to feel compassion for others because you were not shown compassion when you needed it? Where are you now on your journey through healing? These are important and challenging questions to ponder when we encounter grief in another person's life. It is difficult for us to comfort others well when we have not received comfort ourselves.

## THE LIVING SOURCE

Our loving Father knows we need comfort to help us process the extreme emotional pain of living in this broken world. God Himself is the source of this comfort. He is the "God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor. 1:3, 4). Before

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we comfort our grieving friends, our own hearts need the comfort of our loving and compassionate Father, so that we can offer His healing comfort to others.

Imagine you are sitting in the lap of your loving Father, and you are telling Him about your deepest grief. He is filled with compassion for your painful loss. His loving heart is strong enough for all your complex emotions—anger, frustration, sadness, fear, confusion—and difficult questions.

As you express your messy emotions, He holds you close to His heart and whispers comforting words into your ear until your sobbing subsides, and you can hear His heart beating with love for you. He is the God who notices every tear that falls (Ps. 56:8), and longs for the day He will personally wipe away all your tears with His loving hands (Rev. 21:4). Once we have been comforted by God, we are ready to help Him comfort others. Jesus told His followers: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matt. 5:4). And Paul told us to “weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15).

Here are some helpful suggestions as you seek to comfort others:

Pray that you will be a channel of God’s loving comfort into their pain. Keep listening to what the Comforter is inspiring you to say and do.

Be with those who are grieving. Be God’s loving and comforting arms. If it’s appropriate, give them a hug. Tell them this is like a hug from God, to show how much He cares right now.

Listen first. Hear their story and listen to their emotions. Listen patiently, give eye contact, offer tissues, accept their confusion, anger, and deep grief. It is normal for people to use words they wouldn’t usually say. Let them go. Don’t judge people for what they say and do in their times of agonizing loss. It will only add to their pain.

Don’t offer explanations or advice. Don’t tell them to stop being sad because we have a future hope. This will not be helpful. A deeply grieving person finds it difficult to access their rational and hopeful brain. Their greatest need is for kind words and immediate actions that will soothe their pain and stimulate the release of oxytocin to help heal their heart. When someone tries to “fix” their sadness quickly, it usually causes more hurt, confusion, and grief. Unhelpful words can cause deep and memorable wounds that last a lifetime. “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace [blessing] to the hearers” (Eph. 4:29).

Being present with your grieving friend is deeply comforting. Weeping with them is very healing. It shows that you share in their sadness and loss. “Mourning with” might sound like: “I’m so sad that you are so sad.” “Your loss touches my heart deeply.” “I don’t have the words to express how much I care right now. I just want to be here and feel it with you.” Keep it simple and honest. Better to be silent and sad with them than to speak and hurt them.

Each person’s journey through grief is unique, depending on how their family grieves, cultural expectations, personality, previous experiences with loss and comfort, and their personal experience of each loss. Don’t be alarmed by their strong feelings and words. Accept their feelings, and their up-and-down, back-and-forth journey through grief. Be there for them, through the years, when their sadness is triggered by something unexpected.

Imagine you are in their position and think about what you would need most. It may be helpful to offer two or three things you could do for them and let them choose which would be most helpful. One close person who checks in with their needs can often coordinate the most practical and compassionate care through the tragedy.

The journey through grief is a long one. Keep checking in regularly to listen to them, pray, and show care. Help them to experience moments of love, joy, and peace, even in their sadness, to give them hope and healing and sparkles of light in the darkness.

Reflect. What went well? How was the person blessed and comforted? What could I say or do differently next time? Pray “God, help me to be the best comforter I can be, with You, in the grieving places of this broken world. Amen.”

Read more at: <https://adventistreview.org/article/when-hearts-are-breaking/>

# WHO HAS THE MOST INFLUENCE ON YOUR SPIRITUALITY?

BY JOSEPH KIDDER AND NATALIE M. DARISME

Every morning before grade school, I (Natalie) would scamper from my room down the hall to my parent's room and peer around the corner quietly. I would see the silhouette of my mother praying or reading her Bible and would climb into my parents' bed and snuggle up to her as she finished her prayers before getting ready for school. Observing my mother's faith impacted my spirituality and influenced my relationship with Christ.

When you think of someone with the ability to teach others about God, who automatically comes to your mind? Perhaps a pastor or chaplain. In reality, those who have the most spiritual influence are much closer to home.

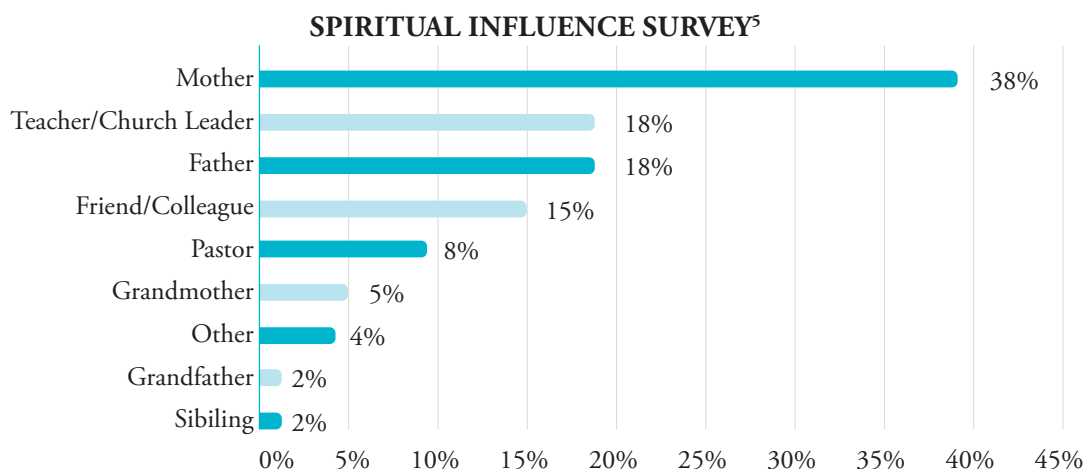
Many churchgoers and pastors alike believe the local pastor has the most opportunity to deeply impact a person's long-term spirituality. This expectation is unrealistic and unsustainable, and many pastors get burned out trying to fulfill it!<sup>1</sup> The role of the pastor is to create a healthy and loving environment and inspire and train church members to engage in discipleship and evangelism. We set out to discover who has the most influence on how people will turn out spiritually.

Out of a sample of 386 people taken between January 2021 and April 2023,<sup>2</sup> 39% of our spiritual influence survey participants said their mother had the strongest influence on their faith.<sup>3</sup> Teachers came in next with 18% and fathers at 18%.<sup>4</sup> Friends and colleagues were 15%, with pastors only at 8%. (See table below). What does this mean?

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Your influence on the spiritual lives of those around you is much more significant than you think. 82% of unchurched people are likely to attend church if invited!<sup>6</sup> As a parent, you are the number one force driving the spiritual outcome of your child as you model your faith.<sup>7</sup>

As a teacher or friend, how you model spirituality through a relationship of trust will impact someone for the rest of their lives, likely even more than their local pastor! These outcomes are due to proximity and relationship. The people you spend significant time within the classroom, at your job, and around the dinner table- will influence your belief system the most.<sup>8</sup>

## INFLUENCING FOR ETERNITY

Paul writes to Timothy, his young mentee, commenting on the faith Timothy learned from the women in his family: “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well” (2 Timothy 1:5, ESV). Just as Timothy was shown what faith looks like in how he was raised, we should aim to raise the children in our community with a faith that endures.

Paul also recognized the power of his influential relationship when he became a spiritual father to Timothy. In 1 Timothy 1:2, Paul calls Timothy his “son in the faith.”<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that Paul’s ministry work was extremely busy, these verses reveal that Paul still took the time to invest in the life of Timothy by learning about his family and upbringing. The relationships you develop with others have the power to influence them for eternity. Through our research, we discovered several ways you can use your power of influence to bring others to Christ.<sup>10</sup>

## THE POWER OF INVITATION

Tracy grew up in an unsafe home, so during high school, she found belonging with a group of students who smoked and got high together because they could identify with each other’s difficult life experiences.



One evening, they passed a Christian youth group while heading with her friends to get high. Tracy was about to walk by, but then she recognized one of the guys in the group. He had always treated Tracy with respect and kindness. As he waved, inviting them over, Tracy felt urged to accept the invitation.

She quietly listened to one of the youth share about Jesus and how God loved each one of them. But she struggled to harmonize that love with the lack of love she grew up with. The Holy Spirit convicted her heart, and she realized the Spirit that urged her to go to the concert was the same One calling her to go up and accept Jesus into her heart. While people prayed over her, she felt peace flood her heart.

Tracy's new church embraced her without judgment as she grew in Jesus' love. Today, Tracy is a powerful youth leader in her local church because of the invitation she received. She regularly takes in youth who need love and shelter, helping teens get on a better life path.

The power of an invitation to follow Jesus is strong. About half of the people surveyed by Barna say they would be "open to being invited to church by a friend."<sup>11</sup> Who could you invite this week? Lifeway Research found that 47% of people who attend a Bible study do so because a friend invited them.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus used the power of invitation frequently. He invited each of the twelve disciples to follow Him, including Matthew, a tax collector and outcast in society (Matthew 9:9-13). Jesus invited Himself to Zacchaeus' house, and Zacchaeus invited Jesus into His heart (Luke 19:1-10). Jesus has invited each of us into a relationship with Him, and we are called to invite others to join us in following Him.

When Jesus encountered the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:1-26, He invited her to drink living water and never thirst again. He was talking about the salvation that only He could give and the peace and hope a relationship with Him brings. After accepting His invitation, she hurried back to her town and invited everyone she could find to come to meet the Messiah! Her testimony to her friends was so compelling that they dropped everything to go and see Jesus. Your invitation and testimony, through the work of the Holy Spirit, can have that same outcome!

## THE POWER OF DISCIPLESHIP

Jeff has been a grade schoolteacher for 19 years and has always been engaged in discipling his students both inside and outside of class time. He has a Sabbath celebration with his students every Friday. He gives Bible studies for baptism, attends every birthday party he is invited to, welcomes them into his home, and keeps track of his students after they have left his classroom. He attends their weddings and holds their new babies.

Jeff's intentional discipleship has kept many young people connected to Jesus. Because Jeff served as a spiritual father to his students, he has had the joy of seeing many baptisms as a result of his Bible studies. Many of his students have called him for advice on relationships, career choices, and spiritual questions over the years. His former students trust him to this day because of the care he showed them even after they left his classroom.

You've probably heard the word "discipleship" used often in Christian circles. Being "a disciple" means being a follower of a teaching or a way of life. Being a disciple of Jesus means following His teachings and practices. Discipleship is lifelong, not instantaneous, and it's something every church member can do.

Discipleship is more than formal Bible studies and weekly Sabbath school lessons. The work of discipling is done daily through everyday interactions. In the Hebrew Shema, found in Deuteronomy 6:1-9, God gives instructions on how parents can help their children develop a love for Him and obey His commandments: "Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road when you lie down, and when you get up."<sup>13</sup> Discipling those we interact with is done through these daily life moments: when teaching sportsmanship in basketball practice, when you go on a hike with your family, or when you practice with your praise band. Discipling others is a way of life that seizes every opportunity to impart faith.

When people in our survey were asked if the atmosphere and culture of their church leaned more toward social activities or discipleship, 79% answered social, and 13% answered discipleship. Lifeway researchers found that "churchgoers build relationships, but often without discipleship."<sup>14</sup> Perhaps part of the problem is that churches forget that social activities *are* perfect environments for discipleship. Evangelistic programs, Bible studies, and small groups are only a few of the many ways we can intentionally disciple others. Discipling is not difficult; we just need to open our eyes and find opportunities to share our faith and values with others. All churches must be intentional about the culture they are creating so that healthy fellowship and discipleship can occur in their local context.

## THE POWER OF ENCOURAGEMENT & FOLLOW-UP

Amelia, who grew up in the church, went through a period of rebellion in her younger years. After leaving the church, while going through dark valleys in her life, Charlotte reached out to Amelia. They had attended the same church together in the past. Charlotte felt impressed to care for Amelia. She helped her navigate dark valleys and walked with her by regularly taking her out to dinner, visiting her, calling her weekly, and challenging her in love to make the right decisions.

Amelia says what brought her back to God and the church was the encouragement of Charlotte, her "adopted spiritual mom." Charlotte, by keeping in close contact with Amelia, developed a bond that allowed Amelia to navigate the challenges of life and bring her to the right path.<sup>15</sup>

In our Spiritual Influence Survey, we discovered that only 32%<sup>16</sup> of participants said that someone has followed up with them and checked on their spiritual health. Yet 96% wanted someone to check up on them, mentor them, disciple them, encourage them, and pray with them. One participant even said: "I wish someone would teach me how to pray, read the Bible, and worship God." People desire continuous discipleship, so we should not be afraid to take the initiative to disciple someone in a formal or informal setting.

The 59 instances where the phrase "one another" is found in the New Testament show how essential it is to create a fellowship that leads to intentional discipleship in church culture.<sup>17</sup>

This means investing in the life of someone else by loving other people, instructing others, being encouraging, not judging, creating an accepting environment, and so on.

Paul and Barnabas mentored a young person who ministered with them, John Mark. But on one of their missionary trips, John Mark became weary and left them to go home. So, Paul no longer wanted John Mark to travel with them. But Barnabas saw potential in him. After a “sharp disagreement,” Paul left with Silas, and Barnabas continued doing mission work with John Mark. Barnabas, the “Son of Encouragement,” mentored John Mark to become an influential disciple of Jesus. Today, we have the Gospel of Mark because Barnabas didn’t give up on John Mark (Acts 15:39). Even later on, Paul found a way to use Mark in his mission work and said in 2 Timothy 4:11 that Mark was valuable to him. He discovered that his perspective on John Mark had been too harsh. You may not see instant results in the life of your mentee. But if you persist over time, as Barnabas did, you may see God transform them and do amazing work in them.

## CONCLUSION

When I (Joe) first started attending the local Adventist church in Bagdad, it was an eerie experience. It was different than the Orthodox church I had been to a few times before. I didn’t know anyone, and the style of worship was unfamiliar. But I enjoyed learning about Jesus. Bashir and Selma, a couple in their 20s, spotted me at church and started talking to me, inviting me to their home for lunch, praying with me, and asking how I was doing in my walk with Jesus.

When I was kicked out of my home, they invited me to live with them. They read the Bible with me every night, and we worshiped together daily. They taught me how to keep the Sabbath, how to read the Bible, how to pray, and how to worship. I am in the faith today because they were a source of encouragement and discipleship in my time of need.

Just as Bashir and Selma discipled a new believer, you can do the same. Invite others to meet Jesus and find ways to disciple them in their walk with God. God can use you to impact someone else for eternity.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Carey Nieuwhof, “How Pastoral Care Stunts the Growth of Most Churches,” accessed April 19, 2023, <https://careynieuwhof.com/how-pastoral-care-stunts-the-growth-of-most-churches/>
- <sup>2</sup> This sample comprised of students at the seminary and churchgoers from various churches in the North American Division and Inter-American Division. Respondents were given the opportunity to mark as many options as they wanted, and were urged to submit stories of their personal experience as well.
- <sup>3</sup> Emma Green, “It’s the Moms Who Get Kids to Church,” *The Atlantic*, October 26, 2016, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/10/its-the-moms-who-get-kids-to-church/505310/>
- <sup>4</sup> Michael Gryboski, “Mothers contribute more to kid’s spiritual growth than fathers, Barna study says,” *Christian Post*, July 13, 2019, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/mothers-contribute-more-kids-spiritual-growth-than-fathers-barna-study.html>
- <sup>5</sup> This composition included the following figures, which does not add up to 100% due to survey participants answering more than one option for people who spiritually influenced them. Out of 386 people, answers were as follows: Mother = 150, Father = 69, Teacher = 71, Friend/Colleague = 56, Pastor = 29, Grandmother = 20, Other = 16, Grandfather = 8, Sibling = 7.
- <sup>6</sup> Scott Knowlton, “82% of Unchurched People are Somewhat Likely to Attend Church If Invited,” August 27, 2013, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://scottknowlton.wordpress.com/2013/08/27/82-of-unchurched-people-are-somewhat-likely-to-attend-church-if-invited/>
- <sup>7</sup> Barna Group, “How Faith Heritage Relates to Faith Practice,” *Barna*, July 9, 2019, accessed April 19, 2023, [https://www.barna.com/research/faith-heritage-faith-practice?mc\\_cid=fc133c2aff8&mc\\_eid=e78aa9ba2e](https://www.barna.com/research/faith-heritage-faith-practice?mc_cid=fc133c2aff8&mc_eid=e78aa9ba2e)
- <sup>8</sup> “One-In-Five U.S. Adults Were Raised In Interfaith Homes,” *Pew Research Center*, October 26, 2016, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.pewforum.org/2016/10/26/links-between-childhood-religious-upbringing-and-current-religious-identity/>
- <sup>9</sup> Paul also does this with both Onesimus and Titus. See Philemon 1:1-2, 10 and Titus 1:4.
- <sup>10</sup> These conclusions resulted from data compiled through surveys, conversations, and stories received from over 386 participants in our study from 2021-2023.
- <sup>11</sup> “Five Trends Among the Unchurched,” *Research Releases in Culture & Media*, Barna, October 9, 2014, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.barna.com/research/five-trends-among-the-unchurched/>
- <sup>12</sup> Ken Braddy, “The Top Reason People Attend Bible Study Groups,” Lifeway Research, June 1, 2021, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2021/06/01/the-top-reason-people-attend-bible-study-groups?ecid=PDM238140&bid=1143025373>
- <sup>13</sup> See Deuteronomy 6:4-9, NIV.
- <sup>14</sup> Aaron Earls, “Churchgoers Build Relationships, But Often Without Discipleship,” *Lifeway Research*, May 8, 2019, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/05/08/churchgoers-build-relationships-but-often-without-discipleship/>
- <sup>15</sup> Researcher Kara Powell, from Fuller Youth Institute, suggests that youth need 2-5 adults to mentor them, keep track of them and love them in her presentation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5aIjFM33C6o>. Accessed April 19, 2023.
- <sup>16</sup> These figures are based on 386 survey participants who answered this question.
- <sup>17</sup> Gary Gilley, “Biblical Discipleship- Fellowship”, Volume 20, Issue 2, March/April 2014, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://totministries.org/biblical-discipleship-fellowship/>

# REPRINTED ARTICLES

— In this section you will find timeless articles that are carefully selected to assist you in your work with families.

# MY MARRIAGE IS OVER

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BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

## QUESTION

**My marriage of five years is over. There is no love remaining in our relationship. We disagree about everything and every conversation is tension-filled. I am thinking about getting a divorce soon and probably marrying my old boyfriend from high school, who has been talking to me lately. He has always been a very kind and sweet guy, we've always had fun together and he still makes me laugh. As a Christian, I am wondering if it is alright to move forward with this relationship that has so much promise. I know marriage is important to God, but I also feel like God would want me to be happy. Your thoughts?**

We are very sad to hear your marriage has not lived up to your expectations and you are ready to leave it behind. Marriage is probably one of the most challenging relationships on earth, even when the husband and wife are believers. So, unless you go into marriage with your eyes wide open, invest in a rigorous process of premarital counseling/education, and make Jesus the center of your marriage, it is easy to become frustrated and give up on your marriage prematurely.

Marriage was the first institution established by God at Creation as referenced in Genesis 2:18, 24: "And the Lord God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him...' Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

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Later on, in the New Testament, the Pharisees asked Jesus if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason. Jesus responds in Matthew 19:4-6: “And He answered and said to them, ‘Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.’”

As you can see by what Jesus said to the Pharisees, marriage was meant to be a life-long commitment between a man and a woman. This means, deciding to get married also includes approaching it with an attitude of permanence. And, of course, as a believer, you would want your marriage to be filled with God’s presence and power so you will both be patient and kind (1 Cor. 13:4) with each other and set the appropriate boundaries in your marriage to protect it from being infiltrated by a past relationship.

Beyond God’s intention for marriage as a lifetime commitment, are there specific directives for husbands on this matter? Ephesians 5:25 answers this question by declaring: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her.” This passage of Scripture tasks husbands with the responsibility of being to their wives what Christ has been to the church; loving, kind, forgiving, patient, and faithful.

While you didn’t elaborate on what might be happening in your marriage, we would hope you can both take stock of how you are measuring up on your mutual responsibility to your marriage relationship. This is the time, to be sure, to get your marriage back on track and safeguard your relationship from anything that would diminish its viability.

Jesus makes clear the acceptable parameters for divorce in Matthew 19:9: “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”

We hope you desire to do what God wants for every marriage—to honor Him by being faithful to Him and your marriage, and trust God to help you regain the love you once had for each other. We pray this is an effort both you and your husband are willing to make.

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# LIVING TOGETHER WITHOUT BEING MARRIED

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BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

## QUESTION

Please clarify what the Bible says about living together without being married. Since I was a kid, getting married meant going to the courthouse, followed by a church blessing. Recently I moved to the United States, met someone, and we live together now. My partner is not a Christian, but I am. We would like to get married but are not able to do so yet because of our immigration status, but we are committed to each other. My dad says that what I am doing is not acceptable to God. In the United States, though, I've met several couples who are not married and live together and are accepted by their church. When I read the Bible, my impression is that there was no marriage back then, at least not like today. I believe the concept of marriage has changed over time depending on the circumstances. I also believe marriage is optional, although we would like to get married at some point in the future. Can I consider my current living arrangement as a marriage and have a real wedding later? Thank you for clarifying this matter.

Thank you for taking the time to write to us about such an important and personal issue. In direct response to your question, nothing has changed in the Bible about God's original intent for marriage, family, and sexuality, regardless of how people—in and out of the church—might be living and behaving these days. A good rule of thumb for the Christian is always to check with the Word of God, rather than copying the lifestyle of people who may profess to be followers of Christ.

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In Genesis 2:24, 25 the Bible shares the account of the first couple who were created by God and married by God, when it says: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.”<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, if we go to the New Testament—long after the book of Genesis and the remainder of the Old Testament was written—Jesus quotes this very passage of Scripture to the Pharisees in Matthew 19:4-6: “And He answered and said to them, ‘Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning “made them male and female” and said, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.’”

So, despite hundreds of years between the writing of the book of Genesis and the book of Matthew, we can clearly see there were no changes in God’s expectations for marriage. In fact, the apostle Paul goes on to say in 1 Corinthians 7:1, 2: “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: ‘It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.’ But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband” (ESV).<sup>2</sup> Again, this biblical passage unmistakably indicates that for people to be a couple and live together lawfully in God’s eyes, they should be married or risk living sexually immoral lives.

We believe God loves you and wants to save you and your partner regardless of what has happened or is happening in your lives. And the fact that a Christian church may accept into their fellowship a couple that is living together and not married doesn’t necessarily indicate they are condoning their behavior. Rather, by being welcoming to such a couple the church is showing interest in their salvation and is nurturing them to understand and accept the ways of God. On this note the Bible says in 1 John 1:9: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

You are in our prayers as you accept God’s will and power in your life to be able to live to honor Him in all that you do.

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<sup>2</sup> Scripture quotations marked ESV are from *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

# SHOULD I SAY “YES”?

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BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

## QUESTION

**I’m a working professional woman in my late 20s. I’ve been dating a guy for about a year, and our relationship appears to be getting serious. He’s a member of my church, our families have known each other for several years, and he’s doing quite well in his profession. Here’s the thing; he’s a decent, God-fearing man, but I don’t like some of his habits. I believe I love him, but I’m not yet “in love” with him. Will the feeling of being in love with him finally come when he begins to get rid of some of the habits I don’t like? How will I know I’m ready to accept his proposal for marriage when he pops the question? So many of my friends from college have gotten married and are already divorced. I don’t want this to happen to me. Am I missing something? This is why I’m being very careful and cautious and would like to get your perspective.**

Congratulations on finding a man who’s a member of your church, whose family you’ve known for years, who’s gainfully employed, and who has demonstrated an interest in pursuing a serious relationship with you. You are way ahead in the game. While every relationship is different, the similarities you share with the young man you’re dating are among the best indicators for what makes a strong foundation for a lasting marriage.

We often share with dating couples—and married couples too—that there are no perfect couples because there are no perfect people. So regardless of whom you marry, you can be sure

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that person will have habits—how they speak, dress, eat, comb their hair, or any number of other issues—you don’t like. While it’s true that habits you don’t care for will invariably make a person less attractive to you, don’t confuse that with love or being in love.

To love someone is a decision you make. The love we’re referencing here isn’t built on the feelings in love songs—mostly centered on a physical attraction that leads to romantic feelings, which are fleeting—but rather a decision based on principles and values that tend to help every successful marriage go the distance.

Relationships based on surface issues—the way a person looks, how much money they make, or what kind of car they drive—are never as important as sharing similar values, especially your beliefs about God and your commitment to living by those ideals. As such, answering questions such as: Does he love and honor God? Is he kind, considerate, flexible, and forgiving? Is he honest, patient, hardworking, and does he have a healthy relationship with his parents and siblings? Is he altruistic, and does he value people regardless of their race, social class, or gender? These are the kind of questions you need to answer to satisfaction about a potential life partner.

To be sure, there are certain essentials and nonnegotiables you want to see in the character of the person you hope to marry. The more things you have in common—especially on issues of faith—the easier it will be to establish a relationship that’s truly satisfying and has what it takes to endure.

About the habits he has that you don’t like, we can assure you he doesn’t like all your habits either. What’s important at this point is to begin preengagement counseling to help you to identify together your strengths and growth areas in a safe place with a skilled facilitator. This is where you can explore your likes and dislikes and develop strengths from your growth areas.

Once you’re at this point in your relationship, the notion of loving someone or being in love with them (an artificial concept made up by our culture/society) will not matter. Loving someone is a decision you make. So being in love with that person is also a choice you can make as you invest in a solid and long-lasting future together.

Please know you’re in our prayers as you allow God to lead you and provide you with the kind of husband you need. And remember the promise in Philippians 4:19: “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”\*

Trust God and allow Him to order your steps.

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# MY SONS WANT TATTOOS!

BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

## QUESTION

**I am a Christian single mom of two sons. One is 19 years old and the other 23. Recently they've been talking about getting tattoos, and I am disturbed by that idea. I find tattoos disgraceful and distasteful. In my opinion, tattoos disrespect the human body created in the image of God. I love my sons and want them to keep their clean-cut image. One has a few more years to complete his university degree. The other has recently begun his professional career. I feel like all the values I've poured into my sons over the years are about to crumble in a dust heap. Please help!**

As parents of two adult children ourselves we empathize with your emotions. Parenting is especially difficult during the information age—when our children are being influenced 24/7 by all types of media with warped values.

We hear you say you hope your sons won't get tattoos since you raised them with values to do otherwise, and you are somewhat anxious and disappointed by this possibility.

The Bible passage quoted when Christians speak against getting tattoos is found in Leviticus 19:28: "You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo any marks on you: I am the Lord."<sup>1</sup> Of course, this text specifically warns against these practices to honor the dead. However, many—like you—believe getting a tattoo also disfigures the image of God, since we are created in His image.

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Regardless of what you believe about Leviticus 19:28, more significant is what kind of parent you want to be to your sons at this stage of their lives as emerging adults. Parenting experts suggest, not unlike the Bible (see Eph. 6:4) and the writings of Ellen White,<sup>2</sup> the need to be age-appropriate in our parenting. And the style that is recommended for the best outcome is identified as authoritative parenting—which is described as one with high support (warmth and love) and high control (appropriate limits).

At 19 and 23, your sons are ready for you to be more of a guide on the side than a sage on the stage. They need to be allowed to make decisions for themselves. After all, they will soon be completely on their own and should have been practicing to make good and sound decisions before now.

We encourage you to engage your sons in kind and respectful conversation to share your views or preference about tattoos. Ask them about their motivation to get tattoos and if they think their choice will influence others for good or evil. Pray with them—asking God to lead them in their decision-making to do all things to honor Him—then allow them to make the choice on their own.

Please know you are in our prayers as you allow your sons room to grow at this stage of their lives and show them love and regard by respecting their choices, even if they are different from the ones you would make. And keep praying for them and showing them love each day.

Remain encouraged and faithful.

<sup>1</sup> Bible texts are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>2</sup> See Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review & Herald Pub. Assn., 1952), pp. 200-203.

# RESOURCES

— The Seventh-day Adventist Church  
is constantly creating new materials  
to support your work with families.

# LIVING FRUITFUL LOVE

BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

Review and Herald® Publishing Association

July, 2021

26 pages

The Bible speaks about another kind of fruit that is not bought at the market or cultivated at the orchard or farm. In the book of Galatians, the Apostle Paul uses fruit to show what will happen to us when we choose to be filled with the Spirit of Jesus. The fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are virtues that are cultivated when we are filled with the Spirit of Jesus in our hearts. It is the result of having a relationship with Jesus and allowing His Spirit to flow in us and through us.



Digital download at [family.adventist.org/familyworship](https://family.adventist.org/familyworship)

# REBUILDING THE FAMILY ALTAR

BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

Review and Herald® Publishing Association

July, 2022

42 pages



During the 2022 Family Togetherness Week of Prayer, our desire is for families to build or rebuild the altar of family worship in their homes. Family worship gives every family an opportunity to daily rebuild the altar of God.

Rebuilding the family altar means to establish a regular habit of setting aside time to worship God as a family. The most important thing is to make a commitment to doing something that intentionally points your family to God daily. Bring God into your big and small moments!

Digital download at [family.adventist.org/familyworship](https://family.adventist.org/familyworship)



# KEYS TO HEALTHY MINDS: FLOURISHING FAMILIES

BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

Review and Herald® Publishing Association

July, 2023

36 pages

The 2023 Family Togetherness Week of Prayer resource booklet: *Keys To Healthy Minds: Flourishing Families*, shares concepts to help families and individuals flourish in their emotional health. Our prayer is that this will be a reality we can all experience as we allow God's peace, joy, hope, and healing to abide in our hearts.



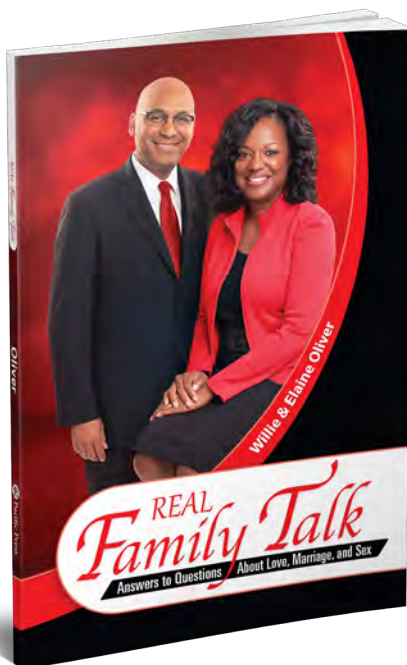
Available in 12 languages: English, French, Italian, Latvian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Sinhala, Spanish, Tamil and Ukrainian

Digital download at [family.adventist.org/familyworship](https://family.adventist.org/familyworship)

# REAL FAMILY TALK: ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ABOUT LOVE, MARRIAGE AND SEX

BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

Pacific Press® Publishing Association  
Nampa, Idaho, 2015  
127 pages



This book is a compilation of selected columns on relationships written by Willie and Elaine Oliver for the Message magazine in response to questions from real people. The authors provide expert advice, based on biblical principles, for questions about marriage, sex, parenting, being single and other real relationships issues. In their counsel, the authors remind us of the reality that we all face challenges in our relationships and in our homes. Their discerning answers direct us to seek God's guidance, reminding us that God's plan is for us to have healthy homes and relationships where each person seeks the harmony that God desires for us to experience.

# REAL FAMILY TALK

WITH WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

[www.hopetv.org](http://www.hopetv.org)



Through engaging, informative, and spiritual discussions about issues facing today's families, *Real Family Talk* seeks to strengthen families and inspire hope. In each edition, the Olivers draw from their pastoral, educational, and counseling experience to navigate discussions about family life, approaching each topic with practical solutions and sound biblical principles.

Watch all 12 seasons now on [www.hopetv.org/realfamilytalk](http://www.hopetv.org/realfamilytalk)

# CONNECTED: DEVOTIONAL READINGS FOR AN INTIMATE MARRIAGE

BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

The Stanbrough Press Ltd., 2020

162 pages

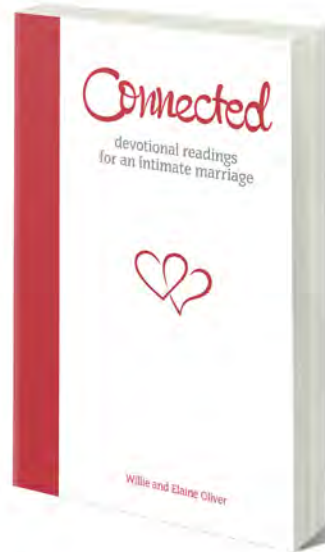
Imagine if you could take your marriage up to the next level. What if it were possible to go from a relationship that survives to one that thrives? What if there were a way to strengthen your commitment to each other? What if better communication could create greater trust? And, best of all, what if grace could help you see the best in your spouse?

In *Connected: devotional readings for an intimate marriage*, Willie and Elaine Oliver share over 35 years of marriage experience, growing together, learning from each other, and rearing children. They know how to make the 'what ifs' become reality.

With 52 devotional reflections, there's a thought for each week of the year, specifically designed to help couples to pause (reflect on the ideas shared), pray (about the ideas shared and how they relate to their experience) and then choose (determine to experience change together).

Discover more within!

Available at <https://adventistbookcenter.com/connected-devotional-readings-for-an-intimate-marriage.html>



# COUPLE'S BIBLE

Safeliz, 2019

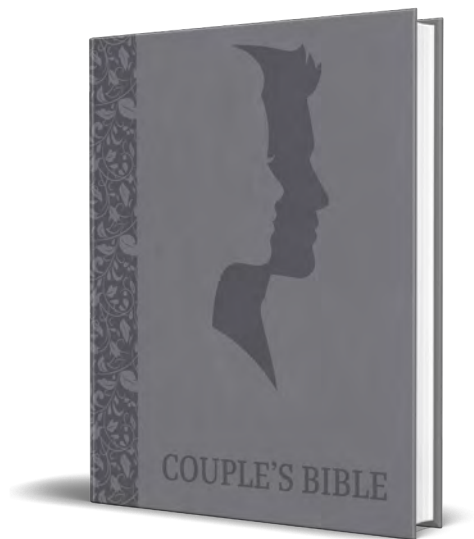
1,500 pages

The Couple's Bible is designed to help build and nurture relationships. There are more than 170 topics that are divided into five sections focusing on how to strengthen marriage, and parenting relationships, as well as how to overcome challenges that couples face. Special features include:

- Marriage in the Bible, Biblical Theology of the Family, Pillars Undergirding Family Ministries, Special Texts for Couples and more
- A special Bible course on home and family
- 101 Ideas for Family Evangelism
- Marriage vocabulary dictionary and maps
- And much more...

The Bible is available in several languages including English, Spanish and French and can be ordered at Adventist Book Centers throughout the world or by visiting:

**[www.safelizbibles.com](http://www.safelizbibles.com)**



# HOPE FOR TODAY'S FAMILIES

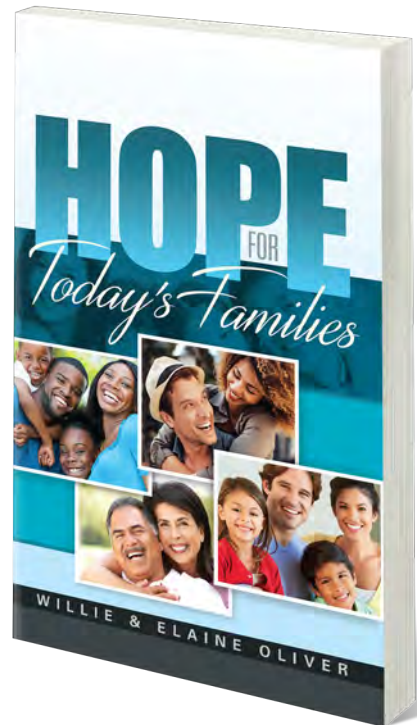
BY WILLIE AND ELAINE OLIVER

Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2018

94 pages

The 2019 world missionary book of the year is still good to help strengthen marriages and families any time. It offers *Hope for Today's Families* using time-proven principles that will facilitate a meaningful and happy life.

Available in many languages at Adventist Book Centers worldwide or through your local publishing house.

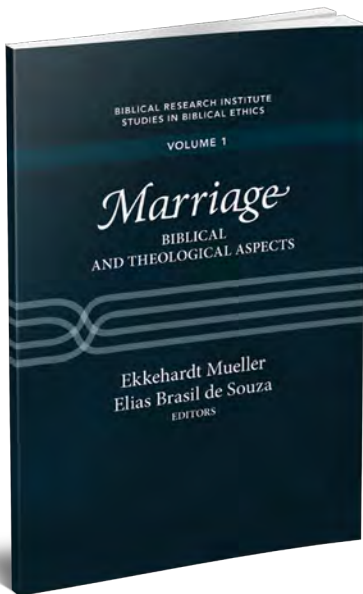


# MARRIAGE: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS, VOL. 1

EKKEHARDT MUELLER AND ELIAS BRASIL DE SOUZA, EDITORS

Biblical Research Institute. Review and Herald Publishing, 2015

304 pages



This book offers thoughtful and detailed studies on several areas of concern for pastors, church leaders, and members. After showing the beauty of marriage and the relevance of Scripture to a sound understanding of marriage and sexuality, this volume tackles crucial topics such as singleness, gender and roles in marriage, sexuality, religiously mixed marriages, and divorce and remarriage.

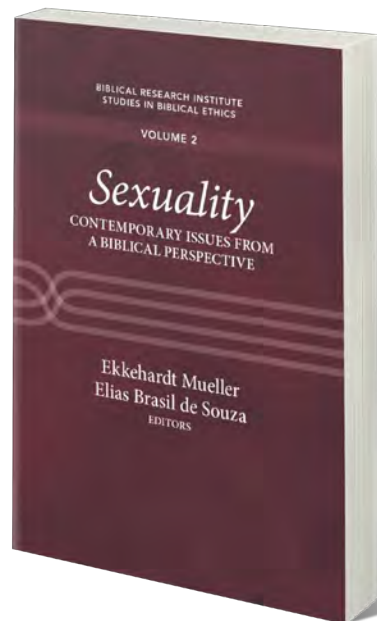
# SEXUALITY: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES FROM A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE, VOL. 2

EKKEHARDT MUELLER AND ELIAS BRASIL DE SOUZA, EDITORS

Biblical Research Insititute, 2022

643 pages

Sexuality: Contemporary Issues from a Biblical Perspective is the sequel to Marriage: Biblical and Theological Aspects. Focusing on sexuality, this volume addresses several topics of contemporary relevance to individual Christians and church communities around the world. It wrestles with matters directly or indirectly related to marriage, such as cohabitation and polygamy. It also examines topics not necessarily connected to marriage, such as sexual addiction, cybersex, robotic sex, rape, female genital mutilation, child sexual abuse, and queer theology and practice.



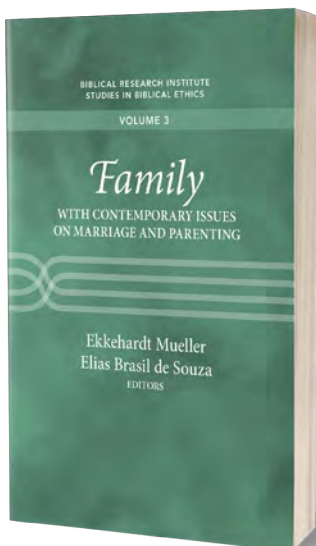


# FAMILY: WITH CONTEMPORARY ISSUES ON MARRIAGE AND PARENTING, VOL. 3

EKKEHARDT MUELLER AND ELIAS BRASIL DE SOUZA, EDITORS

Biblical Research Institute. Review and Herald Publishing, 2023

689 pages



*Family: Contemporary Issues on Marriage and Parenting* concludes the three-volume series on marriage and sexuality published by the Biblical Research Institute. This volume addresses topics and issues relevant to the family from the perspective of a biblical theology of marriage as established at creation. A major goal of this volume is to bring biblical clarity to the challenging topics its authors have addressed and thus help readers face challenges regarding family and sexuality based on the authority of God's Word.

# APPENDIX A FAMILY MINISTRIES IMPLEMENTATION

— Please use these documents as part of your work in Family Ministries. The contents are the result of working with families in our church around the world.

Note: Some of the recommendations listed in these forms may need to be adapted and modified to the specific needs and laws where you live.

## **DOWNLOADABLE MATERIALS**

To download the Appendix A surveys and forms please visit our website: [family.adventist.org/2024RB](https://family.adventist.org/2024RB)

# A FAMILY MINISTRIES POLICY AND PURPOSE STATEMENT

The congregation and staff of the:

.....

Church are committed to providing a safe environment to help children learn to love and follow Jesus Christ. It is the purpose of this congregation to prevent any form of child abuse physical, emotional or sexual and to protect children and those who work with them.

Churches with programs for children are not insulated from those who abuse: therefore, this congregation believes that it is vitally important to take decisive steps to ensure that the church and its programs are safe, providing a joyful experience for children and youth. The following policies have been established and reflect our commitment to provide protective care of all children when they are attending any church sponsored activity.

- Volunteers who work with children and youth are required to be active members of this congregation for a minimum of six months, and must be approved by appropriate church personnel before they may begin working directly with children, unless there has been previous documented clearance.
- All NAD employees and NAD volunteers who regularly work with children must complete an application form (see NAD’s Children’s Ministries website: <https://www.childmin.org/childrens-safety>). References must be obtained from potential volunteers. Appropriate personnel or staff must check those references. Other divisions are encouraged to follow this procedure.
- All workers with children should observe the “two person” rule, which means that workers must avoid one-on-one situations with children whenever possible.

- Adult survivors of childhood physical or sexual abuse need the love and acceptance of the church family. Individuals with such a history must discuss their desire to work with children and youth with one of the staff in a confidential interview prior to receiving approval to work in these areas.
- Individuals who have committed physical or sexual abuse, whether or not convicted, may not work in church –sponsored activities or programs for children or youth.
- Opportunities for training in prevention and recognition of child abuse will be provided by the church. Workers will be expected to participate in such training.
- Workers should immediately report to the pastor or administration any behaviors or other incidents that seem abusive or inappropriate. Upon notification, appropriate actions will be taken and reports made in compliance with the operating procedure of these policies.
- Guidelines for volunteers who work with your and children will be provided to each volunteer.
- Children shall not be allowed to roam around the church without adult supervision. Parents are responsible for supervising their children before and after Sabbath School.
- No child should be released to use the restroom unless accompanied by a parent or older sibling.
- A responsible adult shall be designated to circulate in and around the church, including parking areas to provide security. This is critical when only one adult is present at some activities for minors, such as a Sabbath School division.
- Any discipline shall occur within the visual contact of another adult. All forms of corporal punishment are strictly prohibited.
- All meetings for children or youth must have the approval of the pastor and/or church board, especially overnight activities. Minors must have signed parental permission for each trip, including emergency medical treatment release.
- If there is a known sex offender attending a church, a deacon or other responsible adult shall be assigned to monitor the person while on the premises or at off-site church activity. The offender shall be informed of the procedure. If a sex offender transfers to or attends another church, the leadership of that church shall be notified.

# THE FAMILY MINISTRIES LEADER

The family ministries leader designs a ministry to families that will meet the specific needs of the congregation and community. This section provides planning support for family ministries leaders. Planning is critical for ministering to the individuals and families in the congregation. Family ministries is also an excellent way to reach out to families in the community. The family ministries leader is a member of the local church board and integrates family ministries activities to the whole church program. Listed below are responsibilities and activities.

1. Develop and chair a small family ministries committee that reflects the distinctiveness of the congregation. It may include a single parent, young married persons, mid-life families, retired, widowed or divorced persons. People who serve on this committee should be carefully chosen as visionary people reflecting the grace of God.
2. Be a family advocate. Family ministries is not merely program-oriented, but must look at the whole church program with sensitivity to its impact on families. In some situations the family ministries leader may need to advocate for family time. In other words, there may be so many programs going on in a congregation that people have little time to live their own lives as families.
3. Survey family needs and interests in the congregation. The needs assessment survey and family profile sheet may be used to help determine the needs of the congregation.
4. Plan programs and activities for the year that may include video presentations, retreats or special speakers who present workshops and seminars. Plans should

also include simple activities that may be suggested to families through the church bulletin or newsletter.

5. Work with the pastor and church board to be sure plans are included in the local church budget.
6. Make use of the resources available from the conference family ministries department. These can save time, energy and serve to keep costs down for the local congregation. When planning for special presentations, the conference family ministries director is able to assist in finding interesting and qualified presenters.
7. Communicate with the congregation. Family ministries should not be perceived simply as an annual event. Keep the importance of good family skills alive by use of posters, the church newsletter and/or bulletin throughout the year.
8. Share your plans with the conference family ministries director.

# WHAT IS A FAMILY?

One of the tasks of a family ministries leader is to define the families to whom they minister within their congregations. A ministry only to married couples with children, for example, will benefit only a small percentage of the people in the church. Families of all sorts may need guidance as they move toward healthy relationships. The work of coping with the daily tasks of sharing a household and managing conflict is never easy when people share space and resources or come from homes with differing values. Here are some of the ways families today are configured.

- Families are nuclear – with Mom, Dad and children who were born to this Mom and Dad.
- Families are stepfamilies – sometimes called blended. Stepfamilies are formed when parents divorce or are widowed and remarry. Some become stepfamilies when an unmarried parent marries someone not the father/mother of his/her child.
- Families are single – sometimes just me and the cat – living alone. They may be divorced, widowed or never married, but the household is a separate entity. Some singles may live with other singles in one household.
- Families are single parent – This may occur when a parent is divorced or widowed and has not remarried, or is a parent who has never married.
- Families are empty nest families – Mom and Dad when the kids leave home.
- Families are re-attached – When adult children come back to live with Mom and Dad – usually a temporary arrangement. A family is re-attached when an older parent lives with the family of a son or daughter or grandchild.

- Families are a part of the family of God. Many consider members in their congregation as family and may feel closer ties to them than those related by birth or marriage.

Beyond the usual family demographics one can also stimulate people to think about their important relationships, including those in the church family, by posing questions like these:

- If an earthquake destroyed your town, who would you be most desperate to locate to be sure they were okay?
- If you were moving a thousand miles away, who would move with you?
- Who would be the ones you'd stay in touch with, however difficult it might be?
- If you developed a long-term illness, who could you count on to take care of you?
- Who will be your family from now until you or they die?
- From whom could you borrow money and not feel like you had to pay it back right away?



# COMMITTEE AND PLANNING GUIDELINES

Family ministries leaders who are either new to the position or have never served as a leader wonder where to begin! This section is to help a leader get started. It is often helpful to select a small committee with whom one can work well—people well oriented in the grace of Christ and who don't have the proverbial ax to grind. A family ministries committee, more than any other, should seek to model family. What follows are some ways to accomplish that. While these ideas are not the only way to work, they can help a group work together more smoothly. (They may be helpful to other committees as well).

- Select a small number of persons with similar concerns for families. They should represent the variety of families found in the congregation. This committee might have a single parent, married couple, divorced, retired or widowed persons, and reflect the gender and ethnic profile of the church.
- The committee should not be too large—five to seven persons are ideal. Individuals may represent more than one family category.
- Especially for the first meeting, gather in an informal setting—perhaps at someone's home or a comfortable room at the church. Begin with prayer for God's blessing.
- Provide light refreshments that include water or hot or cold drinks, something light too much on like fresh fruit, cookies, or nuts. Make it attractive, but not fussy or involving great effort.
- For the first meeting, spend time telling each other your story. This is not a therapy session so let people know that they should tell only what is comfortable. A few guidelines will help: confidentiality is to be respected and seen as a gift to one

another. It might be good for the leader to begin—starting with sentences like, “I was born in..., raised in a (Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, Catholic or whatever) home.” Include other things like where you went to school, children’s names or other pertinent information. Include how you became a Christian or a Seventh-day Adventist or a pleasant or funny story from childhood. This may seem like a waste of time. But you may be surprised to hear the story of someone you thought you knew for a long time. The telling of our stories is how we connect and bond with each other. It will make your work together go more smoothly. It will also make it easier for committee members to be sensitive to the needs of one another.

- For all subsequent meetings, spend a portion of time—perhaps 10 or 20 minutes in re-connecting with your committee members. One might be rejoicing over an important event. Another may need support with a special need. Here are some questions you could ask to start your meetings:
  - \* Who are the people you consider to be your close family?
  - \* How do you live your faith together as a family?
  - \* What do you think the church could do to help your family?
  - \* What do you like best about your family?

Then move to the agenda. Remember that you are modeling family.

- Review results of the Interest Survey.
- Talk about goals. What do you wish to accomplish? Will it meet a need? Who are you trying to reach? How can you accomplish your goals?
- Pray for God’s blessing, plan wisely so that people do not burn out and ministry is soon underway.

An important resource for Family Ministries leader is the Family Ministries Planbook. A new edition of this resource book is published every year and includes programs, sermon outlines, seminars and much more that can be used as part of your yearly program.

# A GOOD PRESENTATION WILL DO FOUR THINGS

1. **INFORM** – People should learn something they did not know prior to attending your presentation.
2. **ENTERTAIN** – People deserve not to be bored!!!
3. **TOUCH THE EMOTIONS** – Information that only informs the head never makes a change in attitude or behavior.
4. **MOVE TO ACTION** – If participants leave your presentation without a desire to DO something different –you have wasted your time and theirs!

## HANDOUTS

- Distribute only when they are relevant to the presentation.
- Sometimes it's best not to distribute handouts until the end of the meeting: the audience shouldn't be rustling papers while you are speaking.
- Your audience should not read ahead and tune you out.
- Don't just copy someone else's presentation for your handouts.

## INTRODUCTION

- Find out who will introduce you.
- Write your own introduction.
- Contact the person at least two days before and give them the introduction.
- Pronounce any unusual words– check accuracy of all information.
- Don't make assertions that are not true.

# THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF PRESENTATIONS

1. **Know Thyself** – Body language and tone of voice make up 93% of your credibility. Would you be interested in you?
2. **Be prepared** – Know your presentation, your equipment and be ready for mishaps. Projectors always blow bulbs in the midst of important presentations so keep a spare, and know how to change it.
3. **Examine Your Speech** – Use direct expressions, and don't seek to impress—you're there to communicate.
4. **Arrive Early** – Your guests might be waiting. Be there at least a half hour before the presentation to make certain that everything is set up the way you want it to be.
5. **Tell Them What to Expect** – Tell the meeting attendees specifically what they will learn in the course of the meeting and how they will be able to apply their new knowledge. Clear goals keep attendees focused on their own responsibilities as active participants.
6. **Less Is More** – Your audience can only take so much, so limit your main points. Seven main points is roughly the maximum your audience can take in and fully contain.
7. **Keep Eye Contact** – Use note cards instead of a completely scripted speech, so you can look up and keep eye contact with your audience. Avoid the urge to READ a presentation. Your audience response will be thanks enough for sticking your neck out.
8. **Be Dramatic** – Use bold words and unusual statistics. Your presentation should be filled with simple, hard-hitting statements to keep your audience intrigued. Laughter never hurts either!
9. **Motivate** – End your presentation with a call to action. Tell your audience exactly what they can do in response to your presentation.
10. **Take A Deep Breath, and Relax!** – Don't huddle over the lectern. If you are standing behind one, stand up tall. Move around. Use gestures for emphasis. Remember how you say something is as important as what you have to say.

# FAMILY LIFE PROFILE SURVEY

Name ..... Date of Birth .....

Age group:  18-30  31-40  41-50  51-60  61-70  71+

Gender:  M  F

Address .....

Telephone (Home) ..... (Work) .....

Baptized SDA  Yes  No

If Yes, local church membership .....

If No, what is your religious background/present affiliation? .....

Marital status:

Single, never married

Single, divorced

Single, widowed

Married—Spouse's name ..... Date of Birth .....

Spouse is SDA—Local church membership

Spouse is not SDA—Present religious affiliation

Children whose primary residence is with you:

Name ..... Birthdate .....

Grade in school ..... School attending .....

Baptized SDA? ..... Local church membership .....

Name ..... Birthdate .....

Grade in school ..... School attending .....

Baptized SDA? ..... Local church membership .....

Children whose primary residence is elsewhere:

Name ..... Birthdate .....  
 Baptized SDA? ..... Local church membership .....

Name ..... Birthdate .....  
 Baptized SDA? ..... Local church membership .....

Other family members living with you:

Name ..... Birthdate .....  
 Baptized SDA? ..... Local church membership .....  
 Family Relationship .....

Name ..... Birthdate .....  
 Baptized SDA? ..... Local church membership .....  
 Family Relationship .....

What is the most significant thing the Family Ministries Committee could do this year to address the interests/needs of your family?

.....  
 .....

I am interested in Family Ministries and am willing to help by

- Telephoning as needed
- Participating in planning sessions
- Providing transportation
- Preparation for events
- Help with meals/refreshments
- Child care
- Advertising
- Other
- Presenting lectures/classes/seminars/workshops or other presentations

Your interest area(s)

.....

# FAMILY LIFE PROFILE

Church ..... Date .....

## FAMILY CATEGORY

### Active Members

- With Children Under 18
- No Children Under 18

### Married—Spouse is a Member

- Ages 18-30
- Ages 31-50
- Ages 51-60
- Ages 61-70
- Ages 71 +

### Single—Never Married

- Ages 18-30
- Ages 31-50
- Ages 51-60
- Ages 61-70
- Ages 71 +

### Inactive Members

- With Children Under 18
- No Children Under 18

### Married—Spouse is a Non-member

- Ages 18-30
- Ages 31-50
- Ages 51-60
- Ages 61-70
- Ages 71 +

### Single—Divorced

- Ages 18-30
- Ages 31-50
- Ages 51-60
- Ages 61-70
- Ages 71 +

# FAMILY MINISTRIES INTEREST SURVEY

Your age group:  18-30  31-40  41-50  51-60  61-70  71+  
Gender:  M  F

From the topics below, please select the five that are of most interest to you.  
Place a check in front of each one you select:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="radio"/> Preparation for marriage   | <input type="radio"/> Worship and devotional life  |
| <input type="radio"/> Family finance             | <input type="radio"/> Communication                |
| <input type="radio"/> Discipline in the home     | <input type="radio"/> Single adult living          |
| <input type="radio"/> Parenting teenagers        | <input type="radio"/> Improving self-worth         |
| <input type="radio"/> Preparation for childbirth | <input type="radio"/> Resolving anger and conflict |
| <input type="radio"/> Divorce recovery           | <input type="radio"/> Television and media         |
| <input type="radio"/> Single parenting           | <input type="radio"/> Preparation for retirement   |
| <input type="radio"/> Sexuality                  | <input type="radio"/> Chemical dependency issues   |
| <input type="radio"/> Enriching your marriage    | <input type="radio"/> Blended families             |
| <input type="radio"/> Grief recovery             | <input type="radio"/> Death and dying              |
| <input type="radio"/> Understanding temperaments | <input type="radio"/> Coping with widowhood        |
| <input type="radio"/> Other (Please list): ..... |  |

Suggested guest speakers/presenters: .....

Name .....

Address ..... Telephone .....

Area(s) of specialty .....

What time of the day and what day of the week is best for you to attend a 1-1/2 - 2 hour program on one of the above topics? (Check the appropriate periods.)

	Sun.	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.	Sat.
Morning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Afternoon	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Evening	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



# COMMUNITY FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION SURVEY

1. What do you believe is the number one problem facing families in this community right now?

.....

2. Would you consider attending any of these Family Life Seminars if they were offered in this area?  
(Select as many as you wish.)

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> How to Handle Conflict           | <input type="radio"/> Divorce Recovery                    |
| <input type="radio"/> Communication in Marriage        | <input type="radio"/> Stress Management                   |
| <input type="radio"/> Marriage Enrichment or Encounter | <input type="radio"/> Overcoming Loneliness Weekend       |
| <input type="radio"/> Understanding Children           | <input type="radio"/> Family Finances                     |
| <input type="radio"/> Self-Esteem                      | <input type="radio"/> Grief Recovery                      |
| <input type="radio"/> Parenting Skills                 | <input type="radio"/> Time Management and Life Priorities |
| <input type="radio"/> Dealing with Teenagers           | <input type="radio"/> Planning Retirement                 |
| <input type="radio"/> Childbirth Preparation Class     |   |
| <input type="radio"/> Other (Please specify).....      |   |

3. What time of the day and what day of the week is best for you to attend a 1-1/2 - 2 hour program on one of the above topics? (Check the appropriate periods.)

	Sun.	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.	Sat.
Morning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Afternoon	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Evening	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4. It will help strengthen this survey if we could obtain the following information about you:

Sex:  M  F

Age: (Please circle the appropriate group.)

- 17 or under  19-30  31-40  41-50  51-60  61-70  71+

Do you have children under 18 years of age in your home?  Yes  No

Are you:

- |                                     |   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Never married | <input type="radio"/> Married                 |
| <input type="radio"/> Separated     | <input type="radio"/> Divorced                |
| <input type="radio"/> Widowed       | <input type="radio"/> Remarried after divorce |

# SAMPLE EVALUATION

1. What inspired you most about this workshop?

.....

2. What did you learn that you didn't know before?

.....

3. Were the concepts in this workshop presented in a clear manner?

.....

4. Which activity/section was of least value to you?

.....

5. How could this workshop be improved?

.....

6. On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being generally dissatisfied and 5 being very satisfied, how would you rate this workshop? Circle one.

1       2       3       4       5  
Generally      Somewhat      Somewhat      Generally      Very  
Dissatisfied      Dissatisfied      Satisfied      Satisfied      Satisfied

7. Who made this evaluation?

Your age group:    18-30    31-40    41-50    51-60    61-70    71+

Gender:    M    F

Marital Status:

Never married       Married  
 Separated       Divorced  
 Widowed

How long have you been married, divorced, separated or widowed?

..... years      ..... months

Thank you for your honest comments, they will help us in planning future workshops!

# APPENDIX B

# VOTED

# STATEMENTS

— The following *Voted Statements*  
are official positions of the  
Seventh-day Adventist Church.

# AFFIRMATION OF MARRIAGE

Issues related to marriage can be seen in their true light only as they are viewed against the background of the divine ideal for marriage. Marriage was divinely established in Eden and affirmed by Jesus Christ to be both monogamous and heterosexual, a lifelong union of loving companionship between a man and a woman. In the culmination of His creative activity, God fashioned humankind as male and female in His own image; and He instituted marriage, a covenant-based union of the two genders physically, emotionally, and spiritually, spoken of in Scripture as “one flesh.”

Arising from the diversity of the two human genders, the oneness of marriage images in a singular way the unity within diversity of the Godhead. Throughout Scripture, the heterosexual union in marriage is elevated as a symbol of the bond between Deity and humanity. It is a human witness to God’s self-giving love and covenant with His people. The harmonious affiliation of a man and a woman in marriage provides a microcosm of social unity that is time-honored as a core ingredient of stable societies. Further, the Creator intended married sexuality not only to serve a unitive purpose, but to provide for the propagation and perpetuation of the human family. In the divine purpose, procreation springs from and is entwined with the same process whereby husband and wife may find joy, pleasure and physical completeness. It is to a husband and wife whose love has enabled them to know each other in a deep sexual bond that a child may be entrusted. Their child is a living embodiment of their oneness. The growing child thrives in the atmosphere of married love and unity in which he or she was conceived and has the benefit of a relationship with each of the natural parents.

The monogamous union in marriage of a man and a woman is affirmed as the divinely ordained foundation of the family and social life and the only morally appropriate locus of

genital or related intimate sexual expression. However, the estate of marriage is not God's only plan for the meeting of human relational needs or for knowing the experience of family. Singleness and the friendship of singles are within the divine design as well. The companionship and support of friends looms in importance in both biblical testaments. The fellowship of the Church, the household of God, is available to all regardless of their married state. Scripture, however, places a solid demarcation socially and sexually between such friendship relations and marriage.

To this biblical view of marriage the Seventh-day Adventist Church adheres without reservation, believing that any lowering of this high view is to that extent a lowering of the heavenly ideal. Because marriage has been corrupted by sin, the purity and beauty of marriage as it was designed by God needs to be restored. Through an appreciation of the redemptive work of Christ and the work of His Spirit in human hearts, the original purpose of marriage may be recovered and the delightful and wholesome experience of marriage realized by a man and a woman who join their lives in the marriage covenant.

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This statement was approved and voted by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Administrative Committee (ADCOM) on April 23, 1996.

# STATEMENT ON HOME AND FAMILY

The health and prosperity of society is directly related to the well-being of its constituent parts—the family unit. Today, as probably never before, the family is in trouble. Social commentators decry the disintegration of modern family life. The traditional Christian concept of marriage between one man and one woman is under assault. The Seventh-day Adventist Church, in this time of family crisis, encourages every family member to strengthen his or her spiritual dimension and family relationship through mutual love, honor, respect, and responsibility.

The church's Bible-based Fundamental Belief No. 22 states the marital relationship "is to reflect the love, sanctity, closeness, and permanence of the relationship between Christ and His church. ... Although some family relationships may fall short of the ideal, marriage partners who fully commit themselves to each other in Christ may achieve loving unity through the guidance of the Spirit and the nurture of the church. God blesses the family and intends that its members shall assist each other toward complete maturity. Parents are to bring up their children to love and obey the Lord. By their example and their words they are to teach them that Christ is a loving disciplinarian, ever tender and caring, who wants them to become members of His body, the family of God."

Ellen G. White, one of the founders of the church, stated: "The work of parents underlies every other. Society is composed of families, and is what the heads of families make it. Out of the heart are the 'issues of life' (Prov.4:23); and the heart of the community, of the church, and of the nation is the household. The well-being of society, the success of the church, the prosperity of the nation, depend upon home influences." -The Ministry of Healing, p. 349.

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This public statement was released by the General Conference president, Neal C. Wilson, after consultation with the 16 world vice presidents of Seventh-day Adventists, on June 27, 1985, at the General Conference session in New Orleans, Louisiana.

# STATEMENT ON CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Child sexual abuse occurs when a person older or stronger than the child uses his or her power, authority, or position of trust to involve a child in sexual behavior or activity. Incest, a specific form of child sexual abuse, is defined as any sexual activity between a child and a parent, a sibling, an extended family member, or a step/surrogate parent.

Sexual abusers may be men or women and may be of any age, nationality, or socio-economic background. They are often men who are married with children, have respectable jobs, and may be regular churchgoers. It is common for offenders to strongly deny their abusive behavior, to refuse to see their actions as a problem, and to rationalize their behavior or place blame on something or someone else. While it is true that many abusers exhibit deeply rooted insecurities and low self-esteem, these problems should never be accepted as an excuse for sexually abusing a child. Most authorities agree that the real issue in child sexual abuse is more related to a desire for power and control than for sex.

When God created the human family, He began with a marriage between a man and a woman based on mutual love and trust. This relationship is still designed to provide the foundation for a stable, happy family in which the dignity, worth, and integrity of each family member is protected and upheld. Every child, whether male or female, is to be affirmed as a gift from God. Parents are given the privilege and responsibility of providing nurture, protection, and physical care for the children entrusted to them by God. Children should be able to honor, respect, and trust their parents and other family members without the risk of abuse.

The Bible condemns child sexual abuse in the strongest possible terms. It sees any attempt to confuse, blur, or denigrate personal, generational, or gender boundaries through sexually abusive behavior as an act of betrayal and a gross violation of personhood. It openly condemns abuses of power, authority, and responsibility because these strike at the very heart of the victims' deepest feelings about

themselves, others, and God, and shatter their capacity to love and trust. Jesus used strong language to condemn the actions of anyone who, through word or deed, causes a child to stumble.

The Adventist Christian community is not immune from child sexual abuse. We believe that the tenets of the Seventh-day Adventist faith require us to be actively involved in its prevention. We are also committed to spiritually assisting abused and abusive individuals and their families in their healing and recovery process, and to holding church professionals and church lay leaders accountable for maintaining their personal behavior as is appropriate for persons in positions of spiritual leadership and trust.

As a Church we believe our faith calls us to:

1. Uphold the principles of Christ for family relationships in which the self-respect, dignity, and purity of children are recognized as divinely mandated rights.
2. Provide an atmosphere where children who have been abused can feel safe when reporting sexual abuse and can feel that someone will listen to them.
3. Become thoroughly informed about sexual abuse and its impact upon our own church community.
4. Help ministers and lay leaders to recognize the warning signs of child sexual abuse and know how to respond appropriately when abuse is suspected or a child reports being sexually abused.
5. Establish referral relationships with professional counselors and local sexual assault agencies who can, with their professional skills, assist abuse victims and their families.
6. Create guidelines/policies at the appropriate levels to assist church leaders in:
  - a. Endeavoring to treat with fairness persons accused of sexually abusing children,
  - b. Holding abusers accountable for their actions and administering appropriate discipline.
7. Support the education and enrichment of families and family members by:
  - h. Dispelling commonly held religious and cultural beliefs which may be used to justify or cover up child sexual abuse.
  - i. Building a healthy sense of personal worth in each child which enables him or her to respect self and others.
  - j. Fostering Christlike relationships between males and females in the home and in the church.
8. Provide caring support and a faith-based redemptive ministry within the church community for abuse survivors and abusers while enabling them to access the available network of professional resources in the community.
9. Encourage the training of more family professionals to facilitate the healing and recovery process of abuse victims and perpetrators.

(The above statement is informed by principles expressed in the following scriptural passages: Gen 1:26-28; 2:18-25; Lev 18:20; 2 Sam 13:1-22; Matt 18:6-9; 1 Cor 5:1-5; Eph 6:1-4; Col 3:18-21; 1 Tim 5:5-8.)



# STATEMENT ON FAMILY VIOLENCE

Family violence involves an assault of any kind-verbal, physical, emotional, sexual, or active or passive neglect-that is committed by one person or persons against another within a family, whether they are married, related, living together or apart, or divorced. Current international research indicates that family violence is a global problem. It occurs between individuals of all ages and nationalities, at all socioeconomic levels, and in families from all types of religious and non-religious backgrounds. The overall rate of incidence has been found to be similar for city, suburban, and rural communities.

Family violence manifests itself in a number of ways. For example, it may be a physical attack on one's spouse. Emotional assaults such as verbal threats, episodes of rage, depreciation of character, and unrealistic demands for perfection are also abuse. It may take the form of physical coercion and violence within the marital sexual relationship, or the threat of violence through the use of intimidating verbal or nonverbal behavior. It includes behavior such as incest and the mistreatment or neglect of underage children by a parent or another guardian that results in injury or harm. Violence against the elderly may be seen in physical, psychological, sexual, verbal, material, and medical abuse or neglect.

The Bible clearly indicates that the distinguishing mark of Christian believers is the quality of their human relationships in the church and in the family. It is in the spirit of Christ to love and accept, to seek to affirm and build others up, rather than to abuse or tear one another down. There is no room among Christ's followers for tyrannical control and the abuse of power or authority. Motivated by their love for Christ, His disciples are called to show respect and concern for the welfare of others, to accept males and females as equals, and to acknowledge that every person has a right to respect and dignity. Failure to relate to others in this way violates their personhood and devalues human beings created and redeemed by God.

The apostle Paul refers to the church as "the household of faith" which functions as an extended family, offering acceptance, understanding, and comfort to all, especially to those who are hurting or disadvantaged. Scripture portrays the church as a family in which personal and spiritual growth can occur as feelings of betrayal, rejection, and grief give way to feelings of forgiveness, trust, and wholeness. The Bible also speaks of the Christian's personal responsibility to protect his or her body temple from desecration because it is the dwelling place of God.

Regrettably, family violence occurs in many Christian homes. It can never be condoned. It severely affects the lives of all involved and often results in long term distorted perceptions of God, self, and others.

It is our belief that the Church has a responsibility-

1. To care for those involved in family violence and to respond to their needs by:
  - b. Listening to and accepting those suffering from abuse, loving and affirming them as persons of value and worth.
  - c. Highlighting the injustices of abuse and speaking out in defense of victims both within the community of faith and in society.
  - d. Providing a caring, supportive ministry to families affected by violence and abuse, seeking to enable both victims and perpetrators to access counseling with Seventh-day Adventist professionals where available or other professional resources in the community.
  - e. Encouraging the training and placement of licensed Seventh-day Adventist professional services for both church members and the surrounding communities.
  - f. Offering a ministry of reconciliation when the perpetrator's repentance makes possible the contemplation of forgiveness and restoration in relationships. Repentance always includes acceptance of full responsibility for the wrongs committed, willingness to make restitution in every way possible, and changes in behavior to eliminate the abuse.
  - g. Focusing the light of the gospel on the nature of husband-wife, parent-child, and other close relationships, and empowering individuals and families to grow toward God's ideals in their lives together.
  - h. Guarding against the ostracism of either victims or perpetrators within the family or church community, while firmly holding perpetrators responsible for their actions.
  
2. To strengthen family life by:
  - c. Providing family life education which is grace-oriented and includes a biblical understanding of the mutuality, equality, and respect indispensable to Christian relationships.

- d. Increasing understanding of the factors that contribute to family violence.
  - e. Developing ways to prevent abuse and violence and the recurring cycle often observed within families and across generations.
  - f. Rectifying commonly held religious and cultural beliefs which may be used to justify or cover up family violence. For example, while parents are instructed by God to redemptively correct their children, this responsibility does not give license for the use of harsh, punitive disciplinary measures.
3. To accept our moral responsibility to be alert and responsive to abuse within the families of our congregations and our communities, and to declare that such abusive behavior is a violation of Seventh-day Adventist Christian standards. Any indications or reports of abuse must not be minimized but seriously considered. For church members to remain indifferent and unresponsive is to condone, perpetuate, and possibly extend family violence.

If we are to live as children of the light, we must illuminate the darkness where family violence occurs in our midst. We must care for one another, even when it would be easier to remain uninvolved.

(The above statement is informed by principles expressed in the following scriptural passages: Ex 20:12; Matt 7:12; 20:25-28; Mark 9:33-45; John 13:34; Rom 12:10, 13; 1 Cor 6:19; Gal 3:28; Eph 5:2, 3, 21-27; 6:1-4; Col 3:12-14; 1 Thess 5:11; 1 Tim 5:5-8.)

# STATEMENT ON THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF UNBORN LIFE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ABORTION

Human beings are created in the image of God. Part of the gift that God has given us as humans is procreation, the ability to participate in creation along with the Author of life. This sacred gift should always be valued and treasured. In God's original plan every pregnancy should be the result of the expression of love between a man and a woman committed to each other in marriage. A pregnancy should be wanted, and each baby should be loved, valued, and nurtured even before birth. Unfortunately, since the entrance of sin, Satan has made intentional efforts to mar the image of God by defacing all of God's gifts—including the gift of procreation. Consequently, individuals are at times faced with difficult dilemmas and decisions regarding a pregnancy.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is committed to the teachings and principles of the Holy Scriptures which express God's values on life and provide guidance for prospective mothers and fathers, medical personnel, churches, and all believers in matters of faith, doctrine, ethical behavior, and lifestyle. The Church while not being the conscience of individual believers has the duty to convey the principles and teachings of the Word of God.

This statement affirms the sanctity of life and presents biblical principles bearing on abortion. As used in this statement, abortion is defined as any action aimed at the termination of a pregnancy and does not include the spontaneous termination of a pregnancy, known also as a miscarriage.

## BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES AND TEACHINGS RELATING TO ABORTION

As the practice of abortion must be weighed in the light of Scripture, the following biblical principles and teachings provide guidance for the community of faith and individuals affected by such difficult choices:

**1. God upholds the value and sacredness of human life.** Human life is of the greatest value to God. Having created humanity in His image (Genesis 1:27; 2:7), God has a personal interest in people. God loves them and communicates with them, and they in turn can love and communicate with Him.

Life is a gift of God, and God is the Giver of life. In Jesus is life (John 1:4). He has life in Himself (John 5:26). He is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25; 14:6). He provides abundant life (John 10:10). Those who have the Son have life (1 John 5:12). He is also the Sustainer of life (Acts 17:25-28; Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:1-3), and the Holy Spirit is described as the Spirit of life (Romans 8:2). God cares deeply for His creation and especially for humankind.

Furthermore, the importance of human life is made clear by the fact that, after the Fall (Genesis 3), God “gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). While God could have abandoned and terminated sinful humanity, He opted for life. Consequently, Christ’s followers will be raised from the dead and will live in face-to-face communion with God (John 11:25-26; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16; Revelation 21:3). Thus, human life is of inestimable value. This is true for all stages of human life: the unborn, children of various ages, adolescents, adults, and seniors—independent of physical, mental, and emotional capacities. It is also true for all humans regardless of sex, ethnicity, social status, religion, and whatever else may distinguish them. Such an understanding of the sanctity of life gives inviolable and equal value to each and every human life and requires it to be treated with the utmost respect and care.

**2. God considers the unborn child as human life.** Prenatal life is precious in God’s sight, and the Bible describes God’s knowledge of people before they were conceived. “Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them” (Psalm 139:16). In certain cases, God directly guided prenatal life. Samson was to “be a Nazirite to God from the womb” (Judges 13:5). The servant of God is “called from the womb” (Isaiah 49:1, 5). Jeremiah was already chosen as a prophet before his birth (Jeremiah 1:5), as was Paul (Galatians 1:15), and John the Baptist was to “be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (Luke 1:15). Of Jesus the angel Gabriel explained to Mary: “therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). In His Incarnation Jesus Himself experienced the human prenatal period and was recognized as the Messiah and Son of God soon after His conception (Luke 1:40-45). The Bible already attributes to the unborn child joy (Luke 1:44) and even rivalry (Genesis 25:21-23). Those not-yet-born have a firm place with God (Job 10:8-12; 31:13-15). Biblical law shows a strong regard for protecting human life and considers harm to or the loss of a baby or mother as a result of a violent act a serious issue (Exodus 21:22-23).

**3. *The will of God regarding human life is expressed in the Ten Commandments and explained by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.*** The Decalogue was given to God’s covenant people and the world to guide their lives and protect them. Its commandments are unchanging truths which should be cherished, respected, and obeyed. The Psalmist praises God’s law (e.g., Psalm 119), and Paul calls it holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12). The sixth commandment states: “You shall not kill” (Exodus 20:13), which calls for the preservation of human life. The principle to preserve life enshrined in the sixth commandment places abortion within its scope. Jesus reinforced the commandment not to kill in Matthew 5:21-22. Life is protected by God. It is not measured by individuals’ abilities or their usefulness, but by the value that God’s creation and sacrificial love has placed on it. Personhood, human value, and salvation are not earned or merited but graciously granted by God.

**4. *God is the Owner of life, and human beings are His stewards.*** Scripture teaches that God owns everything (Psalm 50:10-12). God has a dual claim on humans. They are His because He is their Creator and therefore He owns them (Psalm 139:13-16). They are also His because He is their Redeemer and has bought them with the highest possible price—His own life (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). This means that all human beings are stewards of whatever God has entrusted to them, including their own lives, the lives of their children, and the unborn.

The stewardship of life also includes carrying responsibilities which in some ways limit their choices (1 Corinthians 9:19-22). Since God is the Giver and Owner of life, human beings do not have ultimate control over themselves and should seek to preserve life wherever possible. The principle of the stewardship of life obligates the community of believers to guide, support, care for, and love those facing decisions about pregnancies.

**5. *The Bible teaches care for the weak and the vulnerable.*** God Himself cares for those who are disadvantaged and oppressed and protects them. He “shows no partiality nor takes a bribe. He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing” (Deuteronomy 10:17-18, cf. Psalm 82:3-4; James 1:27). He does not hold children accountable for the sins of their fathers (Ezekiel 18:20). God expects the same of His children. They are called to help vulnerable people and ease their lot (Psalm 41:1; 82:3-4; Acts 20:35). Jesus speaks of the least of His brothers (Matthew 25:40), for whom His followers are responsible, and of the little ones who should not be despised or lost (Matthew 18:10-14). The very youngest, namely the unborn, should be counted among them.

**6. *God’s grace promotes life in a world marred by sin and death.*** It is God’s nature to protect, preserve, and sustain life. In addition to the providence of God over His creation (Psalm 103:19; Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3), the Bible acknowledges the wide-ranging, devastating, and degrading effects of sin on the creation, including on human bodies. In Romans 8:20-24 Paul describes the impact of the Fall as subjecting the creation to futility. Consequently, in rare

and extreme cases, human conception may produce pregnancies with fatal prospects and/or acute, life-threatening birth anomalies that present individuals and couples with exceptional dilemmas. Decisions in such cases may be left to the conscience of the individuals involved and their families. These decisions should be well-informed and guided by the Holy Spirit and the biblical view of life outlined above. God's grace promotes and protects life. Individuals in these challenging situations may come to Him in sincerity and find direction, comfort, and peace in the Lord.

## IMPLICATIONS

The Seventh-day Adventist Church considers abortion out of harmony with God's plan for human life. It affects the unborn, the mother, the father, immediate and extended family members, the church family, and society with long-term consequences for all. Believers aim to trust God and follow His will for them, knowing He has their best interests in mind.

While not condoning abortion, the Church and its members are called to follow the example of Jesus, being "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), to (1) create an atmosphere of true love and provide grace-filled, biblical pastoral care and loving support to those facing difficult decisions regarding abortion; (2) enlist the help of well-functioning and committed families and educate them to provide care for struggling individuals, couples, and families; (3) encourage church members to open their homes to those in need, including single-parents, parentless children, and adoptive or foster care children; (4) care deeply for and support in various ways pregnant women who decide to keep their unborn children; and (5) provide emotional and spiritual support to those who have aborted a child for various reasons or were forced to have an abortion and may be hurting physically, emotionally, and/or spiritually.

The issue of abortion presents enormous challenges, but it gives individuals and the Church the opportunity to be what they aspire to be, the fellowship of brothers and sisters, the community of believers, the family of God, revealing His immeasurable and unfailing love.

# STATEMENT ON SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

In His infinite love and wisdom God created mankind, both male and female, and in so doing based human society on the firm foundation of loving homes and families.

It is Satan's purpose, however, to pervert every good thing; and the perversion of the best inevitably leads to that which is worst. Under the influence of passion unrestrained by moral and religious principle, the association of the sexes has, to a deeply disturbing extent, degenerated into license and abuse which results in bondage. With the aid of many films, television, video, radio programs, and printed materials, the world is being steered on a course to new depths of shame and depravity. Not only is the basic structure of society being greatly damaged but also the breakdown of the family fosters other gross evils. The results in distorted lives of children and youth are distressing and evoke our pity, and the effects are not only disastrous but also cumulative.

These evils have become more open and constitute a serious and growing threat to the ideals and purposes of the Christian home. Sexual practices which are contrary to God's expressed will are adultery and premarital sex, as well as obsessive sexual behavior. Sexual abuse of spouses, sexual abuse of children, incest, homosexual practices (gay and lesbian), and bestiality are among the obvious perversions of God's original plan. As the intent of clear passages of Scripture (see Ex 20:14; Lev 18:22,23,29 and 20:13; Matthew 5:27,28; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10; Rom 1:20-32) is denied and as their warnings are rejected in exchange for human opinions, much uncertainty and confusion prevail. This is what Satan desires. He has always attempted to cause people to forget that when God as Creator made Adam, He also created Eve to be Adam's female companion ("male and



female he created them” Gen 1:24 NEB). In spite of the clear moral standards set forth in God’s Word for relationships between man and woman, the world today is witnessing a resurgence of the perversions and depravity that marked ancient civilizations.

The degrading results of the obsession of this age with sex and the pursuit of sensual pleasure are clearly described in the Word of God. But Christ came to destroy the works of the devil and reestablish the right relationship of human beings with each other and with their Creator. Thus, though fallen in Adam and captive to sin, those who turn to Christ in repentance receive full pardon and choose the better way, the way to complete restoration. By means of the cross, the power of the Holy Spirit in the “inner man,” and the nurturing ministry of the Church, all may be freed from the grip of perversions and sinful practices.

An acceptance of God’s free grace inevitably leads the individual believer to the kind of life and conduct that “will add luster to the doctrine of our God and Saviour” (Titus 2:10 NEB). It will also lead the corporate church to firm and loving discipline of the member whose conduct misrepresents the Saviour and distorts and lowers the true standards of Christian life and behavior.

The Church recognizes the penetrating truth and powerful motivations of Paul’s words to Titus: “For the grace of God has dawned upon the world with healing for all mankind; and by it we are disciplined to renounce godless ways and worldly desires, and to live a life of temperance, honesty, and godliness in the present age, looking forward to the happy fulfilment of our hope when the splendor of our great God and Saviour Christ Jesus will appear. He it is who sacrificed himself for us, to set us free from all wickedness and to make us a pure people marked out for his own, eager to do good.”—Titus 2:11-14, NEB. (See also 2 Peter 3:11-14.)

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This statement was approved and voted by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Executive Committee at the Annual Council session in Washington, D.C., October 12, 1987.

# STATEMENT ON RACISM

One of the odious evils of our day is racism, the belief or practice that views or treats certain racial groups as inferior and therefore justifiably the object of domination, discrimination, and segregation.

While the sin of racism is an age-old phenomenon based on ignorance, fear, estrangement, and false pride, some of its ugliest manifestations have taken place in our time. Racism and irrational prejudices operate in a vicious circle. Racism is among the worst of ingrained prejudices that characterize sinful human beings. Its consequences are generally more devastating because racism easily becomes permanently institutionalized and legalized and in its extreme manifestations can lead to systematic persecution and even genocide.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church deplors all forms of racism, including the political policy of apartheid with its enforced segregation and legalized discrimination.

Seventh-day Adventists want to be faithful to the reconciling ministry assigned to the Christian church. As a worldwide community of faith, the Seventh-day Adventist Church wishes to witness to and exhibit in her own ranks the unity and love that transcend racial differences and overcome past alienation between races.

Scripture plainly teaches that every person was created in the image of God, who “made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17:26). Racial discrimination is an offense against our fellow human beings, who were created in God’s image. In Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal. 3:28). Therefore, racism is really a heresy and in

essence a form of idolatry, for it limits the fatherhood of God by denying the brotherhood of all mankind and by exalting the superiority of one's own race.

The standard for Seventh-day Adventist Christians is acknowledged in the church's Bible-based Fundamental Belief No. 13, "Unity in the Body of Christ." Here it is pointed out: "In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation."

Any other approach destroys the heart of the Christian gospel.

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This public statement was released by the General Conference president, Neal C. Wilson, after consultation with the 16 world vice presidents of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, on June 27, 1985, at the General Conference session in New Orleans, Louisiana.

# STATEMENT ON HUMAN RELATIONS

Seventh-day Adventists deplore and seek to combat all forms of discrimination based on race, tribe, nationality, color, or gender. We believe that every person was created in the image of God, who made all nations of one blood (Acts 17:26). We endeavor to carry on the reconciling ministry of Jesus Christ, who died for the whole world so that in Him “there is neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal. 3:28). Any form of racism eats the heart out of the Christian gospel.

One of the most troubling aspects of our times is the manifestation of racism and tribalism in many societies, sometimes with violence, always with the denigration of men and women. As a worldwide body in more than 200 nations, Seventh-day Adventists seek to manifest acceptance, love, and respect toward all, and to spread this healing message throughout society.

The equality of all people is one of the tenets of our church. Our Fundamental Belief No. 13 states: “In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him, and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation.”

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This statement was approved and voted by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Administrative Committee (ADCOM) and was released by the Office of the President, Robert S. Folkenberg, at the General Conference session in Utrecht, the Netherlands, June 29-July 8, 1995.

# STATEMENT ON TRANSGENDERISM

The increasing awareness of the needs and challenges that transgender men and women experience and the rise of transgender issues to social prominence worldwide raise important questions not only for those affected by the transgender phenomenon but also for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. While the struggles and challenges of those identifying as transgender people have some elements in common with the struggles of all human beings, we recognize the uniqueness of their situation and the limitation of our knowledge in specific instances. Yet, we believe that Scripture provides principles for guidance and counsel to transgender people and the Church, transcending human conventions and culture.

## THE TRANSGENDER PHENOMENON

In modern society, gender identity typically denotes “the public (and usually legally recognized) lived role as boy or girl, man or woman,” while sex refers “to the biological indicators of male and female.”<sup>1</sup> Gender identification usually aligns with a person’s biological sex at birth. However, misalignment may happen at the physical and/or mental-emotional levels.

On the physical level ambiguity in genitalia may result from anatomical and physiological abnormalities so that it cannot be clearly established whether a child is male or female. This ambiguity of anatomical sexual differentiation is often called hermaphroditism or intersexualism.<sup>2</sup>

On the mental-emotional level misalignment occurs with transgender people whose sexual anatomy is clearly male or female but who identify with the opposite gender of their biological sex.

They may describe themselves as being trapped in a wrong body. Transgenderism, formerly clinically diagnosed as “gender identity disorder” and now termed “gender dysphoria,” may be understood as a general term to describe the variety of ways individuals interpret and express their gender identity differently from those who determine gender on the basis of biological sex.<sup>3</sup> “Gender dysphoria is manifested in a variety of ways, including strong desires to be treated as the other gender or to be rid of one’s sex characteristics, or a strong conviction that one has feelings and reactions typical of the other gender.”<sup>4</sup>

Due to contemporary trends to reject the biblical gender binary (male and female) and replace it with a growing spectrum of gender types, certain choices triggered by the transgender condition have come to be regarded as normal and accepted in contemporary culture. However, the desire to change or live as a person of another gender may result in biblically inappropriate lifestyle choices. Gender dysphoria may, for instance, result in cross-dressing,<sup>5</sup> sex reassignment surgery, and the desire to have a marital relationship with a person of the same biological sex. On the other hand, transgender people may suffer silently, living a celibate life or being married to a spouse of the opposite sex.

## **BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES RELATING TO SEXUALITY AND THE TRANSGENDER PHENOMENON**

As the transgender phenomenon must be evaluated by Scripture, the following biblical principles and teachings may help the community of faith relate to people affected by gender dysphoria in a biblical and Christ-like way:

1. God created humanity as two persons who are respectively identified as male and female in terms of gender. The Bible inextricably ties gender to biological sex (Gen 1:27; 2:22-24) and does not make a distinction between the two. The Word of God affirms complementarity as well as clear distinctions between male and female in creation. The Genesis creation account is foundational to all questions of human sexuality.
2. From a biblical perspective, the human being is a psychosomatic unity. For example, Scripture repeatedly calls the entire human being a soul (Gen 2:7; Jer 13:17; 52:28-30; Ezek 18:4; Acts 2:41; 1 Cor 15:45), a body (Eph 5:28; Rom 12:1-2; Rev 18:13), flesh (1 Pet 1:24), and spirit (2 Tim 4:22; 1 John 4:1-3). Thus, the Bible does not endorse dualism in the sense of a separation between one’s body and one’s sense of sexuality. In addition, an immortal part of humans is not envisioned in Scripture because God alone possesses immortality (1 Tim 6:14-16) and will bestow it on those who believe in Him at the first resurrection (1 Cor 15:51-54). Thus, a human being is also meant to be an undivided sexual entity, and sexual identity cannot be independent from one’s body. According to Scripture, our gender identity, as designed by God, is determined by our biological sex at birth (Gen 1:27; 5:1-2; Ps 139:13-14; Mark 10:6).

3. Scripture acknowledges, however, that due to the Fall (Gen 3:6-19) the whole human being — that is, our mental, physical, and spiritual faculties — are affected by sin (Jer 17:9; Rom 3:9; 7:14-23; 8:20-23; Gal 5:17) and need to be renewed by God (Rom 12:2). Our emotions, feelings, and perceptions are not fully reliable indicators of God's designs, ideals, and truth (Prov 14:12; 16:25). We need guidance from God through Scripture to determine what is in our best interest and live according to His will (2 Tim 3:16).
4. The fact that some individuals claim a gender identity incompatible with their biological sex reveals a serious dichotomy. This brokenness or distress, whether felt or not, is an expression of the damaging effects of sin on humans and may have a variety of causes. Although gender dysphoria is not intrinsically sinful, it may result in sinful choices. It is another indicator that, on a personal level, humans are involved in the great controversy.
5. As long as transgender people are committed to ordering their lives according to the biblical teachings on sexuality and marriage they can be members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The Bible clearly and consistently identifies any sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage as sin (Matt 5:28, 31-32; 1 Tim 1:8-11; Heb 13:4). Alternative sexual lifestyles are sinful distortions of God's good gift of sexuality (Rom 1:21-28; 1 Cor 6:9-10).
6. Because the Bible regards humans as wholistic entities and does not differentiate between biological sex and gender identity, the Church strongly cautions transgender people against sex reassignment surgery and against marriage, if they have undergone such a procedure. From the biblical wholistic viewpoint of human nature, a full transition from one gender to another and the attainment of an integrated sexual identity cannot be expected in the case of sex reassignment surgery.
7. The Bible commands followers of Christ to love everyone. Created in the image of God, they must be treated with dignity and respect. This includes transgender people. Acts of ridicule, abuse, or bullying towards transgender people are incompatible with the biblical commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31).
8. The Church as the community of Jesus Christ is meant to be a refuge and place of hope, care, and understanding to all who are perplexed, suffering, struggling, and lonely, for "a bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench" (Matt 12:20). All people are invited to attend the Seventh-day Adventist Church and enjoy the fellowship of its believers. Those who are members can fully participate in church life as long as they embrace the message, mission, and values of the Church.
9. The Bible proclaims the good news that sexual sins committed by heterosexuals, homosexuals, transgender people, or others can be forgiven, and lives can be transformed through faith in Jesus Christ (1 Cor 6:9-11).

10. Those who experience incongruity between their biological sex and gender identity are encouraged to follow biblical principles in dealing with their distress. They are invited to reflect on God's original plan of purity and sexual fidelity. Belonging to God, all are called to honor Him with their bodies and their lifestyle choices (1 Cor 6:19). With all believers, transgender people are encouraged to wait on God and are offered the fullness of divine compassion, peace, and grace in anticipation of Christ's soon return when all true followers of Christ will be completely restored to God's ideal.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed. (DSM-5TM), edited by the American Psychiatric Association (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), 451.
- <sup>2</sup> Those born with ambiguous genitalia may or may not benefit from corrective surgical treatment.
- <sup>3</sup> See DSM-5TM, 451-459.
- <sup>4</sup> This sentence is part of a succinct summary of gender dysphoria provided to introduce DSM-5TM that was published in 2013 (accessed April 11, 2017).
- <sup>5</sup> Cross-dressing, also referred to as transvestite behavior, is prohibited in Deuteronomy 22:5.



# STATEMENT ON HOMOSEXUALITY

The Seventh-day Adventist Church recognizes that every human being is valuable in the sight of God, and we seek to minister to all men and women in the spirit of Jesus. We also believe that by God's grace and through the encouragement of the community of faith, an individual may live in harmony with the principles of God's Word.

Seventh-day Adventists believe that sexual intimacy belongs only within the marital relationship of a man and a woman. This was the design established by God at creation. The Scriptures declare: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen 2:24, NIV). Throughout Scripture this heterosexual pattern is affirmed. The Bible makes no accommodation for homosexual activity or relationships. Sexual acts outside the circle of a heterosexual marriage are forbidden (Lev 18:5-23, 26; Lev 20:7-21; Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor 6:9-11). Jesus Christ reaffirmed the divine creation intent: "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female," and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?" So they are no longer two, but one" (Matt 19:5, NIV). For these reasons Seventh-day Adventists are opposed to homosexual practices and relationships.

Jesus affirmed the dignity of all human beings and reached out compassionately to persons and families suffering the consequences of sin. He offered caring ministry and words

of solace to struggling people, while differentiating His love for sinners from His clear teaching about sinful practices. As His disciples, Seventh-day Adventists endeavor to follow the Lord's instruction and example, living a life of Christ-like compassion and faithfulness.

# GUIDELINES FOR THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH IN RESPONDING TO CHANGING CULTURAL ATTITUDES REGARDING HOMOSEXUAL AND OTHER ALTERNATIVE SEXUAL PRACTICES

## THE DIVINE IDEAL OF SEXUALITY AND MARRIAGE

Issues related to human sexuality and marriage can be seen in their true light as they are viewed against the background of the divine ideal for humanity. God’s creative activity culminated in making humankind in His own image as male and female and instituting marriage. Marriage as a wonderful divine gift to humanity is a covenant-based union of the two genders physically, emotionally, and spiritually, referred to in Scripture as “one flesh.” Jesus Christ affirmed marriage to be both monogamous and heterosexual, a lifelong union of loving companionship between a man and a woman. In addition, throughout Scripture such heterosexual union in marriage is elevated as a symbol of the bond between Deity and humanity.

The harmonious relation of a man and a woman in marriage provides a microcosm of social unity that is time-honored as a core ingredient of stable societies. The Creator intended married sexuality not only to serve a unitive purpose but also to provide joy, pleasure, and physical completeness. At the same time, it is to a husband and wife whose love has enabled them to know each other in a deep sexual bond that a child may be entrusted. Their child, a living embodiment of their oneness, thrives in the atmosphere of married love and unity and has the benefit of a relationship with each of the natural parents.

While the monogamous union in marriage of a man and a woman is affirmed as the divinely ordained foundation of the family and social life and the only morally appropriate locus of intimate sexual expression,<sup>1</sup> singleness and the friendship of singles are within the divine design

as well. Scripture, however, places a distinction between acceptable conduct in friendship relations and sexual conduct in marriage.

Unfortunately, human sexuality and marriage have been corrupted by sin. Therefore, Scripture does not focus only on the positive aspects of human sexuality but also on wrong expressions of sexuality and their negative impact on people and society. It warns humans of destructive sexual behaviors such as fornication, adultery, homosexual intimacies, incest, and polygamy, (e.g., Matt 19:1-12; 1 Cor 5:1-13; 6:9-20; 7:10-16, 39; Heb 13:4; Rev 22:14, 15) and calls them to do what is good, healthy, and beneficial.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church adheres without reservation to the divine ideal of pure, honorable, and loving sexual relations within heterosexual marriage, believing that any lowering of this high view is detrimental to humanity. It also believes that the ideals of purity and beauty of marriage as designed by God need to be emphasized. Through the redemptive work of Christ, the original purpose of marriage may be recovered, and the delightful and wholesome experience of matrimony may be realized by a man and a woman who join their lives in a lifelong marriage covenant.

## **THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY**

The Seventh-day Adventist Church believes that it has been called into existence by God to proclaim the everlasting gospel to the entire world, and to invite persons everywhere to be ready for the second coming of Jesus. The Church pursues God's mission around the globe, currently teaching, preaching, caring, and serving in more than 200 nations. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has no creedal statement: it believes that its teachings rest on the authority of the Bible alone. It summarizes those beliefs, however, in a Statement of Fundamental Beliefs, currently 28 in number. Central to the Church's understanding of God's plan for ordering human society is its teaching on "Marriage and the Family."<sup>2</sup>

Because Seventh-day Adventists live, work, and minister in every part of the world, individual Seventh-day Adventists and the institutions by which the Church pursues God's mission relate to and interact with all levels of human government. The Bible instructs Christians to be obedient to the laws enacted by civil government, and wherever morally possible, Seventh-day Adventist members and Church organizations will seek to be subject to the governing authorities, even as they seek counsel about how to respond when the claims of government conflict with the truths of the Bible and the Fundamental Beliefs of the Church.

## **THE CHURCH'S RELATIONSHIP TO CIVIL LEGISLATION ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY AND ALTERNATIVE SEXUAL BEHAVIORS**

The Word of God is replete with instruction and illustration bearing on the believer's relationship to the authority and jurisdiction of civil government. Because the Seventh-day Adventist

Church values the entirety of the Word of God as its ultimate authority for truth, doctrine, and way of life, it always seeks to reflect in its teaching and practice the full message of Scripture regarding appropriate interaction with civil government. To that end, the Church periodically offers counsel to individuals, leaders, and church institutions when the claims of civil government and the teachings of the Bible appear to be in conflict. This document focuses on the growing divide between the enactments of some civil governments and the beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church about acceptable sexual behaviors.

The following principles, though not comprehensive, undergird the Church's consistent application of biblical truths to the societies and cultures in which it operates and the governments to which it responds. These principles will be especially important in framing, for a Church ministry or organization, an appropriate response to any level of civil government that may attempt to impose on the Church its perceptions of legally and morally acceptable sexual practices.

**1. All human governments exist through the provision and allowance of God.** The apostle Paul clearly instructs both individual Christians and the Church to place themselves willingly in submission to human governments that have been ordained by God to preserve God-given liberties, promote justice, preserve social order, and care for the disadvantaged (see Rom 13:1-3). Insofar as they act in concert with the values and principles articulated in the Word of God, civil governments deserve the respect and obedience of individual believers and the corporate Church. Wherever possible, individual Seventh-day Adventists and Church organizations in a given state or nation will seek by their behavior and statements to be understood as loyal citizens, participating in the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Additionally, believers are instructed to pray for those in civil authority (1 Tim 2:1, 2) so that believers may practice the virtues of God's kingdom.

**2. Although the authority of human government is derived from the authority of God, the claims and jurisdictions of human governments are never ultimately definitive for either individual believers or the Church. Both individual believers and the Church owe supreme allegiance to God Himself.** On those occasions when the claims of civil government directly conflict with and contradict the teaching of the Word of God as understood by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, both the Church and its members are bound by that same Word of God to obey its precepts rather than those of human government (Acts 5:29). This expression of a higher allegiance is specific only to the claim of government that is in contradiction to the Word of God, and does not otherwise diminish or remove the obligation of either the Church or individual believers to live in submission to civil authority on other matters.

**3. Because individual believers and the organized Church enjoy the rights and liberties given them by God and ratified by civil government, they may fully participate in the processes by which societies organize social life, provide for public and electoral order, and structure civil relationships.** This may include a clear articulation of the Church's beliefs in such things as (1) the preservation of liberty of conscience; (2) the protection of the weak and disadvantaged; (3) the responsibility of the state to promote justice and human rights; (4) the divinely ordained state of marriage between one man and one woman and the family that results from this union; and

(5) the values of God-given health principles and practices in building up the social and economic welfare of the state. Neither individual Seventh-day Adventists nor the congregations, institutions, and entities through which they engage in their God-given mission should surrender their privileges and rights as a result of opposition to their allegiance to biblical teaching. With its long history of defending religious liberty and freedom of worship around the globe, the Seventh-day Adventist Church defends the rights of all persons, of whatever faith, to follow the dictates of their conscience and to engage in the religious practices to which that faith compels them.

**4. Because the Seventh-day Adventist Church believes and practices a holistic understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ, its evangelistic, educational, publishing, medical, and other ministry organizations are integral and indivisible expressions of its fulfillment of the commission given by Jesus, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19, 20, ESV).** While Seventh-day Adventist congregations, publishing and media ministries, educational institutions, hospitals and medical centers, and ministry organizations appear to share certain similarities with other social and cultural institutions, they have historically been organized and continue to be organized on a faith and missional basis. They exist for the express purpose of communicating the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ through their multiform methods and initiatives, and to advance the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and should enjoy all the privileges and liberties accorded to the religious organization of which they are essential parts. The Seventh-day Adventist Church vigorously asserts and defends the nonseparability of its various forms of mission, and urges all civil governments to accord to each of its organizations and entities the rights of conscience and freedom of religious practice asserted in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and guaranteed in the constitutions of most world states.

**5. In their interface with civil governments and societies, both the Church and individual Seventh-day Adventists must conduct themselves as representatives of the kingdom of Christ, exhibiting His characteristics of love, humility, honesty, reconciliation, and commitment to the truths of the Word of God.** Each human being, of whatever gender, race, nationality, social class, faith, or sexual orientation, deserves to be treated with respect and dignity by the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the entities and organizations through which it pursues God’s mission. Because it defines itself as the body of Christ, who “died for us” “while we were yet sinners” (Rom 5:8), the Church holds itself to the highest standards of speech and conduct toward all human beings. Recognizing that God is the ultimate Judge of all persons, the Church believes in the opportunity of all persons to be included in the kingdom of heaven as they acknowledge and forsake their sinfulness, confess Christ as Lord, accept His righteousness in place of their own, seek to obey His commandments, and live His life of service. The Church affirms its right to describe some behaviors, ways of living, and the organizations that promote them as contrary to the Word of God. The Church is also responsible, however, to differentiate clearly between its critique of those beliefs and behaviors, and its respect for the persons expressing those beliefs and behaviors. The

Church does not condone and will not allow its public statements on matters of social concern to be characterized as contempt or verbal humiliation of those with whom it disagrees. In exercising its freedoms, the Church's public speech must exhibit the grace always seen in Jesus. All Seventh-day Adventist entities and organizations, as well as individual members of the Church, are urged to express their respect for individuals or groups of persons with whose behavior and opinions they are compelled to disagree because of allegiance to the Word of God. The Church earns the credibility to participate in difficult social and national issues by its clear identification of itself as a redemptive entity.

In light of the above principles derived from the Word of God, the Seventh-day Adventist Church seeks to offer counsel to congregations, church organizations and entities, and those who lead church organizations and entities. The complex issues surrounding civil governments' responses to the reality of homosexuality and alternative sexual practices in contemporary society underscore the importance of this counsel.

## **THE CHALLENGES OF STATE LEGISLATION**

In a growing number of nations, governments enact special legislative or judicial protection to prevent what they consider discriminatory behavior. Those protections sometimes appear to impair the religious-freedom rights of Seventh-day Adventist pastors, leaders, and Church organizations to employ persons, perform weddings, offer employment benefits, publish missional material, make public statements, and provide education or educational housing on the basis of the Seventh-day Adventist teaching about the sinfulness of sexual behaviors prohibited by Scripture.

Conversely, in a number of nations, homosexual or alternative sexual practices result in harsh penalties imposed by law. While Seventh-day Adventist institutions and members may appropriately advocate for preserving the unique and God-given institution of heterosexual marriage in their societies and legal codes, it is the position of the Church to treat those practicing homosexual or alternative sexual behaviors with the redemptive love taught and lived by Jesus.

## **THE MORAL AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOMS OF THE CHURCH**

The Seventh-day Adventist Church will encourage all its congregations, employees, ministry leaders, organizations, and entities to uphold church teachings and faith-based practices in Church membership, employment, education, and marriage ceremonies, including officiating at weddings. These teachings and faith-based practices, built upon the Bible's instructions about human sexuality, are equally applicable to heterosexual and homosexual relationships. It is inconsistent with the Church's understanding of scriptural teaching to admit into or maintain in membership persons practicing sexual behaviors incompatible with biblical teachings. Neither is it acceptable for Adventist pastors or churches to provide wedding services or facilities for same-sex couples.

In upholding these Scriptural standards, the Church relies upon the faith-based exemptions usually and customarily extended by civil government to religious organizations and their affiliated ministries to organize themselves according to their understanding of moral truth. The Church will also attempt to provide legal counsel and resources to Church leaders, organizations, and entities so that they operate in harmony with its biblical understanding of human sexuality.

Congregational leaders, Church employees, ministry leaders, and institutions are advised to review carefully the Church's existing policies with regard to membership, employment, and education to ensure that local practices are in harmony with the Church's expressed teachings about sexual behavior. Consistent expression and application of organizational policies and teachings regarding such behavior will be a key feature of maintaining the faith-based exemptions customarily allowed by civil governments.

## **FAITH-BASED DECISION MAKING IN EMPLOYMENT AND ENROLLMENT**

The Seventh-day Adventist Church asserts and reserves the right for its entities to employ individuals according to Church teaching about sexual behaviors compatible with the teaching of Scripture as understood by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. While each institution and ministry operates in its own society and legal climate, each also expresses the worldwide belief system and teachings of the global Church. The Church maintains the right of these ministries and institutions to make decisions based on the teaching of Scripture and will provide legal review of relevant law and ordinances.

Wherever possible and feasible, the Church will continue to advocate, both legislatively and in courts of law, for faith-based preferential hiring and enrollment practices for itself and its ministries.

## **THE CHURCH AND PUBLIC SPEECH**

The Church asserts the right to express its commitment to biblical truth through the communication it makes available to its members and to various publics, as well as to defend the free-speech rights of its employees to express the Church's teaching about sexual behavior in public environments, including worship services, evangelistic meetings, educational classrooms, and public forums. Church leaders accept the responsibility to keep themselves and Church employees informed about government regulations regarding acceptable speech, and to invite periodic legal review of how those regulations should affect the Church's mission. Those responsible for the Church's official communication and those who preach and teach should emphasize the importance of surrendering all behavior, including sexual behavior, to the transforming power of Jesus Christ. The standard for both published material and public statements about sexual behaviors must be that they are widely understood as both "clear and respectful," expressing biblical truth with the kindness of Jesus Himself.



## THE CHURCH AND PUBLIC SPEECH

To achieve a consistent application of a “clear and respectful” standard in its ministries, the Church urges all its ministries, including pastoral and evangelistic ministries, educational ministries, publishing and media ministries, and health and medical ministries, among others, periodically to provide training and counsel to employees who interface with the public through media and public presentations. This training should include a review of current national or community law pertaining to public speech about sexual behaviors, and examples of appropriate ways to communicate the Church’s beliefs and teachings.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Official Statements about “Same-Sex Unions” and “Homosexuality.”
- <sup>2</sup> Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists, “Marriage and Family,” No. 23.





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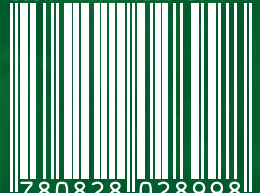
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