Relatively Speaking

Strengthening Family Ties

Gordon Houser

CLOSER THAN A BROTHER ~ MEN'S SERIES

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by Gordon Houser

Faith & Life Resources

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Closer Than a Brother—Men's Series
RELATIVELY SPEAKING: STRENGTHENING FAMILY TIES
by Gordon Houser

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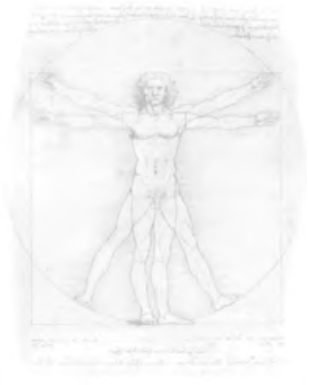
Welcome to this study!



As important as prayer, Bible study, and service to others are to our spiritual life, it is in the arena of family relationships that our discipleship is most tested and nurtured. When I'm asked what has most helped me grow as a Christian, I say without hesitation, "Being in a family."

We may be able to convince others through our talk that we are spiritual men, but our families know us for who we are. In my family relationships I've had to learn often about confessing my shortcomings, asking forgiveness, and forgiving others. It is in my family where I'm most known, yet also most loved.

To be known for who I am yet still loved is perhaps the most healing experience I've had. This has happened for me not only in my natural family but in my church family as well. This kind of love is an expression of God's love. It is tangible, not merely theoretical.

Our culture promotes rugged individualism, the idea that we make our own way without needing others. The Bible teaches the opposite: We cannot make it alone. All of us, whether single or married, need to be in relationship with others, not only in families but in the church.

If you are the group leader ...

Please see the section, "How to use this booklet" and other notes in the "Leader's Guide" on page 45.

One view of family sees the man as head of the house. While this may work, too often it leads to an experience of distant authority that leaves other family members and the man himself feeling alienated. The emphasis of Scripture is on health and wholeness in all our relationships.

This study looks at the roles Christian men are called to live out as part of natural families and of the family of God: sons, brothers, workers, fathers, disciples.

The first session says that all men are born as sons. God created us to be in relationship, and that begins for everyone in a family. Too often the family one is born into does not nurture that new life. Each of us men has experienced the pain of not getting the love and care we need. One of our tasks is to acknowledge those wounds and find healing, which may require us to talk with other men about our hurts.

The second session considers how to get along with others. Men in our culture seem driven to compete, whether on the ball field or in the workplace. Christ calls us to love one another, and we need each other's help to learn that difficult lesson.

The third session looks at how middle-aged men have grown up with the message that our lives gain meaning primarily through what we accomplish—the kind of job we have, what we produce, how much we earn. Family often has been seen as the responsibility of women. This is changing, with many women working outside the home. Yet many families are in crisis, and

men have an important role to play in bringing health to families—our own and others.

The fourth session expands the role of father beyond mere biological reproduction. Middle age is a time of generativity, a time to share the wisdom we have learned with younger men—our own sons or grandsons, but also men in other contexts, such as the church or the community in which we live. This role is particularly crucial in our society, since so many men have not been fathered and consequently engage in destructive behavior.

The fifth session calls us to live out our primary identity as disciples of Christ. Discipleship implies learning. We need to learn how to be faithful in all the roles we live. That happens best in the context of the family of God, where we share our burdens and our blessings, our wounds and our wisdom. *

This series of booklets is designed to help men grow in friendship as brothers in Christ. Yet the goal is not merely to help us feel better about ourselves. We face a significant calling in our culture. As William R. Jarema writes, "Men who befriend other men are helping create a new generation of loyal, intimate, confident and trustworthy men and fathers who will invigorate and renew father-son relationships."

One of Jesus' final commands to his followers was to "make disciples" (Matthew 28:19). Such a task is heroic, yet it involves the kind of personal, nitty-gritty, everyday relationships that exist in families. Relatively speaking, it is a glorious calling.

* ***Note*** that we do not include a session on marital relationships. The study *Sex and Faith: Celebrating God's Gifts* in this series addresses those relationships in a depth that we cannot here.

Session 1

Sons

As sons we experience wounds from our parents, our siblings, and the world around us. Like the prodigal father in Jesus' parable, God calls us to acknowledge our wounds and offer them for healing.

Opening worship

Hymn: "Amazing grace!" (*HWB* 143).

Meditation: Read the following responsively, then sit in silence for a few moments, reviewing all you have learned and experienced as a son. Identify both the high points and the low points.

If children live with criticism,
they learn to condemn.
If children live with hostility,
they learn to fight.
If children live with ridicule,
they learn to be shy.
If children live with shame,
they learn to feel guilty.
If children live with tolerance,
they learn to be patient.
If children live with encouragement,
they learn confidence.
If children live with praise,
they learn to appreciate.
If children live with fairness,
they learn justice.

Leader: Tips for leading the sessions are given on page 45.

If children live with security,
    they learn to have faith.
If children live with approval,
    they learn to like themselves.
If children live with acceptance and friendship,
    they learn to find love in the world.

—Terry Falla, in *Be Our Freedom, Lord*, edited by Terry Falla (Lutheran Publishing House, 1984).

Prayer:

Creator God, you have brought us into this world as sons of our parents. Some of us carry our family heritage with thanksgiving. Some of us know mostly pain. Most of us carry both the wounds and the blessings of sonship. Teach us gratitude for those things that have built us up. Lead us to healing from memories and experiences that cause us regret. Help us to know you as the parent who mentors us, builds us up, and leads us to life. In the name of your son Jesus, who gave his life for us. Amen.

Exploring the topic

Among the roles we men live out, sonship is the one we all are born into. We may be orphaned or born into an abusive situation, but we are nevertheless sons of someone. Because we do not choose this role or choose our parents, we must learn to deal with what is given. That may be difficult in a culture where people tend to shirk responsibility and shift blame. But it is one of the first steps we can take toward healthy manhood.

We also live in a culture where men are taught that they need to be in control. In fact, however, life teaches us that we are not in control. If we

follow the illusion that we are in control, we will be sorely disappointed. One way to get rid of that illusion is to reflect on those things that we don't have control over—including who our parents are. But while we cannot control the past, we can take responsibility of dealing with what we have to work with in the present.

The Bible is a realistic book that helps us come to terms with the givens of life. It does not pretend that evil and suffering do not exist. Instead, it calls us to respond faithfully to life as we encounter it. We must play the cards we are dealt. We are born into a certain family—or no family. We are born with certain physical, mental, and emotional characteristics and tendencies.

As we grow up, we also experience wounds—from our parents, our siblings, and the world

Food for thought 1: Trying to earn Dad's love

In my mid-20s I lived in an intentional Christian community. There I experienced people loving me even when I screwed up, which happened often enough. In the process, I grew increasingly aware of the wound I carried of not feeling loved by my father. He had worked hard all his life and provided for our family. He had never abused me or my mother. Yet I did not feel his affection, never heard him say he loved me. He seemed distant, caught up in his own projects.

While I believed intellectually that God loved me unconditionally, I did not believe this in my gut. I came to realize that this difficulty stemmed from my relationship with my father. Through the love of my brothers and sisters in Christ and through meetings with my pastor—but mostly through God's grace—I came to the point of forgiving my father for not showing me his love. I saw that his having lost his own father when he was only eleven affected his ability to be a loving father. I also saw that many of the characteristics I observed in my father were present in me as well. Forgiving my father meant forgiving myself, accepting myself.

After this healing process, which took several years, my father and I grew closer, and became more like peers. I felt greater love for him and from him.

around us. These too are things that we need to deal with, whether we could have prevented them or not. How well we acknowledge these wounds and find healing from them will determine how deeply we can experience God's love, which leads us to health and wholeness.

Men often have difficulty acknowledging their wounds. We are taught to be tough, to shake off the pain and move on, to refrain from crying. Yet we carry our wounds with us. And when we try to pretend they are not there, we end up treating others—often our spouse, children, or close friends—harshly. We pass our hurt on to others.

Read aloud Luke 15:11-32
Jesus' parable of the prodigal son shows us two sons who respond in different ways to the wounds life has dealt them (see "Food for thought 2"). The elder son chooses to suck it up, deny his resentment, and do what he is assigned. The younger son acts out his rebellion, flees home, and eventually hits bottom. The father, clearly a picture of how God responds to us, accepts both sons as they are and wants them to come clean—to bring their wounds to him for healing.

In the parable, the younger son finds the courage to do just that. In his work among the swine, he realizes that the only way forward for him is to go back to his father, name his brokenness, and plead for restoration. The father, of course, welcomes him with open arms. The older son, by contrast, is crusted over with resentment and unspoken grudges. He does not find it within himself to come to the party and celebrate the new beginnings of his repentant brother.

Going to God and others with our need is difficult for self-reliant men who are socialized not to need others. As Christian men, in particular, we are taught to help others, to give to those in need. But we have a difficult time admitting our own needs. Our culture considers it a sign of weakness to ask for help. We are familiar with the stereotype of the man who refuses to ask directions. (My father-in-law once drove around in a city for an hour before he finally stopped to ask directions to his destination.)

Food for thought 2: An unconventional father

This passage is the third parable Jesus told in response to the Pharisees and scribes grumbling, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). Often called "The Prodigal Son," a better title might be "The Foolish Father." In this parable Jesus points out that God's lavish attention is outrageous when compared with human customs.

New Testament scholar Kenneth Bailey notes that on four occasions in this passage the father goes beyond what a traditional patriarch in first-century Palestinian society would do.

He grants his younger son the freedom to own and sell his portion of the estate. Letting his son take his inheritance before the father died would have brought great shame on the family.

The father runs to welcome his son before he reaches their village, where he would have been shunned for what he has done. Traditional Middle Easterners, wearing long robes, do not run in public (v. 20), which is humiliating. In that culture the patriarch would be expected to sit in grand isolation in the house to hear what the wayward boy might have to say. The mother would run down to the road and kiss the boy.

When the older son refuses to go in to the banquet the father is throwing (v. 28), he commits an unspeakable public insult to the father. A traditional patriarch in that culture would be expected to ignore the insult and proceed with the banquet. But in painful humiliation he goes out to find one more lost son.

When the older son scolds his father in public (vv. 29-30), the father, according to that culture, should explode and order a thrashing. Instead, he breaks tradition and accepts the older son.

The entire parable shows God's lavish, foolish love. It also depicts two responses to that love: acceptance and rejection. Both sons sinned, but one came to receive God's love; the other did not.

When we do seek help, even if we just need to talk with someone, we often turn to women—our wives or friends. Less often do we express our needs, especially our emotional needs, to other men.

On the night before Jesus died, he ate a meal with his disciples. He said the them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15). Later, praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, he poured out his anguish about his impending death. We, too, can learn to share deeply with other men, admit our needs and pray together for healing of our wounds.

Talking it through

In dyads or in smaller groups, share answers to one or more of the following questions:

1. In the parable, with which son do you most identify—the son who admits his brokenness and is willing to lay out his needs before his father, or the son who covers over his own wounds with words of judgment and resentment?

2. Name a wound you experienced in your relationship with your parents. Have you experienced healing from that? If so, how did it happen? If not, what would such healing look like to you?

3, Name wounds you have inflicted on your parents. How have you dealt with these lately? If healing has yet to take place, what might it look like? What steps need to be taken?

4. As a son, what qualities have you inherited that you are most thankful for? For which are you least thankful?

5. Men in our culture are not raised to discuss their needs with others—especially other men. Discuss reasons for this. What benefits do you see in such an upbringing? What are the pitfalls? Be as specific as you can.

Closing

Asking for healing can be difficult, particularly for men. To help confess our need for healing, sing "O healing river" (*HWB* 372), followed by a period of silence. Then pray either or both of the following prayers of confession, depending on what experiences you bring to this study on family relationships.

For healing from wounds inflicted on us:

Healer God, like the older son in the parable, I carry the wounds of resentment. Life has not seemed fair. Family members have hurt me and have not acknowledged their hurt. Sometimes I want to take out my anger on them, or on others who are close to me. I realize I need your help if I am to live life to the fullest. May your Spirit give me the patience and strength to take the path of healing. Amen.

For healing from wounds we have inflicted:

God, as a son of my parents and as your son, I have sinned against heaven and against you. Like the younger son in the parable, I have squandered the blessings I have received. I have offered rebellion in exchange for love. I have hurt my family in my words and acts. I am not worthy to be called your son because I have not followed in your way. God, be merciful to

me, a sinner. Speak a word of comfort and my soul shall be healed. Amen.

Receive God's grace as you sing "Go, my children" (*HWB* 433).

Conclude this session with further prayers for each other, and a closing prayer.

Session Two

Brothers

As brothers we compete with our siblings for our parents' attention. Learning to get along with our siblings helps us later in getting along with our fellow church members as well as with our neighbors, co-workers, and others.

Opening worship

Hymn: "Help us to help each other" (*HWB* 362).

Prayer:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that
I may not so much seek
To be consoled, as to console;
Not so much to be understood as
To understand; not so much to be
Loved as to love:
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
It is in dying that we awaken to eternal life.
—*St. Francis of Assisi*

Leader: Tips for leading the sessions are given on page 45.

Exploring the topic

Two of my three older brothers are twins. I grew up idolizing them, except for the times they picked on me and made me cry. I observed how alike they were and also how different. And I observed their competition with one another—the interplay of intimacy and conflict as each vied for attention from their parents and peers. Much of their rivalry, I'm sure, stemmed from the fact that they were the middle children—between my oldest brother and me—and often felt neglected, whether or not they were.

What a picture of all of us! We all compete for the attention of others. We want to be seen as individuals in our own right, not just as someone's brother or son.

Read aloud Genesis 25:19-28

As verse 23 of this text suggests, the story of Jacob and Esau is linked to the rivalry between the two nations that would emerge from their descendents. But the story is, first and foremost, about competition that happens in the family—and in this case, even in the womb! The trouble is fed by parents who are not unified in their parenting (see v. 28).

The rivalry comes to a head when the sons are adults. Esau sells Jacob his birthright in a moment of weakness (25:29-34). Later, with the help of his mother, Jacob steals a blessing from his father that was meant for Esau (chapter 27) and flees to his uncle's distant home to escape Esau's wrath. In Jacob and Esau we see the great tragedy that can ensue from division in the family—although we later see the beautiful

reconciliation that takes place between the brothers and their peoples (Genesis 33).

The biblical story and world literature include many stories of sibling rivalry, and even fratricide (the killing of one brother by another). Cain's murder of Abel in Genesis 4 is one of the first stories in the Bible. Jacob's own son, Joseph, barely escapes death from his brothers' hands (37:15-28), so jealous are they of Jacob's favoritism toward Joseph. (Again, however, Scripture tells the moving story of the reconciliation that God brings about in that family.)

Food for thought 1: From suspicion to grace

A unique act of reconciliation occurred at the African American Mennonite Association (AAMA) assembly I attended August 9-11, 2002, in Ingelwood, California. In a workshop called "The Missing Link," Femi Fatunmibi, a Nigerian pastor representing African Mennonites for Mission Partnerships (AMMP), an organization of African congregations in the United States, used the story of Joseph and his brothers to call for reconciliation.

He compared African-Americans to Joseph and Africans to Joseph's brothers, who sold him into slavery. "Our forefathers were wrong," Pastor Femi said, confessing the sin of his ancestors, who sold their fellow Africans as slaves to Europeans. Such sins have consequences for generations afterward, he said. The only way to end the ongoing power of such sin was for him to confess the sin of his ancestors and for African-Americans to forgive that sin.

Weeping, Pastor Femi held the hands of AAMA president Leslie Francisco III and confessed the sin of his ancestors. Bishop Francisco responded by offering forgiveness. Bishop Francisco also confessed that when he and Pastor Femi first met a year or so earlier, he felt a divide between them. They discussed their differences frankly, he said, including the fact that each felt inferior to the other.

As they spoke words of reconciliation, many of the thirty-some people in the room were weeping. Quoting Psalm 102:13, Bishop Francisco said, "The appointed time has come," and he called on Africans and African-Americans to work together to build God's kingdom.

Earlier, Pastor Femi had quoted Genesis 50:20: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people." God takes our sinful acts and brings good out of them, he said. Brothers sinning against brothers can lead to great consequences, but so can brothers reconciling with brothers.

The haunting plea of Rodney King, beaten by the Los Angeles police—Can't we all just get along?—resounds through history. How many conflicts around the world over the centuries have stemmed from the failure of people to get along within their own families? The lessons we learn at home—or fail to learn—enable us to get along with others when we become adults.

Mennonites have been instrumental in beginning and promoting constructive ways to resolve conflict that bring goodness to the opposing parties (called "win-win" solutions). The methods involve talking through problems, hearing and understanding the other party's concerns, then arriving together at a solution that benefits everyone.

Such conflict resolution is much easier for those who learned it in their families. For those who learned other methods of conflict management—fighting, retreating in silence and resentment, or triangulating (talking about someone instead of to the person with whom you have a conflict)—mediation must be learned anew. When we learn to resolve conflicts with our siblings, we find it easier to do so with our co-workers, our neighbors, and especially with our fellow church members.

Jesus used peer language for his disciples (John 15:12-17), and the early church followed suit. In the church we are brothers and sisters in Christ (see session 5). How well we get along, says Jesus, is how the world will know that we belong to Jesus (John 13:35).

Food for thought 2: Dealing with anger

Anger is called one of the deadly sins, and it certainly contributes to much destructive behavior. However, it also is a motivation for moral, righteous action. Christians tend to disparage anger, yet it comes out—often unbidden and more powerful for being denied.

In his book *The Enigma of Anger: Essays on a Sometimes Deadly Sin* (Jossey-Bass, 2002), Garret Keizer writes that "anger can be controlled without being destroyed, and expressed without necessarily leading to destruction." The book is confessional, with numerous examples from the author's experience. He writes as one whose anger "has often seemed out of proportion" for the occasion that caused it, "has more often distressed those I love and who love me than it has afflicted those at whom I was angry" and "has not carried me far enough toward changing what legitimately enrages me."

Keizer defines anger as "an emotion of extreme frustration … poised at the possibility of action." One of his points is that there are many situations in our world with which we should be frustrated and should oppose with action. By denying anger we too often deny our responsibility to act.

He points to Jesus as our model for purposeful anger. One obvious example is his driving the money changers from the temple (Mark 11:15-18; Matthew 21:12-22; Luke 19:45-48; John 2:13-22). Here Jesus acts not out of ego but identifies with a larger concern. "He is not incensed over some personal insult," Keizer writes, "but by a communal sacrilege." How different from our usual acts of anger, which arise out of injury to our ego.

Jesus' action here is also restrained. We read that he overturned tables but not that he knocked people down. Of the Gospels, only John places a weapon in his hand, a lash, and we are not told that he actually hit anyone. Either way, we are far from bombing an abortion clinic or a nuclear weapons plant.

One passage Keizer does not mention is John 11:33. Here the evangelist uses a rare Greek phrase ("greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved") that is elsewhere used to describe horses snorting. The implication is that Jesus is angry. Angry at what? I think he was snorting at death, which had taken his friend Lazarus. He responds by raising him from the dead. You could say that God's act of raising Jesus from the dead is an angry response to death.

If we deny our anger, we deny our humanity. Keizer writes: "Anger is a part of our created nature as human beings, both male and female, in the image of God. The choice, then, is to redeem our anger or to become something less than human." We need one another's help in discerning when and how to apply our anger.

Talking it through

In twos or in larger groups, discuss these questions:

1. Did you have siblings when you were growing up? How many? Where were you in the birth order (oldest, youngest, middle)? How do you think that affected your life?

2. What experiences have you had with sibling rivalry? What destructive consequences has it had—or threatened to have—in your family?

3. Discuss "food for thought 2" in light of your experience with siblings. How did your family deal with anger? Did this make it easier or more difficult to get along with others as an adult? If you are married, how did this affect your relationship with your spouse or children?

4. How does your congregation solve conflicts? What part do you play (avoider, observer, leader, supporter)?

5. Based on Jesus' statement in John 13:35, does your community see your congregation as disciples of Jesus because you love one another? How might that be shown?

Closing

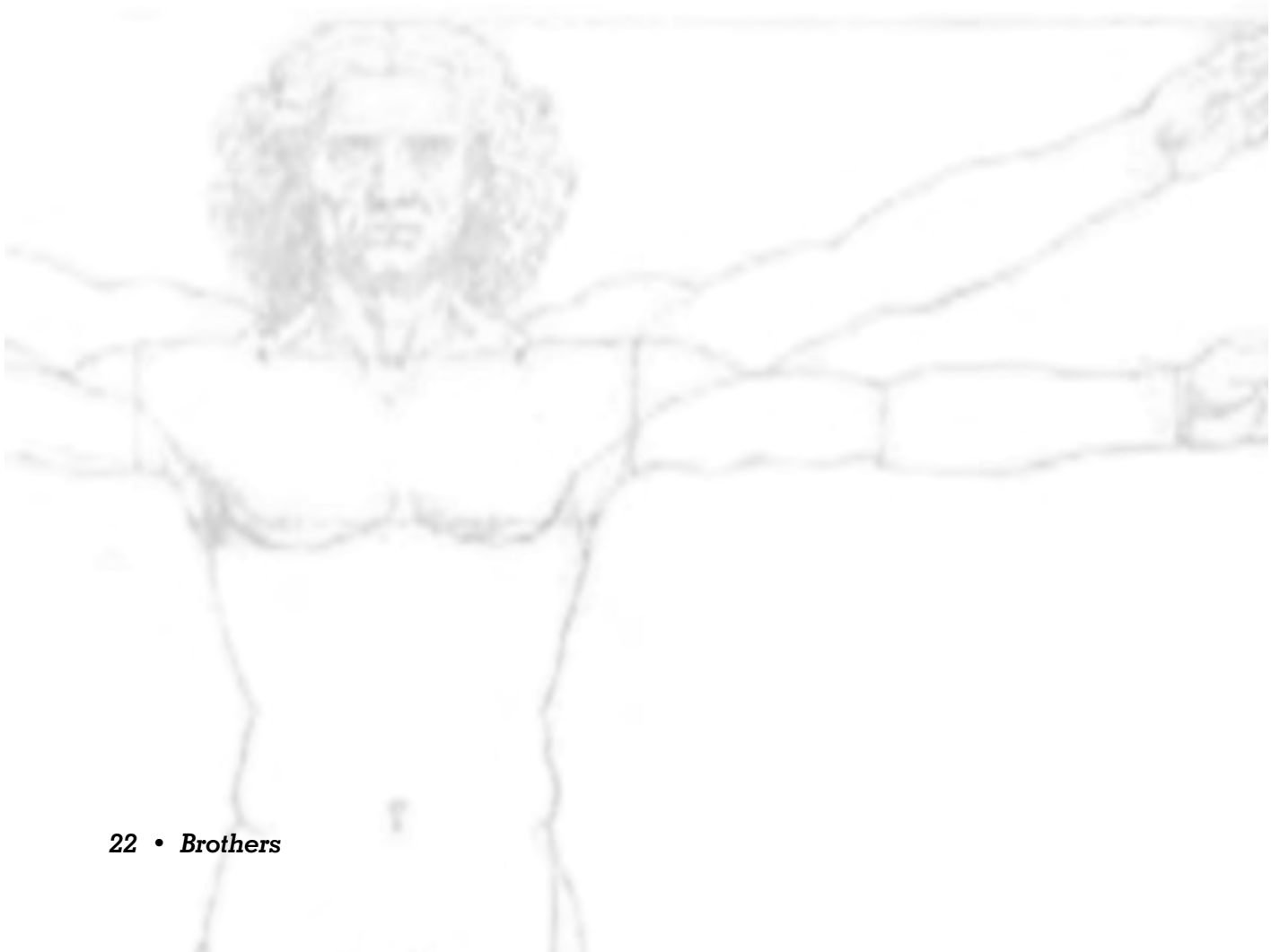
Have three men read (one for each verse) Psalm 133 from the New Jerusalem Bible:

How good, how delightful it is
to live as brothers all together.
It is like a fine oil on the head,
running down the beard,

running down Aaron's beard,
onto the collar of his robes.
It is like the dew of Hermon
falling on the heights of Zion;
for there Yahweh bestows his blessing,
everlasting life.

Take a few moments to share any prayer concerns that came out of the sharing time, particularly those that have to do with sibling relationships. Pray in silence, or invite those who feel led to pray aloud. To symbolize your unity as a community of Christian brothers, try praying in a huddle, with hands on each other's shoulders.

Sing "Bless'd be the tie that binds" (*HWB* 421).



Session Three

Workers

Men tend to identify themselves according to the work they do, what they produce, and how well they provide for their families. While we are called to be faithful in our work, it should not take precedence over our family relationships.

Opening worship

Hymn: "All who love and serve your city" (*HWB* 417).

Scripture reading: Read Luke 10:38-42 aloud from *The Message* (Eugene Peterson, NavPress, 1993).

Prayer:

Our lives are cluttered, Lord Jesus,
by too many things
and too much to do.
We are driven by the need to succeed
and distracted by our service.
We have often lost our way.
Forgive us.
Let us, like Mary,
find the one thing that is needed
and sit at your feet. Amen.
—*from* HWB *695*

Leader: Tips for leading the sessions are given on page 45.

Exploring the topic

In the first year after my father retired from working for the same company for thirty-six

years, he often felt depressed. My mother told me later that he often followed her around the house as she performed her daily tasks. He seemed lost, not knowing what to do. Eventually he took up woodworking, and they traveled.

Men in our culture tend to identify themselves with their work. We usually see ourselves as managers, farmers, lawyers, teachers, business owners, editors. In conversations with other men, we ask, What do you do? From the way we answer the question, it seems that we seldom present ourselves as husbands, fathers, or even as Christians.

We find meaning in our lives through what we do and what we produce. While this is not bad in itself, work has become an obsession for many men in North American society. Americans, for example, work more hours each year and take less vacation time than workers in other industrialized countries (see Food for Thought 1).

While doing good work is certainly important, the New Testament takes a pragmatic view of work. Consider Ephesians 4:28b: "Let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy." Or 2 Thessalonians 3:10b: "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat." One major purpose of work is to provide for ourselves, our family, and those in need.

But our culture is obsessed with more than meeting needs. Our consumerism—our advertising, our malls—all program us so that we never seem to be satisfied. We work long hours yet do

not experience contentment. One of the chief tasks for men today, therefore, is to learn how to find contentment and meaning in their work and relationships.

One biblical character who tradition says balanced work and family was Joseph, the adoptive father of Jesus. We know little about Joseph, but the New Testament shows him to be a man who cared for his wife and family more than himself and who listened to and obeyed God's voice.

Food for thought 1: Are we working too hard?

The International Labor Organization reports that "Americans spend an average of 1,979 hours at work each year, well beyond Japan's 1,842 hours. Canadians are third at 1,767 hours. Some 37 percent of Americans work more than fifty hours per week. Overall, Americans work six weeks more per year than they did twenty years ago."

People of my denomination are known for their work ethic. Anyone who has attended a Mennonite convention learns that they would rather work than play. Many Mennonites in North America are descendants from European immigrants who came overseas to escape conscription into the military, to find religious freedom, or to flee from hunger or terror.

Many of these people had been successful farmers or entrepreneurs in Europe and carried on their skills in Canada and the United States. For example, Mennonites who came to central Kansas in 1874 later developed Turkey Red Wheat, a variety that grows through the winter and is harvested in summer. This revolutionized agriculture in that region and elsewhere.

While much goodness comes from this work ethic, it also carries a darker side. Men who "would rather work than eat" tend to give little attention to their families, and their children grow up without the loving presence of a father. This leads to a new generation of fathers who neglect their children.

Such neglect applies as much or more to those working for the church. Many church workers travel often and are gone from home many weekends. John Ruth, in his book *The Earth Is the Lord's*, recounts the story of Orie Miller, an important leader in the Mennonite church during the first half of the twentieth century. He traveled so much that his family had to schedule time to be with him. He was lauded as a saint among Mennonites, yet the family paid a price.

Read aloud Matthew 1:18—2:23

According to first-century Jewish custom, marriage was a two-part process. First came the engagement, usually arranged by the families. This was more binding than our current practice of engagement—or even of marriage. Later, once the bridegroom had prepared a home, came the wedding, which sealed the marriage covenant. However, if a woman became pregnant during the engagement period, as Mary did, the man was free of his obligation to marry. Joseph chose to proceed with his marriage to Mary and saved her from public disgrace.

Food for thought 2: Work and home

In her book *What's Happening to Home? Balancing Work, Life and Refuge in the Information Age* (Sorin Books, 2002), Maggie Jackson looks at the many changes occurring in our world that affect how we think about home.

Whether we are single, married, with or without children, she writes, we need to look at what home means to us and what we have lost through the many changes in our society. Jackson names our struggle with "the increasing permeability of home wrought by technology." In our information age, many of us carry work home with us in our laptops. Or we keep in touch with clients using cell phones. Or we check our e-mail while we are supposed to be on vacation. What does this do to our relationships? What does this do to our souls?

She notes that according to one poll, more than 70 percent of men ages twenty-one to thirty-nine would give up pay for more time with their families. Many feel trapped in their work and see their family relationships suffering as a result. What to do? According to Jackson, "You must decide whether you want to splinter yourself via cell phone or give those in your presence the gift of your full attention."

To create a home, to make our family life more wholesome and life-giving, Jackson writes, we must simply make up our minds. "To create a home, you must experiment and make the time to forge a sheltering place that is giving and thoughtful."

In our culture of constant stimulation and temptations to consume at the expense of relationships, creating such a home will not be easy. But it is possible. It will likely require the help of others, including our brothers in the church.

Later, his commitment to this woman and her son led them to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's terror. After some years he moved to Palestine's northern region of Galilee, away from his homeland in Judea. These were not career moves but ones motivated by love for his family and the desire to protect them.

Joseph's commitment to his family is well documented in Scripture. The Bible also mentions his occupation as a carpenter (Matt. 13:55). Church tradition holds that he had a strong work ethic. (The Catholic tradition, in particular, holds him in high regard as the patron saint of working people.) Many of us have seen pictures from Sunday school of Jesus in the carpenter shop with his father. We don't know about the quality of Joseph's work, but artisans at that time did not have an easy time making a living. He had to work hard for the family to survive.

Although the Bible does not say much about it, we may imagine that God may have used Joseph's own example to teach Jesus a work ethic that would serve him well in doing the work of healing and teaching. As Jesus went about his ministry he often taught about the work of his heavenly Father: "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work" (John 9:4).

Yet, as we know, the work of Jesus was for the benefit of others, not a headlong rush to earn and accumulate for the indulgence of his own desires. His work always allowed time for relationships and for rest. Jesus involved others—notably, the disciples—in his work, spending much time and exercising much patience in

forming them into a team. And although his work was demanding, he took quiet time away to be with God to be spiritually renewed.

From what we see of Jesus' own work and that of his adoptive father, Joseph, we pick up some clues about how God wants us to relate to our work in the context of our family life. Work is an important gift that allows us to provide for the needs of others, particularly our biological and spiritual families. However, it is not meant to be an obsession that makes our relationships suffer.

In the workplace we can mentor others and share our lives with them, as Joseph did with Jesus, and as Jesus did with his disciples. It is a place where God has called us to be a witness to others. And above all, it is a place where our faithfulness to God and to those whom we love is tested.

Talking it through

In twos or in larger groups, discuss two or three of the following sets of questions:

1. What does the Bible's portrayal of Joseph tell you about balancing priorities—especially with regard to balancing work and family? What changes might this study be calling you to implement in your life?

2. If you do not know each other well, describe your work briefly. How many hours a week do you work? How long is your commute? What energizes you in your job? What saps you of energy? What do you wish you could change in your job?

3. How does your faith affect the way you see your work? If you find meaning in your work, share what it is that makes you feel called to do it. If you find your job to be a chore, talk about what makes it so. What needs to change to make it more satisfying—the job itself, or the way you do the job?

4. What benefits does your work have for relationships in your family—whether your biological family or your church family? What challenges does it present? How do you react when you see that your job is getting in the way of healthy family life?

5. In her book, *What's Happening to the Home?* Maggie Jackson writes, "As North Americans begin a new century, they are worn out." Does this describe you and the people you know? Do you find yourself asking, with the author, "How much work is enough? How do we learn to slow down?"

Closing

Jesus calls us to a new identity, one found in relationship with God rather than in our work. Sing "New earth, heavens new" (*HWB* 299) to celebrate that newness and call us to live in that newness.

Read together this selection from 2 Corinthians 5 in *The Message*:

> We don't evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don't look at him that way anymore. Now we look inside, and what

we see is that anyone united with the
Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new.
The old life is gone; a new life burgeons!

Prayer:

God our Father, with these gifts
we offer you our lives
to do your work in the world.

Take our bodies and our minds,
our work and our leisure,

Our relationships with other people,
our friendships and our family life,

Our dreams and our doubts,
our faith and our plans for the future.

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord,
we bring them to you.

Amen.

Session Four

Fathers

We have great influence over the lives of our children and others in our care. As we pass on our wisdom and encouragement to younger men we will help nurture wholeness in a new generation of men.

Opening worship

Hymn: "Our Father God, thy name we praise" (*HWB* 32)

Meditation: Robert Bly has written much about the importance of healthy initiation of boys into manhood (see resources, page 51). Begin your session by reading and pondering the following quote from Bly: "When a culture ceases to provide specific, meaningful initiatory pathways, the individual male psyche is left to initiate itself. And therein lies a great danger, visible in the kinds of initiation to which many men turn: street gangs, drug and alcohol abuse, high-risk sports, militarism, discipleship to charismatic cult leaders, obsessive workplace competition, compulsive relocation of home and job, serial sexual conquests, pursuit of the 'perfect' (and thus unattainable) older male mentor and so forth."

Leader: Tips for leading the sessions are given on page 45.

At the end of the reading, silently ponder these questions:

- How was I initiated into manhood?

- Am I willing to help initiate others into manhood?

- What is healthy fathering?

Prayer:

Holy Father, we are your sons.
We thank you for your unconditional love for us.
We offer you the wounds we have experienced from our earthly fathers.
We offer you our failures as fathers or as mentors.
Give us the courage to share our wisdom with our sons, and the sons of the church.
Give us the grace to turn to you.
Help us be faithful to the end,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Exploring the topic

By the time we reach middle age, many of us have fathered children and seen them grow into adulthood. Some of us have grandchildren. Others who have not had children have nevertheless "fathered" others, either through supervisory relationships at work, in the community as coaches, or in the church as mentors or teachers.

Psychologist Erik Erikson calls this period of life (ages 40-65) the stage of "generativity," when adults are able to look outside themselves and care for others. Most in this group have already fathered their children through their younger, formative years. Now they may still help influence others, including their own children and

younger men who are becoming fathers, offering them wisdom and encouragement.

Just as sons carry wounds that require healing, so do fathers. We all have experienced the pain of regret for the wounds we've inflicted on our own children or those we care for. In order to provide fathering for others, we must offer these wounds to God for healing and learn from them.

Read aloud 2 Samuel 18:24-33

How we have fathered our children has consequences on the next generation. That is our great hope and our great fear. Just as it can be

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Food for thought 1: Fathering the next generation

In his book *Fathering the Next Generation: Men Mentoring Men* (Crossroads, 1994), William R. Jarema discusses the need for men "to redefine their concepts of male, father and fathering to include masculine emotion, affective expressions and appropriate rituals."

He outlines five "unhealthy fathering styles" of a wounded male—dictator, trickster, competitor, magician and villain. Then he lists five "healthy fathering styles" of an empowered male—elder, companion, champion, mystic, and mentor.

Many men are wounded and practice unhealthy fathering because that's what they have experienced. In his book *The Wild Man's Journey*, Richard Rohr recounts hearing from a nun in Peru who ministered in Lima's central prison. The men there kept asking for Mother's Day cards; she couldn't provide enough of them. But when she offered Father's Day cards, not one man took one. She realized that most of those men were in jail because "they had never been fathered," Rohr writes. "They had never seen themselves as sons of men who admired them."

Jarema writes, "Today more than ever in the history of our world community, we are in need of men who will mentor other men into manhood and fatherhood." The greatest gift exchanged between men, Jarema writes, is friendship. "Men who befriend other men are helping create a new generation of loyal, intimate, confident and trustworthy men and fathers who will invigorate and renew father-son relationships."

How can such friendships be nurtured? An important way, says Jarema, is to tell stories. "Stories allow a man to share his collected wisdom," he writes. "Stories empower and enhance a man's personal knowledge." Storytelling often leads men to reveal secrets that have previously hindered them from moving into health and well-being.

scary for sons to learn they are like their fathers, it can also be frightening for fathers to realize their sons are becoming like them.

The story of David and his son Absalom (2 Samuel 13—18) tragically shows the effect fathers have on sons. When Absalom's half-brother Amnon rapes Absolom's sister, he is following in the footsteps of his father David, who raped Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). Later, Absalom follows in his father's footsteps as a military leader and has his enemies killed. Absalom even leads a revolt against David.

Thus, even though David was a great leader and musician who was "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14), his family life ended in shambles, and he sowed the seeds for the division in Israel that came after his son Solomon's reign.

By God's grace and with others' help, we can find healing for ourselves and help bring wholeness to the next generation. As fathers, grandfathers, uncles, mentors, coaches, or bosses, we

Food for thought 2: Runaway dads

The *Los Angeles Times* carried a story of how U.S. federal agents arrested sixty-one deadbeat dads who collectively owed millions of dollars. The unprecedented sweep involved a three-day hunt in twenty-five states, plus Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico. For the crime of falling behind $10,000 or more in court-ordered support and leaving the state to avoid payment, delinquent parents could spend two years in prison and face a fine of up to $250,000, the paper reported.

Families are seriously harmed not only by divorce but even further when one parent—usually the father—fails to uphold his financial responsibility in paying child support. I know from my brother's experience that courts do not always deal fairly with fathers in a divorce settlement. Nevertheless, in the majority of cases of neglect, it is the fathers who are not providing the financial means for the children to have what they need.

can offer our wisdom to younger males and serve as models for them. We can show them how to be a healthy male in a complex world that presents so many distorted, unhealthy models of masculinity.

Younger men will look to us to learn how to fight for justice, how to relate to women, how to parent, and how to deal with suffering. We have the opportunity to show them the way to live as men of God. In doing so, we are being faithful fathers.

Talking it through

In twos or in larger groups, discuss some or all of the following:

1. Take turns telling stories of your greatest satisfactions and your greatest regrets about fathering. How do you celebrate the successes? How have you dealt with the regrets?

2. To pick up on the opening quote: Share stories of how you were or were not initiated into adulthood. Then share how you prepared your sons or grandsons for adulthood. Did you have certain activities or rituals to mark entries into adulthood? Brainstorm ways in which the church could encourage the marking of life passages from boyhood to adulthood.

3. Tell stories of how you are mentoring younger males—either through a church mentoring program or more informally in your community or church. What has made those relationships meaningful? What do you find challenging? How can you help each other in those relationships?

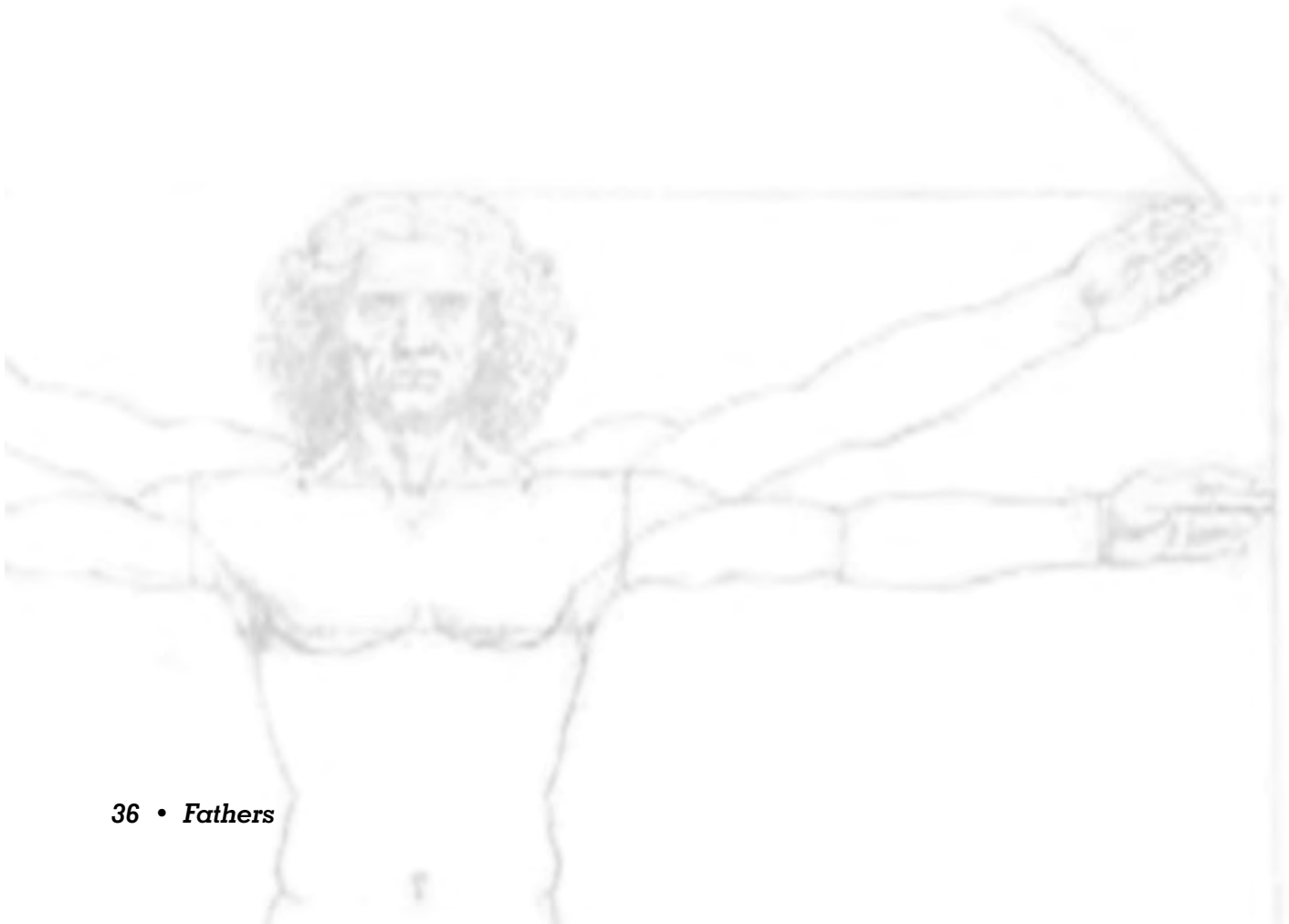
4. Discuss the kind of criminal action described in "Food for thought 2." How can we in the church help alleviate the injustice of "dead-beat dads." Are there families who need our support, both financial and emotional? Are there children with absent fathers for whom we men might provide some fathering?

Closing

Return to the quote by Robert Bly in the opening worship. After reading it again, spend time in silence, reflecting on the ideas you shared in the discussion, and ask God's help in cultivating healthy fatherhood in your family and church.

Take time to pray audibly for each other, based on what members have shared.

Sing the hymn "Lead me, Lord" (*HWB* 538).



Session Five

Disciples

As disciples of Jesus we belong to a new family, the body of Christ, in which we are to love one another as brothers and sisters. Jesus, who apparently was single, models for us a single-minded commitment to the reign of God.

Opening worship

Hymn: "You are salt for the earth" (*HWB* 226).

Scripture reading: Read aloud Matthew 5:3-16.

Responsive prayer:

Jesus our Lord is risen.

Lord, may we experience
the power of your resurrection
and live by it.

The call of freedom
has been sounded.

Lord, may we respond
as the community of the free.

It concerns every one of us personally,
in our place, in our humanity,
in this world of ours.

Lord, may the spirit and gift of your freedom
break the spell of our fears and send us away
obedient rebels, lovers of life's depths
and your disciples forever. Amen.

—Terry Falla, in *Be Our Freedom, Lord*, edited by Terry Falla (Lutheran Publishing House, 1984).

Leader: Tips for leading the sessions are given on page 45.

Exploring the topic

In this study we have been looking at our relationships as men to our families. We are sons, brothers, workers, and fathers. Each of these relationships carries responsibilities and expectations. But our main identity is as disciples of Jesus. As disciples we are called to relate to a new family, the body of Christ, in which we are to love one another as brothers and sisters.

In our society we talk as if biological relationships are the most important in life. We use phrases such as, "Blood is thicker than water." Or we say, "I have to take care of him; he's family." Many Christians even uphold the nuclear family as the Bible's ideal, but it is not. (See sidebar.) We easily lose sight of how radical and how counter-cultural Jesus' teaching is. According to Jesus, our relationship to the family of faith takes precedence over our biological relationships.

Read aloud Mark 3:19b-27, 31-35

This passage is often ignored in our family-friendly churches. We are scandalized either by Jesus' family, who worried that their son and brother was insane (v. 21), or by Jesus' cavalier treatment of his mother and brothers (vv. 33-35). But the real thrust of these verses is that Jesus is calling a new family into being: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (v. 35).

Jesus' definition of family as the community of disciples does not sit well with our society, including many in the church. When the church seeks actually to live out new ways to be family to each other, it is often seen as something weird.

When I joined an intentional Christian community that practiced economic sharing in the way that families do, my family was not happy. Giving up my entire income (which, having just graduated from college, was mostly potential income) to this Christian group was either communistic, un-American, unchristian, or just crazy. Once my parents visited the community, met the people there, and saw how we cared for one another—and cared about them—most of their fears subsided. Even so, their initial criticisms were unnerving.

Food for thought 1: The nuclear family

While many uphold the nuclear family of two parents and children as the model for wholeness for Christians, it is a rather recent development. In his book *Border Crossings* (Brazos Press, 2000), Rodney Clapp writes that Christian proponents of family values "exalt a 'traditional family' that is hardly two centuries old, a kind of family decisively shaped by the advent of capitalism and industrialization."

Perhaps more significantly, Clapp notes how the ideal of the nuclear family jars with the biblical idea of family. "The ancient Hebrews," he writes, "did not even conceive of what we call the nuclear unit apart from the extended family of kin and even servants." While the average North American household consists of two to five people, the average Hebrew household numbered fifty to a hundred inhabitants.

We have sealed off the nuclear family as a private sphere, Clapp writes, while the Roman society of the New Testament period made no such sharp separation between public and private life. The early Christians "regarded the home as something more significant, more challenging and more exciting than a privatized, sentimentalized haven."

If we are going to counter the individualistic values prevalent in our society, we will need more than sentimentalized family values. We need to make the Christian community our first family. The church can help us see family not as a private escape from the real world but as a place to engage the world and bear witness to the values of our Lord.

In a culture that sees relationships as another commodity, we need to be part of a community that upholds biblical convictions about family. Clapp concludes, "If Christians live out Christian family, if we even to a degree make the church our first family, then at least others will know that family can be other than—and more than—a feckless haven, a commodity, or a personal hobby."

We heard similar criticisms and fears from people in other churches. Giving priority to fellow believers to the extent of sharing our money came across as judgmental toward others who did not pool their economic resources. They felt threatened somehow. Of course, it also felt threatening to many of us who were part of the arrangement; economic sharing is not easy!

Food for thought 2: Singleness

Scholars debate whether or not Jesus was single. The Gospels do not describe Jesus' marital status explicitly, but they seem to support the church's historical understanding that he was single. Jesus also seemed to endorse singleness when, in a discussion about marriage, he told his disciples, "There are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:12).

This was radical teaching for Jesus' hearers. Jewish culture of the time assumed every young man would marry. Singleness (other than being a widower or in dire poverty) was seen as abnormal. Eunuchs, biologically incapable of producing families, were excluded from temple worship. Yet Jesus gives them a place in God's kingdom.

The apostle Paul argued for remaining single, as he was (perhaps as a widower), because "the unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:32b-33).

Despite the singleness of Jesus and Paul, not to mention the long Christian tradition of upholding celibacy for members of religious orders, Protestants have tended to uphold marriage as the ideal for all people, and, in the process, have tended to denigrate singleness, or treated it with suspicion or neglect.

In the January 8, 2002, issue of *The Mennonite*, Dawn J. Ranck writes about her experience as a single adult. Churches, she writes, are not always friendly to singles. "Although nearly half the adult population is single, only about 15 percent of the people in our churches are single. Church is the place where my singleness is most evident to me."

As churches we need to honor singles as they are and find ways to make them a vital part of our life together. Single men have much to offer as mentors and as fellow disciples with unique gifts for the church. They also may welcome being included in others' lives.

Dawn relates how good it felt to be invited for a meal with a family in her church. She writes: "The church is God's family on earth. God reminds us that we are part of a family far more significant and enduring than the biological family."

The arrangement no longer exists in our congregation. Nevertheless, the experience taught us that the church is more than an association of individuals; it is family. Each member has a place. This spiritual family does what it can for all to have their needs met—spiritual, emotional, and physical.

The church as family is especially important for those who do not experience biological family life through a spouse and children: single adults. It is a sad irony that this group often feels neglected in church life. The church should actually be the ideal place for singles to find wholeness. Instead they often feel forced to find fellowship elsewhere. (See sidebar.)

When the church is at its best and most faithful to Christ, however, it is a community of disciples who are learning how to be God's new and growing family in the world. The church can be the context in which men live out their relationships as sons, brothers, workers, and fathers and learn how to be more faithful to God in these relationships. In calling us into a new family, Jesus recognizes that we cannot find wholeness alone. We need each other. And men, we are learning, especially need each other.

Talking it through

In twos or in larger groups, discuss some or all of these the following:

1. If you were part of the crowd in the Gospel story for this session, what would you have thought of Jesus? How might his words have scandalized you? Write a list of what scares you and what attracts you to the notion of

church as a spiritual family that takes precedence over the biological family.

2. What are some conflicts you have experienced between loyalty to your family and loyalty to the church? Tell specific stories. How are you dealing with the tension? What further steps can you take?

3. Discuss food for thought #2. To what extent does your congregation honor singleness as a calling for some Christians—particularly Christian men? Is there a relationship between how your church functions as a close-knit spiritual family and the way singles are treated?

4. In reviewing the past sessions on our family relationships, what has stood out to you most? In what area do you feel the greatest need for growth?

Closing

This marks the end of this study on strengthening family ties. Take time to reflect on what you have learned. What has stood out? What goals have you set for yourself as a result of this study?

Take time to pray for one another as you move on to live out what you have learned in this study.

Responsive prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ,
we thank you for inviting each of us
to be part of this church family.

Help us never think of our position in it
as one of privilege, but as an opportunity
to serve each other and your world.

Help us as members of one family
be constantly aware of the needs
of the rest of the family,
and keep us humble.

Lord, help us never make trouble
but always work for peace,
be open warm and honest,
motivated always by your love.

Help us never stand on the letter
of the law, never be concerned with
our own rights, our own place,
our own importance….

Make us bread ready to be broken,
wine ready to be shared,
to meet the needs of all your children
and be your presence in the world.
Amen.

—Terry Falla, in *Be Our Freedom, Lord*, edited by Terry Falla (Lutheran Publishing House, 1984).

Hymn: "Heart with loving heart united" (*HWB* 420).

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Leader's Guide

One of the aims of the Closer Than a Brother series is to encourage men to find "spiritual companions." Some of this work may already have been done, and the men in your group may already have a partner with whom to pair up when dyads are called for. If you have not yet dealt with this issue, you may wish to review pages 10 to 12 in the first booklet of the series, *What Really Matters: Conversation Starters for Men* by J. Lorne Peachey and Everett J. Thomas. If your group, or members in it, have not been exposed to that study, you may wish to start with it, or at least use its suggestions for starting spiritual companion relationship.

How to use this booklet

This booklet is designed so that each participant can have his own copy. The book should be used for participation in the group (for example, the responsive readings and discussion questions), and for personal reflection and growth between sessions. As leader, encourage the men to read the session articles ahead of time, and to bring their books to the sessions.

Be sure to check the individual session notes that follow. But for conducting each session, the following hints on the flow of the sessions may be helpful:

Opening and closing worship

You will likely want to adapt the opening worship and closing exercises to fit the needs of your group. If you are not a singing group, you may want to use the words of the hymns in some other way, or use other appropriate openings. Have hymnals available as appropriate.

Exploring the topic

If the men do not read the material ahead of time, you should be prepared to present the content of the articles to the men as a lead-in to the section, "Talking it through." The articles are short enough that you may read them aloud together. Ideally, however, the material should be read ahead of time, or should be presented more informally than simply reading it.

Thinking it through: dyads and close-to-home conversation

The sessions often call the group to break into dyads for sharing. We also encourage men to remain in the same dyad through all the sessions, so that they can begin to experience the benefits of spiritual companionship. However, you must discern how far your group is ready to go with the use of dyads. If your group does not know each other well, dyads may feel threatening to some when they are asked to talk more personally about themselves.

You are encouraged to push out the group's comfort zones, but don't force it. If your group does not feel ready to try dyads, ask them to meet in groups of three or four and/or to talk less personally about the same issues. This is better than no discussion at all. However, as the sessions continue, you may challenge them to

be bolder in their sharing. Also, if some want to meet in dyads and others do not, consider having a "two-track" system, with some dyads, and some larger groups.

Notes for individual sessions

Session 1: Sons

Try reading the Scripture passage dramatically, having one person read the narrator, and others play the parts of the father, the younger son, and the older son.

You will need to decide if your group is suited to discussing and sharing in dyads for at least part of the "Talking it through" times, or if it is more appropriate to use larger groups. Whatever approach you take, encourage the men to stretch their comfort zones by taking steps toward greater transparency and vulnerability. But don't force it either. Much will depend on how well the group knows and trusts each other.

During "talking it through" in this session, encourage the men, as they feel free, to identify personal needs for relational healing in their families. (Alternatively or in addition, they may wish later to speak to their pastor or other wise people whom they trust.) Then, in the silent times during the closing, encourage the men to pray for each other about the needs they expressed.

In the closing, lead both prayers, inviting men to pray one or both audibly with you—depending on where they feel a need for healing.

Symbols can help the men experience healing. You may wish to sing "O healing river" after the prayers of confession rather than before, then have the men anoint each other with water as they sing. A bowl of water can be passed around, with each man dipping a finger in the water and smearing the sign of the cross on his neighbor's forehead. In introducing this ritual, indicate that God has promised healing and cleansing to all who come to God with sincere and repentant hearts.

Session 2: Brothers

For the Scripture reading, be sure to give adequate background to those who may be new to the biblical story. You may wish to summarize the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their families. It may be especially helpful to review the saga of Jacob and Esau's relationship, including the story of their reconciliation after more than twenty years of separation (Genesis 33).

Touch can feel threatening to many men, yet it also becomes a powerful tool for communicating love and concern in the brotherhood of your group. The closing reading from Psalm 133 mentions oil on the head of Aaron. You may want to touch olive oil to the forehead of each man as a blessing while that psalm is being read.

In praying for one another in this and future sessions, encourage the men to lay their hands on the one being prayed for. Alternatively, pray in a huddle with hands on each other's shoulders.

Session 3: Workers

You may wish to find a reproduction of a painting of Joseph and Jesus in the carpentry shop as

a visual focus for the meeting. Such pictures are often available in Catholic bookstores, or through the Internet (try www.printfinders.com).

In this session, be sensitive to men who may be unemployed or who do not enjoy their job. When the discussion questions ask about how one's work affects family life, you may invite those who are unemployed, if they are willing, to share how their unemployment affects their home.

Before dispersing, ask the men to read 2 Samuel 13—18 in preparation for the next session on fathering. It's too long a passage to read during the session yet provides helpful background in discussing the story.

Session 4: Fathers

Be sure to read 2 Samuel 13—18 ahead of time and be prepared to highlight the stories included there.

There may be men in the group who are not fathers. You may want to encourage them to share about that experience, if they're willing. Some may have never married; others who wanted children but could not have them; still others who married chose not to have children. Given these experiences, ask how men can "father" others who are not their biological children.

Does your church have a mentoring program, matching youth with adults? See how your men may be able to participate if they aren't already. Whether or not such a program exists at your church, the book *One on One: Making the Most*

of Your Mentoring Relationships by Steve Ropp (see page 52) contains many good ideas for relating to young people as mentors, including as fathers to their sons.

Session 5: Disciples

Dramatize the Scripture passage by assigning speaking and narrator parts. If your group is creative, you may wish to have the men read the passage silently first, then "amplify" the story by adding extra lines that you imagine the crowd and Jesus himself speaking.

If any of your men have had experience with churches who have tried to take seriously the early church's model of living communally or otherwise caring for each other in deeper ways, allow time for them to tell the stories and discuss them. You may wish to research groups, such as the Bruderhof, who continue to be church in this way (see www.bruderhof.com).

Since this is the last session, take some time during the closing to summarize what key learnings you have gleaned in this study. Have the men break into small groups and share with each other. It may help to distribute paper and writing instruments, inviting them to write down short summaries on the following: What decisions have you made as a result of these sessions? What help do you need in being faithful to those decisions? How have you grown closer to God and to each other during these times? You may ask if there are related topics that were not addressed that the men in your group want to discuss.

Resources

Bly, Robert. *Iron John: A Book About Men*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1990.

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Many Christian men today are looking for opportunities to walk with peers as they ponder key life issues. Macho talk in the locker room or political discussions at lunch just aren't nurturing their souls. The study series, Closer Than a Brother, helps men go deeper in their life with God through men's groups and accountable relationships in the church family.

Relatively Speaking

Strengthening Family Ties

Every man has people in his life who are related to him. It is often in his relationships with father, mother, siblings, or children that his character and his relationship with God are most tested. Some men are blessed with strong, positive relationships. Most men, however, have experienced some pain among their loved ones. This five-session study gets men talking about family relationships, exploring ways of healing and relationship building. As participants look at their roles as sons, brothers, workers, fathers, and disciples, they will discuss ways in which their society encourages them to sideline family ties in their bid to compete, succeed, and be tough. They will also explore ways in which the alternative values of God's family, the church, can help bring meaning and strength to their relationships at home.

Gordon Houser is associate editor for *The Mennonite*, the denominational magazine of Mennonite Church USA. He and his wife Jeanne live in Newton, Kansas, and have two children. They are long-time members of New Creation Fellowship Church, a Mennonite congregation that has always taken seriously the call to live as a family of faith.

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