

Ministry to the Christian Family

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[Presented in Columbus, Ohio, January 20-21, 1992]

In carefully printed block letters seven year old Shannon Lee wrote: “*Hello God, Help my family get back together. It is falling apart. We need help now, not a year from now. You’ve took too long. Your loving daughter, Shannon Lee. P.S. Call me when you’re ready to help. Bye.*” What a tragedy! What an expression of faith! What irony! In the structured, ordered era of the silicon chip, domestic chaos has invaded the sanctum sanctorum of our private homes. Our glossary for “family” reads like a pathology: “troubled family,” “broken home,” “single-parented family,” “divorce,” “infidelity,” “battered spouse,” “abuser/abused,” “blended family,” “adult victim,” “dysfunctional family,” “egocentric family,” “gay family,” “the non-traditional home.” The condition sounds chronic. It is. But as long as the future of the family rests securely in the hands of its Maker, the condition is not terminal. As a point of fact, God always has been concerned for the family.

To begin, the family is ordained by God. He conceived and created it (Genesis 2:24). By his design the family is the primordial protector, provider, and nurturer (1 Timothy 5:8). The family represents generational evangelism. God first directed the sharing of his gospel through family (Exodus 3:15). Family is the basic unit of worship (Joshua 22:26-28). Family roles are God-ordained (Ephesians 5:22-6:4). The family is the primordial locus of gifts-identification and encouragement in the use of those gifts. Through the family God places human beings into the dimension of time and space, and among pre-existing human relationships. The family is where an individual is first called upon to work. The family (in Christian marriage) is the only social context in which people are permitted and encouraged by God to practice their sexuality. The family is the place of God’s earliest presentation of the law. In the home individuals are first made accountable and learn the meaning of justice, injustice, and grace (Psalm 78:5). The family is the primordial locus of socialization (Genesis 2:18). The family is an integral part of God’s order. The family is one of God’s metaphors for his kingdom (Father, Son, heirs, sons and daughters, etc.). The family is God’s designer-model for commitment (promise), love (submissiveness), and intimacy (unity). The family is a component of heaven and earth which shall in human terms pass away; and yet in divine terms it shall live on in the intimacy of God’s eternal household (Galatians 3:28; Matthew 12:46-50).ⁱ

There are probably hundreds of models that would prove useful for examining the Christian family. For our purposes, one with four simple outcomes seems adequate [See Addenda A: *A Conceptual Model for Family Ministry*, and Addenda B: *Outcomes for the Healthy Christian Family*].

- families being nurtured by the Word
- families nurturing through Christian family relationships
- families developing a Christian life-style
- families growing in a sense of mission

Each of the four outcomes, in-turn, can be described by several accents. (These accents correspond to the fourteen items on the family inventory instrument.) Centering, worship and spiritual growth are integral parts of Word-nurture. Intimacy, commitment, communication, role distinction and bonding are facets of family relationships. Values, adaptability and coping relate to Christian life-style. And Christian identity (Christ-worth), purpose and outreach are the key elements to establishing a sense of mission in the life of each Christian. Whether we are speaking of healthy Christian families, or unhealthy Christian families or of a third kind of Christian family that is neither healthy nor dysfunctional, but which is at considerable spiritual risk (Tim Kimmel has termed this “the hurried home.”ⁱⁱ), all families that carry the banner of Jesus Christ function at some level of each of these fourteen descriptors. And while these fourteen descriptors remain far from perfect

for providing empirical data on the status of a Christian home, these descriptors do provide a practical scheme for surveying the Christian home.

Part One: Being Nurtured in God's Word

Centering

When asked what they would change in their ministries if they could do it all over again, a panel of WELS clergymen who spent their careers in family ministry responded: "Do strategic planning." Without it there is no criteria for evaluating progress, no road map for charting a course, no sense of priority or urgency. Truly, ministry meets people at the point of their needs. But the Christian family has so many needs today that those in ministry to the Christian home quickly become overwhelmed by the magnitude and complexity of such a ministry. Where does one begin?

The Christian home is in crisis. It is a crisis brought about by a profound tension. That tension is nothing new. It is the kind of tension that tears people apart inside, apart from each other, and apart from God. Deep within the heart of each member of the Christian family a battle rages between the Old Man and the New Man in Christ. Word-ministry attends to that battle. For that reason it is important to emphasize that family ministry is nothing new, or revolutionary, or mystical. More than anything else, what family ministry is is spiritual. Christian family ministry connects the spiritual crisis of guilt and shame and sin with the spiritual solution of the cross.

More than that, family ministry brings the spiritually wandering, foundationless, walking-dead together with the person of Jesus Christ—the only Way, the absolute Truth, and water of eternal Life (John 14:6).

But the world that lives in blind darkness mitigates against God's absolutes. Saint Paul writes to Timothy:

For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. (2 Timothy 4:3-5)

One such myth that appeals to Christian families today is the myth of consensus. Marshall McLuhan wrote, "The instantaneous world of electric information media involves all of us, all at once. No detachment or frame is possible."ⁱⁱⁱ Our trends are plotted. Our opinions are graphed. You and I are products of the mass media as well as the objects of the mass media. We have become "the masses." By consensus the masses have declared that there are no absolutes – no absolute Truth and no absolute eternal. The "truth" of one guru is as good as another. "Live life for the present." The question that so many Christians struggle with today is not so much one of "What do you believe?" It is more one of "Whom do you believe?" And the answer all too often is in keeping with the myth: "I believe; therefore, I am."

This troubling symptom is more a manifestation of the hurried home than the dysfunctional family. Stressors in the dysfunctional family usually come from within, where guilt or inadequacy are the issues. But the stressors of the hurried home are generally external. Members of the hurried family have trouble separating man's wisdom from God's wisdom. The hurried family has bought the myths of our day: I work; therefore, I am. I procreate; therefore, I am. I feel; therefore, I am. I build; therefore, I am. I count (beans, votes, feathers-in-my-cap, friends, etc.); therefore, I am. I win; therefore, I am. The hurried home has replaced the God, Jehovah, I AM with its own version of "I am." It is as much at risk as the dysfunctional family. In a spiritual sense, even more. And yes, in some cases leaders in such homes will need to be confronted with their sins of spiritual irresponsibility. Ponder, for a moment, the percentages of homes within your parish that are in this group—70%? 80%? More?

That brings us to a very practical issue with regard to family centrality. Every family, Christian or non, needs to have an answer to the question: Who's in charge? In the patricentric, Victorian home of a century ago the question hardly had to be asked. For better or for worse, father was the lord and master of the household. After The First World War in an economy that was no longer agrarian, industrial America began to view children more as a status symbol than as necessary for survival. For the next two decades American families tended to be kindecetric. Even today some families are troubled because God's order is turned upside down when children are featured as the family center. In the 50's and 60's post-war America became matricentric as "war-widows" continued to fill the void left by husbands and fathers who had gone overseas. Many of us "boomers" grew up in mother-centered homes. The matricentric model tends to drive husbands and fathers into exile as they search for significance outside of the home through a job, a bottle, an extramarital relationship, or some other form of escape. In the 70's "the pill," and the feminist movement gave freedom of the workplace to women. So today, in many homes there is no one to fill the vacuum. They have literally lost the seat of power. Each member of the household is so self-centered that many families really have no center of gravity. In practical terms this family (We could call it "egocentric," except that "egocentric" is an oxymoron.) has become an empty shell.

In the Christian home, the answer to the question "Who's in charge?" is clear and simple: "Jesus, and his Word." His love and forgiveness moves the members of such a family to action. And his model guides and directs their actions. Family ministry that fails to recognize the dynamic power of the gospel of Jesus Christ is no ministry at all. Jesus Christ and his Word is the gravitational center of the Christian home.

[Discussion: How can congregations encourage their families to become introspective so that they are able to identify fancily spiritual strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that face them?]

Worshipping

In his lifetime the Old Testament patriarch, Abraham, built no less than four permanent altars for the worship of Jehovah. Of course, there were no churches or synagogues in his day. Abraham's altars represented loving responses to the Lord of his life. Today families don't actually erect physical altars in their homes. But Christian families do build spiritual altars. Like Abraham's altars, our family altars are a natural response to God's grace. At the family altar we grow in our understanding of God's love and learn how to apply his Truth to our lives. And here at the family altar we come to worship him as the God of our salvation.

As a spiritual place, the family altar ought to get plenty of use—daily use, like the kitchen table or the bathroom sink. The heavy use that it receives ought to be consistent with the abundance of blessings God showers upon us. The full range of spiritual activities that take place within a Christian home are the bricks of the family altar. Prayers at bedtime and mealtime, crisis prayer, private meditations, reading Bible stories to young children, family discussions, devotional activities, and festive celebrations of the gifts of life and God's love (birthdays, baptisms, weddings, confirmations, even Christian burial) are all part of the family altar.

The distinction between "worship" and "spiritual growth" on our conceptual model is a little contrived. The relationship between the two functions is more like a Moebius strip. It is difficult sometimes to know just exactly where one leaves off and the other begins. And, in fact, very often one begets the other, or both occur simultaneously. But, once again, there is a myth at work in the lives of Christian families that needs to be addressed. We might refer to the myth as "entertainment-orientation." Our inability to enjoy quiet is symptomatic. Entertainment-orientation is passive stimulæ over active response—*impression* over *expression*. In regard to the family altar a case needs to be made for balance. Who can be edified by the hope of eternal life with Jesus without actively waiting for his coming (Romans 8:24-25)? Who can grow in the peace that Christ brings into our lives without walking fearlessly into each new day (John 14:27)? Who can be nurtured through the vine without flowering and bearing fruit out of sheer joy (John 15:1-11)? Hearing the gospel produces active, expressive faith and joy in the hearts of Christians. Each member of the Christian family will at some level want to consummate that with some form of expression. That is worship.

The family altar needs to be a place where every member of the family can be involved in worship. Music is one of those very special gifts of God that lends itself well to the worship experience. Families that are reluctant to sing hymns together can still be taught to give shape and meaning to their spiritual responses by reciting Psalms or hymn verses in unison. Younger children can be encouraged to sing simple spiritual songs or sing along with recorded tapes. And everyone needs to have a part in the prayer-life of the Christian home with circle prayers and written prayers and spontaneous prayers. Most of the things that we are describing here are learned activities--skills and habits that you and I, pastors and teachers, can teach and encourage. When we do, God will most certainly bless our efforts.

[Discussion: What key elements need to be included in a model strategy for improving home devotions among WELS families?]

Growing

You have heard the expression, "...one brick short of a full load." When it comes to the family altar, in the WELS we are one brick short of a full load. The brick that is missing is home nurture—more specifically, home nurture through family devotions. It is nothing short of a corporate scandal that God's people have so grossly neglected his Word within their own homes.

Our people need to be reminded that God expects us to have family nurture-time (Deuteronomy 6:6,7), that we are indeed blessed in and through his Word (Luke 11:28); and that the greatest of those blessings is a stronger faith in God's love and power (1 Corinthians 2:2-5). Some families can't seem to get their priorities straight. Let them be reminded that Jesus described discipleship as even more important than family itself (Luke 9:59-62). For those who have tried home devotions over and over, only to have failed over and over, let them be reminded of Paul's self-recrimination, "For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out" (Romans 7:18). His answer was to persevere in Christ. For those who feel awkward in leading a devotion, or are shaky at their command of communication skills, encourage with the example of Moses (Exodus 4:10-16).

We will need to rebuild parents' confidence in their ability to lead their families through Scripture. So many families have lost their purpose because they have stopped nurturing. They have made the incorrect assumption that teaching goes on in the classroom, or in the music studio, or on the playing field, even in the church; so teaching does not need to take place in the home. How far we have come from God's design for the Christian home! The greatest challenge of ministry to and through the Christian family is to restore the joy of teaching to the home. We need to continually place the nurture role before families as their highest priority. Family ministry is an echo of Saint Paul's encouragement to the Romans: "I am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another" (Romans 15:14).

Many Christian homes have lost their agenda. They have forgotten why God made them a family. Family leaders need to be given opportunities to rethink their reasons for existing as a family. The family objectives of a Christian home have to be clear: 1) To teach one another God's plan of salvation for us. 2) To teach one another God's purpose for us in service to one another while we remain on earth. Both objectives are nurture objectives. And both objectives have their beginnings in a clear and thorough understanding of law and gospel and its application to common, practical circumstances.

Christian discipline in the home provides a good point of illustration for law/gospel application. Some Christian parents become trapped on a disciplinary continuum that has a permissive style on one end and authoritarian rule on the other. The authoritarian parent disciplines with many rules, strictly enforced. The permissive parent raises children with few rules or no rules; thus enforcement becomes unnecessary. The concept is deceptively logical. It is even promoted by some so-called Christian ministries. One Christian parenting expert writes, "Both extremes are disastrous. There is safety only in the middle ground, which is sometimes difficult to locate."^{iv} But such an approach largely ignores a gospel motivation. It is effective only insofar as the law is effective. Even a Christian must admit that the law has always been an effective motivator.

A discipline style that in practical application ignores the gospel and the person of Jesus Christ is not Christian. Where law is mistaken for law and gospel, there can only be confusion.

The law/gospel discipline of a Christian home stands in stark contrast to the permissive/authoritarian continuum. In law/gospel discipline behavior is born out of love for the Savior. Yes, the law challenges the conscience with the discomfort of guilt; but it is the loving forgiveness in Jesus that moves us and our children to follow the law's guidance. Our ministry to the Christian home is deeply rooted in a law/gospel application of Bible truth. Jesus said, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down., the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against the house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain. came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash" (Matthew 7:24-27).

[Discussion: What formats in congregational life serve as good opportunities to instruct and encourage parents in the proper application of law and gospel to daily living?]

Part II: Nurturing through Christian Family Relationships

What a marvelous invention this thing called family! In family we have God's first and foremost place for practicing the words of Jesus. As we grow in our relationship with God and his Word, we find more and more opportunities to grow in and through our relationships with one another. Relationships become more intimate when every member of the family is more intimately connected to Christ. Commitment to one another glows when each family member sees God's commitment to them. Communication becomes more honest and open when family members see how God has revealed himself in Christ Jesus. Time spent together and each individual's understanding of a God-given role within the family become more meaningful as family members come to understand how God intends that they complement one another.

Intimacy

With single-minded purpose the choir sang, "Lift up your heads, you mighty gates! Behold the King of Glory waits; The King of Kings is drawing near, The Savior of the world is here..." The sopranos carried their melody as though they were one voice. The director communicated a sense of musical focus to the choir and the orchestra. The souls of those on stage and the audience were knit together in this stirring moment of complete concert. The musical concepts of a composer removed from this setting by hundreds of years were now intimately linked to the hearts of performers and listeners alike. Through the gift of music God was bringing us together; poet and composer, director and performers, and the members of the audience with the people on the stage in this rare and unforgettable moment. This was love with a capital "L," without physical contact or the verbalizing of a love emotion. This was intimacy!

If anyone understood Christian intimacy in a family setting it was the Apostle John. John, who described himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved; John, to whom Jesus entrusted the care of his own mother; this John helps us understand intimacy by recording the prayer that Jesus prayed on behalf of his disciples, and in fact, for all believers:

I pray also for those who will believe in me...that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them. and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20ff)

The concepts of intimacy and love are all wrapped up in the very essence of God himself. “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him” (1 John 4:16b). God acted on his love for us. “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10). If we want ours to be a loving, intimate, united family, we will first need to come to know and grow in God’s love for us. “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:7-9).

Family people love to talk about love. But only Christian homes really understand love at its most profound level because its members know what it is like to be loved by God. The Christian home has experienced love that is not for sale, but freely given; never earned. Its members know its cost to a loving Father who sacrificed to the limit. They understand it is boundless and unchanging. And they value his intimate love as personal. The members of a Christian home treasure God’s love for them as they return it to him in kind (Psalm 18:1).

Jesus used himself as the model for love as he established his new covenant: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you, must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). We are to reflect his love for us by loving one another as he loved us. Throughout the rest of the New Testament we hear the apostles picking up this thread to give it specificity, particularly the Apostle Paul. Listen to some of these “one-anothering” gospel commands: Ephesians, five: “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs ...Submit to one another.” Romans, twelve: “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.” Romans, fifteen: “Accept one another...instruct one another.” Hebrews, ten. “...spur one another on ... encourage one another...” Colossians, three: “Bear with each other...teach and admonish one another.” What this means for the Christian family is that love is not some vague force that turns on our heart-lights and makes us all a tingle. There are some very real and positive actions that emerge from genuine intimate, selfless love; and all of them have their origin in the source of love, God himself.

To the Christians at Corinth the Apostle described love this way: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, It is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). The members of a Christian family find ways to frequently test themselves against Paul’s model for love.

[Discussion: How can a small group ministry program effectively provide for the needs of Christians who are not members of functional Christian homes? Do the positive features of small group ministries outweigh the risks connected with small group ministries?]

Commitment

Love moves Christians to heroic acts. I can think of no other act of Christian love that is as gut-wrenching, and heart-rending as an intervention. I have been involved in two formal interventions in my life. Their memory is still painful and fraught with intense, complex feelings. I recall the months of tearful planning, the secretive meetings, of confrontational letters and statements being written, read and rewritten. I recall the fear of destroying a friendship and the shock of unexpected revelations. And I will never forget the depth of love I felt for both victims and abusers as they struggled with the very real issues of alcoholism and its lasting effects on the family. I saw family loyalty and commitment at its worst and at its best.

Family loyalty gone bad seems to dominate the public’s attention these days with media coverage of La Cosa Nostra and the street gangs of urban America, both of which qualify as a sort of family. In a world in which political ends have even made sacred promises disposable, Christian homes need sound Bible models to follow.

King David knew about family commitments made and broken. Yet at the end of his life he would write with all surety, “Is not my house right with God? Has he not made me an everlasting covenant, arranged and secured in every part? Will he not bring to fruition my salvation and grant me every desire?” (2 Samuel 23:5).

Our model for commitment has its origins in a God who is fully committed to us. Nevertheless, God provides yet another model for family commitment in his gift of marriage.

The marriage vow is the beginning of a new family. Scripture makes it clear that God's intention for marriage is a long-term commitment (Matthew 5:31-32; Matthew 19:3-12). But once again there is a myth circulating among us that plays havoc with the biblical view of commitment. We might call this myth "adventure-orientation." In short, we seek romance. Be advised, the definition we are using here for romance is a classical one: "seeking adventure." In the classical sense a real romance novel would be *Robin Hood* or *Huckleberry Finn*, a story in which the hero travels far from home. Beethoven is looked upon as the first in a long line of great romance composers. His later symphonies did something that earlier symphonies did not do. They wandered far from their original key before returning to the home key. Americans are probably plagued more with adventure-orientation than other cultures because we have a recent history of opening new frontiers (physical, political, technological). We have invested in the myth that life is boring unless we are moving on to something new. "I venture; therefore, I am." No wonder that commerce promotes every product as "new." In the climate of adventure-orientation it is easy for families to become confused about what is really new and what is old. Idiosyncrasies and irritants in relationships are taken for a sign that the time has come to cast off the old and seek adventure among new partners. The romance of "falling in love" sets-up our Christian young people for the inevitable "fall out of love."

Unbridled romance needs to be replaced with commitment to one another and God. That is an educational process that begins long before a couple is seated in the pastor's study for pre-marital counseling. And marriage partners need to be taught how to find adventure by exploring their relationships with one another each new day.

There is a spiritual parallel to our penchant for seeking new romantic adventures in human relationships. Take the gospel, for example. "Give me that ol' time religion" doesn't do well on the spiritual marketplace these days. Some of our hurried families have forgotten that it still is *Good News* that in Christ we are a *new* creation ...that he gives us *new* life in his *new* covenant. There is nothing stale or old or worn-out about the message. Jeremiah wrote, "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are *new* every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23). With God we have both great romance and total commitment.

[Discussion: How can we help family leaders set and work at meeting spiritual goals for the Christian home?]

Communication

When I close my eyes I can still see Eric sitting there in the last desk in row one. Eric's mom was in her second marriage. Eric's stepfather was verbally abusive to everyone, but especially to Eric. His stepfather was not a member of the congregation. In the classroom Eric was rejected by the other seventh graders. He was programmed for failure. But Eric's faith was stalwart.

One night I received a phone call. The conversation was an intense one. Eric's evangelical enthusiasm apparently had become evangelical antagonism. His step-father was "fed up with the _____ nagging about not attending church." We agreed to meet over the matter.

I knew it would be a stormy session when Mr. H. refused to shake my hand as he and his wife stepped into my office. I usually started parent/teacher consultations with a prayer. This was the first time in twenty years that someone vehemently refused such a beginning. So Mrs. H. and I prayed together as Eric's stepdad made his contempt as visible as he could. For the next hour Mr. H. cursed the church, the school, the clergy, Eric, me, his job, and his wife in no particular order and without the slightest bit of reverence. There was little that I could do except defend Eric's loving desire to share the gospel and agree to working on his lack of tact. When it became obvious that there would be no satisfactory resolution, I arose, moving toward the door in a gesture that was designed to indicate that the conference was over. As I moved I heard Mr. H. mumble something about knowing that he could never fit into the pastor's "high and mighty" instruction class. The moment is indelibly frozen in my mind. Instinct told me that the Spirit had opened a crack in the door of

ministry. Mr. H. was telling me why he had such strong feelings about the church. Hidden in his mumble was a load of insecurity and self-abasement. How I thank God for the presence of mind to sit back down! What happened in the next ten minutes was like an out-of-body experience. Mr. H. talked, I listened. I observed God's Spirit work a powerful miracle in a stubborn and proud heart. In the span of those ten minutes Mr. H. committed himself to the pastor's instruction class and to giving regular worship a try--a commitment that he has now been keeping every Sunday for three years as a baptized, confirmed member of the church.

If our ministry to and through the Christian home is to improve, we will need to do a better job of listening, and we will need to teach our people how to listen to one another.

Listening is a biblical concept. "...Everyone should be quick to listen,, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19). There are several other Bible concepts that are key to effective communication within the Christian home:

- Speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:14-16,25).
- Be positive and encouraging (Hebrews 10:24-25; Philippians 4:8-9).
- Be direct and confidential (Matthew 18:15-17).
- Deal with anger (Ephesians 4:26).
- Learn to say "I'm sorry" and "You're forgiven" (Matthew 6:12; Matthew 18:21-35).

A lot of families today fail to cultivate healthy communication habits. They communicate with one another at superficial levels (sports, weather, soaps, etc. over God's love, our relationships, gender issues, etc.). Our families need to relearn some communication skills. The advent of the small group dynamic (a la 12-step recovery groups or Lyman Coleman) offers some valuable insights into effective communication for families. (It might help to think of the family as God's original small group.) We share ourselves at three critical levels:

- my experiences (history)
- my feelings (issues)
- my truth (values and beliefs)

As we disclose more about ourselves, we learn more about ourselves. And we usually disclose ourselves in the above order, with a system of values and beliefs at the very core of our being. In the safer environment of the small group we are freer to probe and explore our experiences, feelings and truths by testing ours against the experiences, feelings, and truths of the other members of the group. We arrive at a better understanding of self by a process that involves little expertise, but much group consensus. Most contemporary families could benefit from practicing this process of sharing one's self.

People living in the environment of the unhealthy (dysfunctional) family more than anything else need to be given a chance to tell their story to let someone else know how they hurt, and where they hurt, and why they hurt. They need to share their fears and their feelings. They need to share their experiences and wisdom. And they need to share truth ...the truth of their lives, and the *truth* of God's love in their lives.

When the family setting has become so dysfunctional, or when denial is so entrenched, the church will need to provide those opportunities to share in other formats outside of the family (e.g. mentoring, small group ministries, or Christian counseling).

[Discussion: What can the congregation do to help facilitate improved and increased communication in the homes of its people?]

Role Distinction

Our roles within the Christian household and our relationships within those Godgiven roles are both tied to the concept of complementation. God's pronouncement that it is not good for the man to be alone (Genesis 2:18) was not an admission that something in creation had gone wrong and was in need of fixing; it was a

pronouncement of divine order. In those words and the words that immediately follow, “I will make a helper suitable for him,” we are led to an understanding that we are created to complement one another. This complementation is yet another special gift of the Creator.

In addition, one gets the impression that such ordered complementation is important to mankind’s primary task—namely, to serve as caretaker of God’s creation (Genesis 2:5,15). Both man and woman were to share in this responsibility. He to lead; she as his “suitable helper.” In the aftermath of sin (and quite probably in the actual sin itself) those respective roles became perverted. Man resisted the responsibility that leadership brought; woman designed to exercise a leadership role that was not hers to exercise. In sin the distorted roles of husband and wife became difficult at best, hopelessly dysfunctional at worst; anything but God’s ideal complement.

Paul addresses man’s predisposition to abandon his responsibilities to lead by making husbands analogous to Christ, the head of the church, reminding husbands that the basis for their headship is the loving self-sacrifice of Christ himself (Ephesians 5:23-31). Similarly, he addresses fatherhood as a responsible act of leading. “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, being them up in the training and instruction of the Lord,” (Ephesians 6:4).

The apostle addresses the predisposition of woman to usurp the man’s role with the encouragement for wives to submit to their husbands in the same way that they submit to their Lord and Savior.

Sin has distorted both roles so severely that Paul’s encouragement frequently bruises the pride of men in general and husbands in particular, and offends the rights of women in general and wives in particular. For both Christian husbands and wives the point is that both pride and rights are manifestations of the sinful self. Saint Paul’s focus was on Christ and on the other, not on self. Only when we are able to focus on the needs of the other in lieu of our own self can we achieve a degree of complementation as God intended.

The Apostle had a word regarding the child role as well. He wrote, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right. Honor your father and mother” (Ephesians 6:1-2). Families are the place where God wants us to learn how to honor (the boss, the government, a next door neighbor), and we begin by honoring our parents. Family is the place where God wants us to learn how to obey (him). And we begin by obeying our parents.

[Discussion: How can the church assist parents in the important task of helping their children identify gifts for service in kingdom work?]

Bonding Relationships

The Boundary Waters can be an imposing place. You can canoe for days without seeing other people. For unseasoned adventurers like my son Paul and me this first night alone in the remote wilderness turned ominous by the sudden onset of a squall. As the lightening silhouetted the tall timbers against the walls of our tiny mountain tent, Paul turned to me and whispered, “Dad, can we pray together?” It had been a few years since the last time that we had last exercised a bedtime prayer ritual, so I treasure that moment and the bonding that took place in the prayer that followed.

The time we spend together as a family is precious. In the early 80’s someone invented “quality time.” A lot of hurried families subscribed. It did untold damage because it gave people permission to compact and compartmentalize their contact and their communication with one another. The closeness that occurred in Canada for Paul and me lasted only a few minutes. It was indeed “quality” time spent together. But it took a life-time (quantity time) of being together and sharing one another’s company to make that moment happen. Christian families long to be together with each other just as we who are called “the children of God” (1 John 3:1) long to be with our Father in heaven and with the rest of his heavenly family. And Christian brothers and sisters desire to be together in the same way that spiritual brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus seek his company (Matthew 12:46-49) and the company of one another.

The church has identified the marriage relationship as a key for the spiritual as well as the functional health of the Christian family. And, given the increase in the number of Christian families that are traumatized

by marriage relationships that have come unglued, perhaps the marriage relationship ought to continue to be seen as one of the keys to family strength. But there is at least one other relationship that deserved far more attention than it is getting. We are speaking of the relationship between fathers and sons. This is not meant to say that other parental relationships (father/daughter, mother/son, mother/daughter) are unimportant. They are all very important. But there is something even biblically special about the father/son relationship. God consistently reveals himself to us in terms of the father/son metaphor. Human attitudes regarding obedience and honor are especially evident in Jesus our perfect model of a son in his relationship with a father.

There is a growing crisis of gender identity. Many of our members are agonizing over gender confusion. This is especially true of more and more of our boys and young men, many of whom grow up without the benefit of a father-figure in the wake of a divorce or illegitimacy. The tragedies of spouse abuse, date rape, homosexual and lesbian orientation, machismo attitudes, and absentee fathers are a reality in WELS congregations. It is naive for us to believe otherwise.

In his (New Age) best-seller, *Fire in the Belly*, Sam Keen describes the struggle that occurs when boyhood has been dominated by mother:

The son must develop various strategies to deal with the power of mother. He may surrender, becoming a mamma's boy, and devoting his life to pleasing her, and later his wife or lover. If he takes this task, his relationship with women will be dominated by the desire to perform well to gain approval, and to avoid female anger or rejection. Or he may take an opposite course and reduce females to either servants or sex objects. The Don Juan male constantly tries to prove his potency by seduction or conquest...to deny her power over him.^v

There is a psychological difference between the genders. Women come to a better understanding of who they are in an environment of human relationships. God placed Eve into a creation in which there were pre-existing human relationships (Adam). Her role was oriented to her relationship with Adam ("suitable helper"). After The Fall her curse was connected to her relationships with the family.

Men realize their identity in an atmosphere of relational independence. Adam was placed into a world in which "no suitable helper was found" (Genesis 2:20). He could only learn that it was not good for man to be alone by being alone. To start a new family a man will need to leave his father and mother (Genesis 2:24). Some of that kind of separation was taking place when Jesus forthrightly declared to Mary and Joseph, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house" (Luke 2:49). How can a Christian young man be guided through this difficult separation process if he has no meaningful relationship with a father-figure? How will he be able to relate to other men, or to women unless he has a Christian's answer to the question: What does it mean to be a man? None of society's answers to that question square with the scriptural model of manhood. Being a Christian man is not 'terminating' the competition (war), or accumulating goods (work), or dreaming of the arrival of the Swedish women's bikini team (sex). Being a Christian man involves stewardship, and leadership (at least in the Christian home), and fatherhood. We cannot go on acting as though God made persons who just happen to be gender-specific. God created us male and female (Genesis 1:27). But our understanding Christian manhood and womanhood comes from close and vibrant relationships with our gender role-models, usually our parents.

[Discussion: Should our congregations consider creating a WELS version of Big Brothers to provide father-figures for boys who are growing up without a father?]

Part III: Developing a Christian Life-Style

Christians make a statement about who they are by the lives they choose to lead. Their system of values is distinctively Christian. They are not only able to adapt to their changing environment; they recognize their ability to affect change as they carry the gospel message in their smiles and actions. They recognize God's

guiding hand in all that occurs in their lives, coping with human losses according to the strength and comfort that he provides. The Christian family plays a key role in the development of such a God-pleasing life-style.

Establishing Values

I could feel big pools of water welling up in my eyes as the choir sang, “Jesus, bless the ones who taught me all the songs I sing; Of the angels and of Mary and the infant King.” I was just realizing for the first time that we were singing about my mother and father, my teachers and my pastors, all who had a hand in teaching me to value music, and the story of Jesus, my “infant King” when I was yet so young and impressionable. What a gift these people were for my life!

By age eight most of our values have been permanently established within a complex system (age nine or ten for some boys)—established, but not fully prioritized. The process of prioritizing values will consume most of the adolescent years. Research tells us that for most children the first eight years are spent in absorbing values from the most significant people in their lives, usually their parents. The next decade will be spent in testing those values against the backdrop of the most significant people in their lives, usually the same parents who were instrumental in setting the values. This scenario stands in glaring contrast with what so many parents tend to believe. Many parents believe that their child’s teacher, or the television, or the child’s friends are more influential than they are. That is simply not the case. For better, or for worse, the speech, the habits, the fears, the joys, the conversation, the idiosyncrasies, the attitudes, the emotions, the actions of parents to a greater degree model life for their children, and serve as a testing ground for their adolescents. Wise, old Solomon observed this long before the research was done. He wrote, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” (Proverbs 22:6). Of modeling Saint Paul wrote, “You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You should know that you are a letter front Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:23).

Law and gospel form the backbone of the Christian system of values: law to strike the tender nerve of the conscience; gospel to soothe and comfort with the healing of forgiveness; law then to guide us in an obedient response to God’s will. But, within the framework of law and gospel there are several foundational principles that ought to be firmly fixed in any Christian’s system of beliefs and values. (The list that follows is not intended to be exhaustive.)

Justice

The bumper sticker reads: “If you want peace, work for justice.” Men have fought and died over their convictions regarding what is fair and unfair to them. Justice is one of the cornerstones of democratic government. It is also a fundamental concept to Christianity.

Our God is a God of justice. He demands perfect justice. For those who cannot keep his law (and we cannot) his punishment is absolute. But Christ kept the law perfectly in our place replacing our sinful rags with his magnificent robe of righteousness. Now before God’s judgment throne we stand arrayed in Christ’s splendiferous robe (Isaiah 61:10; Job 29:14). We are reminded too that the father of the prodigal ordered the “best robe” to be put on his wayward son (Luke 15:22). The Christian home needs to work hard at establishing a sense of justice so that our children grow to appreciate God’s demands, their plight, and the unparalleled value of their salvation in Christ Jesus. An understanding of God’s justice is the beginning of peace for a Christian home that will sometimes question life’s fairness for them.

Human Sexuality

The last two generations of Americans have so idealized sexuality that it has given rise to a new cultural myth: “I am sexual; therefore, I am.” When our young people come to believe that myth, they quite naturally become victims of “rejection-orientation.” They soon become obsessed with appearances, sex appeal, attraction and popularity. How devastating that can be if one continually senses that they are none of the above. The natural reaction to such logic is to build shallow gender relationships and settle for superficial communication.

The Christian system of values needs a place for healthy attitudes toward our own sexuality:

1. that God created sex as something good;
2. that our sexuality is a gift from God;
3. that human sexuality provides an opportunity for personal expressions of our faith;
4. that our sexuality offers significant life decisions to us;
5. that marriage is God's "designer model" for intimacy;
6. that marriage is God's "designer model" for love;
7. that marriage is God's "designer model" for commitment.

In congregations in which there is a Christian elementary school, one gets the impression that parents have unmet expectations for the school, while the school holds unmet expectations of the home in carrying out a Christian course of gender education. In the finger-pointing of unmet expectations neither home nor school is shouldering the responsibility for teaching our children what it means to be a sexual Christian.

Objectives for a gender curriculum can be relatively simple: teach definitions; teach mechanics; teach principles.

Most parents get uptight, when they think about teaching the mechanics. You can almost hear the two sides of the debate. "I just can't bring myself to tell him/her about sexual intercourse." "Nobody, least of all my kid's teacher, is going to tell my kid how to do 'it.'" They are getting upset about the wrong thing. Principles are the key. When children have a solid foundation of Bible principles, the teaching of definitions and mechanics takes on a whole new wholesome flavor.

The area of gender education seems to open wonderful opportunities for joint, cooperative, home/school curriculum-building, the kind of stuff that educators are longing for these days. Forgive the repetition, but God made us sexual creatures. We cannot ignore that fact; and we dare not devalue it.

Contentment

The hurried home is never satisfied. Perhaps we can blame Walt Disney for coaxing a cricket into singing, "When yore mish upon a stark; makes no difference who you are; anything your hearts desire will come to you." In more general terms, discontent has been part of the human dilemma since The Fall. Nevertheless, the myth is certainly bigger than ever: "I want; therefore, I am." The Christian home succumbs when its members do not know what they are looking for in life. Their expectations are misguided. Their wanting is misplaced. Wanting more is not necessarily evil. As Christians, we pray for more of the Spirit's blessings, or a stronger faith, or more opportunities to touch people's lives with the gospel. The problem with this myth is that it focuses our lives on wanting more of the temporal, the self-gratifying, the immediate, the sensual. The hurried Christian home needs to be given opportunities to consider God's will for their lives. They need to learn that wanting comes easier when we want what God wants.

Wanting and ambitions can leave the family in an awful wreck. Our discontent leads us to abandon the quiet life as product-orientation and success-orientation leads to motion-intoxication. The symptom is that we can't relax. "I move; therefore, I am" becomes a code of life. Each member of the family becomes a player in a game-board mentality. What we do is paramount to who we are. Take note the next time you are introduced to someone. Conversation will inevitably begin with, "What do you do?" And if the question isn't asked, most of us will readily volunteer the nature of our work long before we reveal things about our character because we have come to see ourselves in the light of our work instead of the full package.

Two Bible principles need to be held before our Christian homes to counter these myths. The first has to do with what we have and what we want. God wants us to be seekers of spiritual things. "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). To a misguided Martha Jesus remarked, "only one thing is needed" (Luke 10:41). And of the things we have Saint Paul writes to Timothy, "Godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6).

Work Ethic

The Apostle urged the Christians at Thessalonica to “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you., so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody” (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).

Jesus valued the quiet life. How many times didn't he seek out a quiet time and a quiet place? One interesting text has Jesus slipping out of the house where he was staying “very early in the morning while it was still dark” to pray. When Peter and the others finally located Jesus, he was refreshed and eager to find new opportunities to preach (Mark 1:35-39). When we quietly go about our daily work, the respect that we gain from those around us becomes yet another opportunity for sharing the gospel. As Christian families we are to “Be very careful then, how we live - not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:15-16).

Sharing

Finally, a word needs to be said about sharing. Each of the myths that threaten the spiritual strength of the Christian family has self as the driving force. The concept of Christian charity stands in sharp contrast to the “me-first mindset” of our generation. Our families will need to work at instilling the spirit of sharing and the concept of Christian charity in the next generation as a high priority in their values system.

[Discussion: What steps will need to be taken to establish a complete and comprehensive gender education curriculum that involves a partnership between church and home (and Christian school where applicable)?]

Adaptability

Change is an inevitable part of life. The words of a favorite hymn echo “Change and decay in all around I see. O Thou who changest not, abide with me!” while “future-shockers” warn of accelerated change in our lives. For the Psalmist the march of time was providential. “My times are an your hands...” (Psalm 31:15).

It is truly a marvel to see the wisdom of God as one looks at a Christian family. Left to human design, our primary social groups would probably be peer groups...kids over here...empty nesters over there... adolescents way over there...etc. But God arranged us in the intergenerational mix of families. In families we can find the wisdom of age, the realism of middle-age, and the idealism of youth. The church would do well to learn from that model. Instead, we continue to take the easy road (people love to be with their peers), grouping folks in formats that permit the sharing of both mutual experiences and mutual ignorance. In peer groupings there is a natural tendency to erect barriers between the generations. A vital part of ministry to the family is to work with the family as a unit and to demolish the generation walls that separate people.

Such family unity includes grandmas and grandpas. They too need to be valued by the family. In fact, their chief contribution to the Christian home is to fill the critical role of family historian. The past is not sufficient as one's only family; but without a past one has to construct civilization all over again every day. American families are in danger of losing their past because we are losing the importance of senior parents. If we are to know where we are going...if we are going to be able to adapt, then we must first look to the past to get a clear perspective. Grandparents are our living connection to that past. They need to be needed, not as surrogate parents, and not as relics or shrines to be periodically visited; but as people who have volumes of experience to share and a host of feelings to express.

Christian grandparents have much to teach us too. Paul tells Titus, “Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, love, and in endurance. Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women” (Titus 2:2-4).

[Discussion: Do our congregations have a responsibility to highlight the importance of grandparents, and to encourage families to value their history and culture?]

Coping

The news was not good. A doctor sat at my bedside describing how several of the arteries from my heart had become hardened with plaque. To comfort me he recited the odds that the surgery would be successful, the odds that I would not be mentally or physically incapacitated as a result of the surgery, the odds that I could live a relatively normal life. His probabilities left me cold with the sense that my life had become a crap shoot. Over the next few days I was troubled. Even when I tried to exercise my faith in prayer or Bible reading doubts and questions interfered. I began to be concerned that I was losing my faith. Then a friend sent a brief note with eight words from Psalm 46. They put everything back into perspective: “Be still, and know that I am God.”

Families are intimidated by fear and worry that results from speculation. We like to project ourselves onto the big screen of the future so that we can be in charge of our lives. Certainly the microchip has enhanced our ability to make predictions. But in our earnest desire to be like God we begin to believe the myth: “I have a chance; therefore, I am.” When people are concerned for their future (families-in-crisis), they need to be reminded of two vital truths. God loves them; and he is in control (Romans 8:28-39).

For those of us involved in ministry to the hurting, this means that we must begin to recognize ministry opportunities for what they are. For too long our practice has reflected a view that troubled families and homes in crisis are ministry doors slamming shut. We have not always trusted the dynamic power of the gospel to bring about change even in the lives of those who are in trouble. We have sometimes forgotten that law and gospel confront sinners in a way that creates a crisis of the heart. We need to begin to see family ministry of the reactive type as a door of ministry flung open wide. After we have made that transition we will be able to see and respond to the need to develop mentoring skills and begin training our laity for a ministry of compassion to families that hurt.

[Discussion: How can we best utilize the gifts of compassion among our laity so that we can conduct a parish ministry to people who are hurting?]

Part IV: Growing in a Sense of Mission

Of the names and titles that Scripture gives to Jesus’ followers (disciples, branches, children of God, sheep and lambs, etc.), two stand out as mission-setters, giving shape and direction to our lives as Christians. Jesus calls us “salt” and “light” (Matthew 5:13-16). The Christian home helps us to know who we are (identity) so that we can understand why we are here (purpose) and what we are to do while we are here (outreach) as salt and light to the world around us.

Christ-Worth

Kathy (not her real name) freely poured out her heart. At twenty-one, she still had no idea of who she was. Her three year college career had been a terrible disappointment to her and her parents. The few friends she did have had tried to buoy her up by telling her she had plenty of positive qualities. But even they were hard-pressed to name a single one. Relationships with boyfriends had always been difficult even though Kathy was intelligent and attractive. She was unable to organize her life or focus on her future. Her life was out of control and she didn’t understand why.

When I asked Kathy to tell me a little about her past, her initial comment was, “You know, I’m adopted.” I thought of the many adopted young men and women who have struggled to understand who they are in early adulthood. Kathy went on to describe a time not too long ago when she discovered some adoption documents. She learned that she had been abandoned by her Irish-American mother after just a few weeks of life. She commented that Saint Patrick’s Day has meant a lot more to her since then.

It is hard to get on with life until we know who we are. At age twenty-one Kathy is still dealing with the pain of abandonment and a sense of rejection. She has never had an opportunity to finish grieving over the loss of her birth parent. She could probably benefit from having a professional help her do a birth parent search so that she can resolve some of her inner doubts about herself.

Kathy's problem is not all that unusual or unique. In fact, many of us will face an occasion in life in which our spiritual health and growth is threatened by some obstruction. On those occasions it is important for us to find ways to share the burden with others whom we can trust, and get help in overcoming the obstacle.

Family is crucial to our understanding of self. That statement brings us to the proverbial "fork in the road." One direction takes us into the world of self. Having self-awareness and self-understanding and self-esteem turns us inward to an identity that is built on self. This road can bring Kathy to grips with her past. It can even help her to understand her present state of mind, giving her an opportunity to go on in life. But eventually that road dead-ends because self is a dead end.

The other path represents cognitive therapy of another kind. It takes us beyond the obstacles that self has created. This road helps us to see ourselves in the same way that God would see us if it were not for the atoning work of Christ. The Apostle Paul understood the problem when he wrote, "What a wretched man I am!" (Romans 7:24). He saw himself as the problem, not just the sorry wreck that results from a problem. In Don Matzat's words:

I don't have a negative self-image, I have a negative self...If I am the problem, what is the solution? If you educate me you will get a smarter sinner. If you discipline me, you will get a disciplined sinner. If you refute me, I become a refined sinner. Whatever you do with me, you cannot change what I am, and what I am is the problem...Embracing a positive image of self will not, in the long run, make any difference, because I am still wrapped up in myself. I simply become a self-centered sinner who is trying to like himself. Even if I feel bad about myself and do not like myself, I am still focusing upon myself, and "myself" is the problem.^{vi}

We need to learn how to see ourselves as God sees us. The view from his throne is one in which the problem of a wretched self is superimposed with the image of the crucified, risen and ascended Christ. The crucified Christ frees us from a negative self because in his death our self also dies (2 Corinthians 5:14; Galatians 2:20). His ascension makes of each one of us a "new you" ...a "you" that has its identity in Jesus...a "you" that only identifies with Jesus (Colossians 3:1-4). In Christ we have a totally new identity that is complete and perfect in his righteousness, not just for eternity, but here on earth as well. "For me to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21), says Paul. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me..."(Galatians 2:20).

Kathy's tone darkened as she whispered, "I owe everything to my adoptive parents; so I'm staying in school to please them."

Our search for identity sometimes leads us to try to find meaning for life by seeking the approval of other's. If we were to name this phenomenon, it might be called, "affirmation-orientation." Paul asked the haunting question, "Am I now trying to win the approval of men or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10). The myth we so readily engage is "I am noticed; therefore, I am." We have become so adept at the business of image-building and seeking to please others that many of us have to periodically peel off layer after layer of the onion to get at the core of the person again. Jesus noted the same myth-in-action when he called the image-conscious Pharisees "whitewashed tombs" and cups and dishes clean on the outside and dirty on the inside (Matthew 23).

When we serve for the wrong reason, we need to remind one another that the reasons Jesus gives for being salt and light to others is so that, "men may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). All that we are is of God. All that we have comes from God. All that we do, because of what Jesus has done in our place, brings glory to God. Our identity is wholly bound-up in Jesus. When the angels tore open the sky with the eternal chorus, "Glory to God in the highest..." it was nothing less than an invitation for

us to join in that song with lives fully dedicated to him. The miracle of miracles is that God, for Jesus' sake, counts us worthy to be part of that heavenly choir. Yes, family is crucial to our understanding of self. But being a member of God's spiritual family validates us and reaffirms our identity like no other earthly family can.

[Discussion: To what degree can psychology be a useful tool in helping Christians understand themselves? What threat does psychology pose to Word-ministry?]

Having Purpose

As Christians look at the cross, they focus on two directions in life - upwards and outwards. Saint Paul says, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain...I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far..." (Philippians 1:21-24). Our look heavenward keeps us mindful of the day when Jesus will return to take us to be with him.

But we cannot spend the rest of time gazing upward at an empty sky (Acts 1:11). We have work to do. As new creatures in Christ, from eternity God has designed for and assigned to each one of us a purposeful task (Ephesians 2:10). We have productive roles to fill in our homes, in our congregations, and in society. In carrying out those tasks the emphasis is always on serving others. Here is how Paul completed the thought: "...but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body."

The salt metaphor has many interesting applications to life as a Christian. Used as a preservative, we prevent this wicked world from total putrefaction. As a flavoring agent we bring the only source of joy to a world bored in its meaningless search for happiness. For icy-hard hearts our lives serve as the melting agent that prepares them for the gospel's warmth. To a world infected with the gangrenous leprosy of sin, our lives act as an astringent to stanch the gaping wound. As salt we are God's agents of change.

Without a clear spiritual purpose in life we come to the point of despising life itself. Our mythological code becomes "I dominate; therefore, I am." We become obsessed with winning. We live for success and achievement, very often at the expense of others; but certainly for self-gratification. When Christian families live in the shadow of that myth, they are driven to a relentless cycle of wheel-spinning and endless clambering for the next rung. In the mad scramble for meaning in life they are willing to sacrifice the reality of God's purpose for the illusion of human success.

As Jesus reminded his disciples of his purpose, he also clarified theirs—and ours. "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for the harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even, now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together'" (John 4:34-36). Moms and dads, grandmas and grandpas, sons and daughters—we are all harvesters. Life in the Christian home is one of ministry to each other. As we encourage, admonish, spur-on, instruct, submit to, accept, honor one another we are carrying out God's purpose for life.

[Discussion: What is the difference between the Reformed version of family ministry and the Lutheran version of family ministry?]

Outreach

What does an eight year old know? Our Sunday school teacher had asked us each to bring an unchurched friend to next Sunday's class. The only unchurched kid my age that I knew was a kid named Roberto. His path and mine crossed almost daily as he ambled home from Brown Street School, and I negotiated my way home from Cross Lutheran School. I based my belief that Roberto was unchurched on the assumption that anyone who went to Brown Street School was an abject heathen.

Roberto and I seldom talked. Occasionally one of us would lob a friendly snowball at the other. That was about the depth of our relationship. But now there was this challenge from my teacher.

My mother and father were encouraging. I don't recall how I worded my invitation. It was probably something quite brief and to the point. I do recall climbing the cluttered winding stairwell to Roberto's dingy

upstairs apartment to pick him up. He must have taken the invitation seriously because he was waiting for me dressed in a clean shirt and tie. His Hispanic mother greeted me warmly and sent the two of us happily on our way.

That is all that I can recall. I wish I could report that today Roberto is a baptized, confirmed member of one of our WELS congregations. But I can't. If someone made a follow-up call I couldn't tell you. I only know that I did not. The fact is that I don't think he and I ever did much together again after that Sunday except to lob a few more friendly snowballs at one another from afar. So I don't know what happened in his story. But I do know what happened in my story. In my lifetime I cannot think of anything that has brought me greater satisfaction and joy than sharing the love of Jesus with other people. I savor every opportunity to do just that. But that, crude and feeble witness from my childhood remains a treasure locked in an otherwise porous memory.

Healthy Christian families reach out to others. They practice hospitality, sharing their resources and themselves with the people around them (Romans 12:13). They are especially sensitive to the needs of people who are troubled and hurting. The maturing Christian faith not only responds to opportunities to help someone who is carrying a heavy burden in life; it learns how to look for opportunities to exercise Christian charity. Mature Christians not only want to share; they need to share. And the thing they need to share the most is God's love in Christ Jesus.

One of the most crucial challenges in ministry for the next decade is to develop new ways to *encourage, train, and provide opportunities* for Christians to reach out in love to a sin-darkened world. As a church, we have been effective in preaching and teaching the gospel's enlightening news to our people. But we have been less than effective in providing opportunities for our people to reflect that light to others. We talk about doing it a lot more these days. Our churches spend more time, and energy, and money organizing evangelism initiatives. But I wonder if we may have missed an important point. Isn't the gospel's glow ageless? Someone had to plant the seeds of outreach courage in the hearts of little Samuel and David and Esther and Timothy long before they would live out their convictions in the dramas of their adult lives. A careful reading of their stories hints at the strong influence of a God-fearing family as the cradle of future spiritual courage and effective witness to God's truth. We cannot afford to wait for the church to train adults for kingdom work. We need to train family leaders to initiate, nurture and practice Christian witness within the home and beyond it. And we cannot merely rely upon the church to offer sharing opportunities to help us develop a sense of caring for others. We need to help families begin to identify and respond to serving opportunities on their own...partly because the church cannot hope to effectively carry out this work alone, but also partly because the activity of extending ourselves to others is a key factor in developing the attitudes and instincts of a healthy Christian family. *Letting our gospel light shine is a practice that needs to be nurtured in the Christian home.* As God's grace overflows in our lives, he uses us to splash that grace-light all over others around us. Each member of the family of God's people has a unique, compelling story to tell—one of God's power and love at work in their lives. Family ministry looks for ways to help families grow to a point where their individual stories of Christ-alive-in-them can be told.

Like the prodigal of Jesus' parable each member of God's household of faith shares in the abundance of God's blessings: the intimacy of a forgiving father as demonstrated in a loving embrace and a kiss, a regal robe to cover the son's imperfection and give him back his respectability, a ring to symbolize a father's commitment and the son's lasting membership in his father's family, a feast of unparalleled proportions to celebrate their reconciliation, and *sandals to give the son the opportunity to carry the joyful message of his father's love everywhere he went* (Luke 15:11-31). "How beautiful on the mountain are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" (Isaiah 52:7).

[Discussion: How can the church provide more opportunities for its families to reach out to other families to share the joy of saving grace with them?]

Endnotes

ⁱ Oscar E. Feucht, Ed., *Family Relationships and the Church* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1970), "Family Ethos in the Light of the Reformation," Edward H. Schroeder, pp. 99-118.

ⁱⁱ Tim Kimmel, *Little House on the Freeway* (Portland, Multnomah Press, 1989).

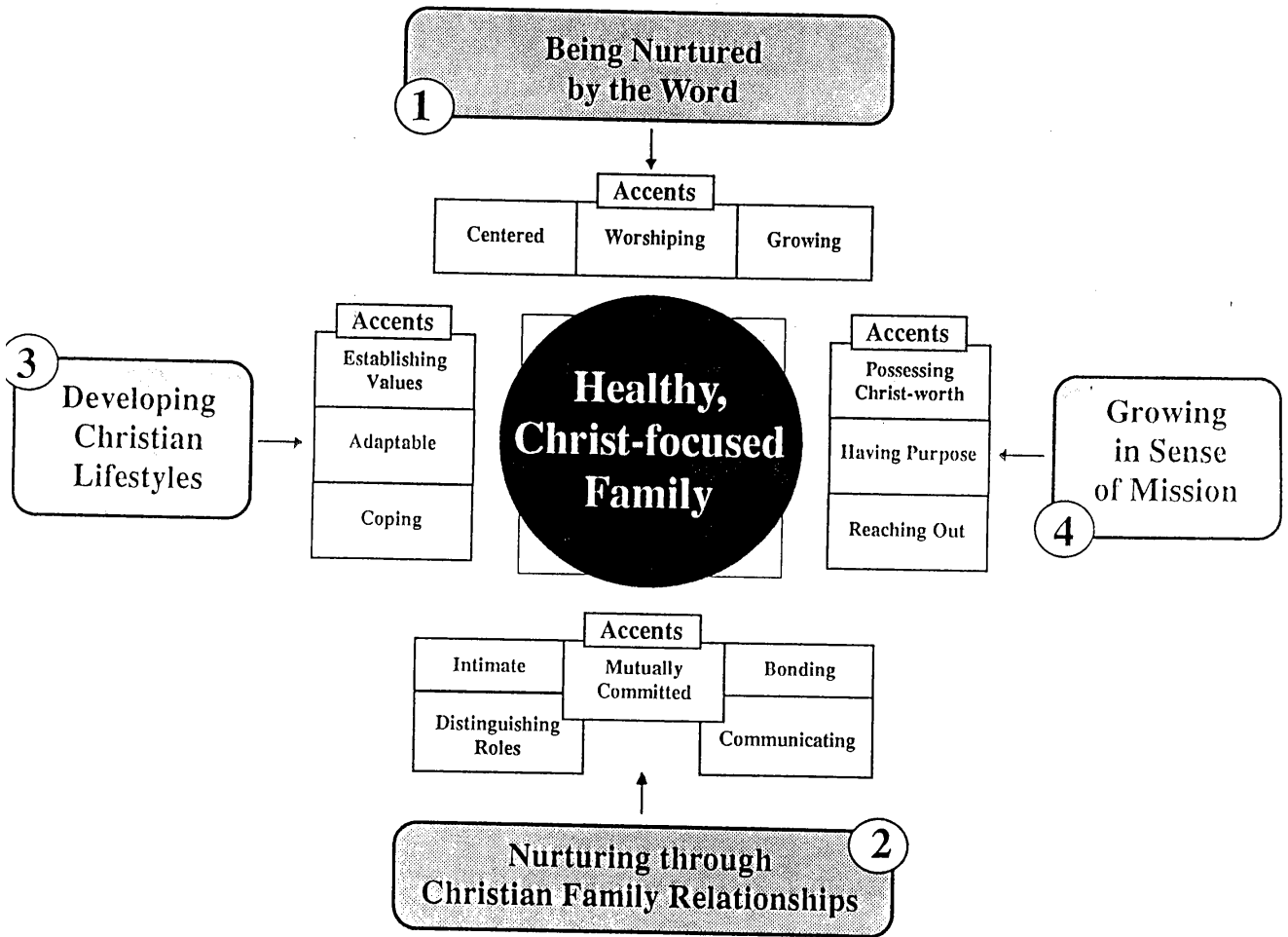
ⁱⁱⁱ Marshal McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message* (New York, Bantam Books, 1967), p. 53.

^{iv} James Dobson, *Discipline with Love* (Wheaton, Illinois, Tyndale House Publishing, Inc., 1986).

^v Sam Keen, *Fire in the Belly* (New York, Bantam, 1991), p. 21.

^{vi} Don Matzat, *Christ-Esteem* (Eugene, Oregon, Harvest House Publishers, 1990), pp. 51, 71.

Addenda A



Outcomes for the Healthy Christian Family

Being Nurtured by the Word	
Centered:	Christ and his Word are at the center of family life.
Worshipping:	The family is regularly engaged in meaningful worship of the true God.
Growing:	The family members encourage one another to grow spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, physically and socially.
Nurturing through Christian Family Relationships	
Intimate:	A close Christian, family is built upon unity with God.
Mutually Committed:	Family members support one another in love.
Communicating:	Communication is direct, loving, constructive and forgiving.
Distinguishing Roles:	Family members interact according to divinely ordained roles.
Bonding:	Family members prioritize time spent with and for one another.
Developing Christian Lifestyles	
Establishing Values:	Family values are shaped by biblical truths.
Adaptable:	The Christian family prepares members to deal with and affect change.
Coping:	In times of stress the family applies God's promises for strength and guidance.
Growing in Sense of Mission	
Possessing Christ-worth:	The family and its members know who they are in Christ.
Having Purpose:	The family helps members identify and use their gifts to serve in his kingdom according to God appointed roles.
Reaching Out:	The family shares its blessings outside the home.