

FULLER



STORY Rachel Lingle, pictured above, practices empathy and presence as she sits with clients in the therapy room *p. 12*

SCHOLARSHIP Scholars and practitioners explore the theme of “family” in articles guest edited by members of Fuller’s MFT faculty *p. 36*

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✦ *Never Give Up* by Kristin Young. Ilford HP5 Plus, 35mm film, Leica, 2015.

Kristin Young (current MDiv student) writes of her photography: "I often wonder why God allows us the privilege of being mothers or fathers or of being born into families. He could have

continued to fashion us from layers of dust. Yet we are born into these communities that shape, love, and sometimes even hurt us in unique and unimaginable ways. As a child, it is a primary way

we feel secure. As a parent who follows Christ, it is a way to understand the love of a Father in heaven. If God is in and works through all, my photographic goal is to find his presence in the

mundane and extraordinary moments of family life. Those moments are fleeting and fade too fast, but, once captured, they can live beyond just our memories."

Read Kristin's story on p. 22. And see more of her work at kristinmyoung.com and on pp. 11, 34-35, 70-71, 89, and in the closing cover.

FULLER

ISSUE #25 | FAMILY

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Rachel Lingle by Lindsey Sheets

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+ Editor's Note

"The teachings of Jesus challenge conventional assumptions about family and simultaneously lay the groundwork for a new concept of family marked by discipleship," writes Chris Blumhofer, in his article on "Family in the Gospel of Mark" (p. 40).

We know this to be true of all areas of life, don't we? Jesus transforms. The way of his kingdom upends how we see the world and the way we live in it. The Spirit renews our hearts, our minds, our strength. Our work, our play. Our hopes, our fears. This issue of *FULLER* magazine considers the particular question of how our faith shapes, and reshapes, our understanding of "family."

As Dr. Blumhofer writes, the way of Jesus means a redefinition of kinship and community; it means a renewed perspective on the connections between people and the ways we belong to one another.

The idea of family—across cultures, generations, circumstances, and contexts—is complicated, of course. All families, like all people, differ. Some are large, some are small. Some are healthy, some less so. Some families are biological, some are chosen, some are brought together by circumstance. Despite what some of us may picture in our minds as an archetypal or "traditional" family, we know that family is multifaceted and charged with beautiful complexity. Still, Jesus calls each of us to faithfulness, as we each live in our own configurations and systems of family, wherever we find ourselves.

I'm thankful that a significant part of Fuller's work and mission, through its Marriage and Family Therapy program in particular,

involves the deep work of "bringing healing and wholeness to individuals, couples, and families in their relationships." Faculty of our MFT program—Miyoung Yoon Hammer, Michael Hardin, Cameron Lee, Alesia Starks—guest edited this issue, which seeks to explore what family looks like in the kingdom of God.

In these pages, Ebson Simick and Tryfina Phipon share about their journey of planting a church as a married couple, Kristin Young reflects on pursuing a theological education after the loss of her son, and Eric VanValin recounts his story of becoming a foster parent. Cameron Lee writes about a healthy way of caring for pastors' kids, while Nicole Boymook looks at the power and beauty of a chosen family, and Michael Hardin asks the question of what happens to a family when a member walks away from the faith. Additionally, Les and Leslie Parrott discuss what healthy marriages can look like, as Ahren Martinez talks about ministering to the emerging generation.

I'll say up front: certain configurations and aspects of family are missed in these pages. One hundred pages can only cover so much. Yet our hope is that the voices you find in these pages offer

a glimpse of how the gospel transforms our imagination of what family can be, of how we might walk together as families in the way of Jesus, and of how we ought to care for one another as sisters and brothers in the kingdom of God.



JEROME BLANCO
Editor in Chief

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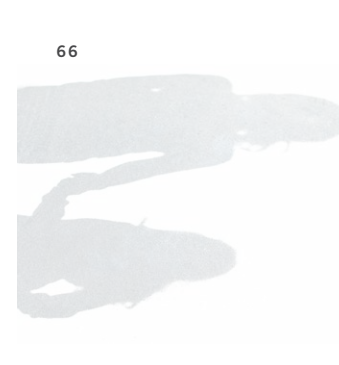
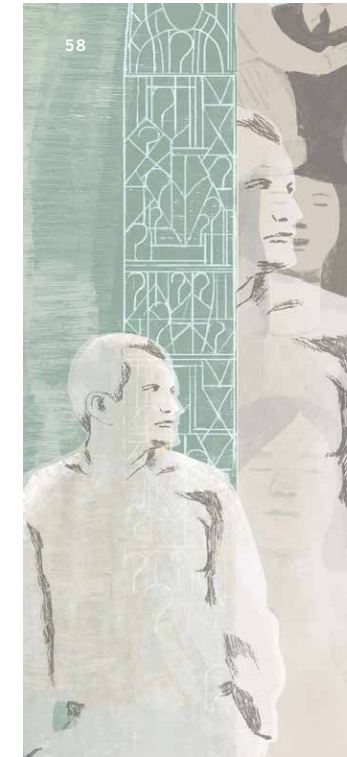
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Expanding Our Family Horizon

David Emmanuel Goatley, President

Two colleagues greeted each other during my Southern Africa visit. “How is our wife?” was the first salutation. A brief recount of health followed. The second person then asked, “And how are our children?” The first person answered with summaries about their activities in church, school, and sports. It was a wonderful exchange between old friends who had not seen each other in some time. They were reconnecting over updates about family.

One friend explained that all people in their culture have roles that contribute

to the entire community rather than being limited to their individual households. One’s mother is a mother to all the children. One’s son is a son to all the adults. One’s sibling is a sibling to all peers. The normative idea of family is expanded and relational in that culture. This is in stark contrast to the customary notion in much of the North Atlantic West that family is constricted, biological, or legal.

What comes to mind when you think of the word “family”? Is your family a legal arrangement, or does it include relational

alignments? My sister was neither biological nor adopted. There was never a doubt in our household or beyond, however, that she was my parents’ daughter and my sister.

It is amazing how God brings families together—especially when you are not limited by biology or legality. The Spirit can knit people together in bonds of love and service that are stronger than anything else.

I once read a book that criticized churches that function like families. The church

is not a family, the author asserted. I wondered what kind of dysfunctionality defined the author’s perception of family. When people love God and love each other like siblings in the Lord, isn’t that a family you want? I choose a church that is a functional family over one that operates like an efficient business, association, or club every time.

Regrettably, many people are not blessed to be nurtured well by their families. Sinfulness and sickness, sometimes alone and other times in tandem, tragically

Ampliando Nuestro Horizonte Familiar

David Emmanuel Goatley, Presidente

Dos colegas se saludaron durante mi visita a Sur Africa. “¿Cómo está nuestra esposa?” fue el primer saludo. Un recuento breve de salud siguió. La segunda persona preguntó: “¿Y cómo están nuestros hijos?” La primera persona respondió con resúmenes sobre sus actividades en la iglesia, la escuela, y en deportes. Fue un intercambio maravilloso entre viejos amigos que no se veían hacía mucho tiempo. Se estaban volviendo a conectar por medio de actualizaciones sobre sus familias.

Un amigo explicó que todas las personas en su cultura tienen roles que contribuyen a la

comunidad entera en vez de estar limitado a su hogar individual. La madre de uno es madre de todos los niños. El hermano o hermana de uno es hermano o hermana de todos. La idea normativa de familia es ampliada y relacional en esa cultura. Esto es un contraste bien marcado a la noción habitual en gran parte de la zona Atlántico Noroeste donde la familia es restringida, biológica, o legal.

¿Qué le viene a la mente cuando piensas en la palabra “familia”? ¿Es su familia un arreglo legal, o incluye alineamientos relacionales? Mi hermana no es biológica

o adoptada. Nunca hubo duda en nuestro hogar o más allá de que ella era hija de mis padres y mi hermana.

Es asombroso cómo Dios une a las familias, especialmente cuando uno no está limitado por biología o legalidad. El Espíritu puede unir a las personas en lazos de amor y servicio que son mas fuertes que cualquier otra cosa.

Una vez leí un libro que criticaba las iglesias que funcionan como familias. La iglesia no es una familia, el autor afirmó. Me preguntaba qué tipo de disfuncionalidad definía

la percepción del autor sobre la familia. Cuando las personas aman a Dios y se aman como hermanos en el Señor, ¿acaso no es esa la familia que deseas? Yo escogo una iglesia que es una familia funcional en lugar de una que opera como una empresa, asociación, o club social eficiente cada vez.

Lamentablemente, muchas personas no tienen la bendición de ser bien nutridas por sus familias. El pecado y la enfermedad, a veces solos y otras veces en conjunto, dan como resultado demasiadas familias que trágicamente se golpean, se regañan, y se magullan mutuamente en el sentido

가족의 개념을 넓히기

데이비드 임마누엘 고틀리, 총장 (David Emmanuel Goatley)

남아프리카를 방문했을 때, 두 동료가 인사를 나누는 장면을 보았습니다. 한 명이 먼저 물더군요, "우리 아내는 어떻게 지내요?" 그러자 상대방이 아내의 건강에 관해 간단히 이야기한 후, "우리 아이들은 잘 지내고 있나요?" 라고 물었습니다. 첫 번째 사람은 자녀들의 교회, 학교, 스포츠 활동에 대해 짧게 설명했습니다. 오랜만에 만난 옛 친구들이 교류하는 모습이 멋졌습니다. 가족의 소식을 나누면서 다시 끈끈해지더군요.

한 친구가 설명해주길, 그들의 문화에서는 모두가 각자의 가정에서 뿐만 아니라 전체 공동체에 기여하는

역할을 가지고 있다고 했습니다. 누군가의 어머니는 모든 아이들의 어머니이고, 누군가의 아들은 모든 부모의 아들입니다. 누군가의 형제자매는 또래 모두에게 형제자매가 되는 겁니다. 이 문화에서는 '가족'의 개념이 확장되고 관계적입니다. 이는 가족을 제한적이거나, 생물학적이거나, 법률적으로 바라보는 북대서양 서부의 많은 관습적인 생각과 극명하게 대조됩니다.

가족이라는 단어를 생각하면 무엇을 떠올리게 되나요? 여러분에게 가족은 법적인 합의를 뜻하나요, 아니면 관계적인 합의를 포함하나요? 세계는 생물학적으로 연결된

것도 아니고, 입양된 것도 아닌 여동생이 한 명었습니다. 하지만 우리 집에서나 밖에서나, 제 동생이 저희 부모님의 딸이자 제 여동생이라는 것에 의심의 여지가 없었습니다.

하나님께서 가족을 하나로 모으시는 방법은 놀랍습니다. 특히 특히 생물학적 또는 법적 제한을 받지 않을 경우에 말입니다. 성령은 그 무엇보다 강한 사랑과 봉사의 유대 속에서 사람들을 하나로 묶을 수 있습니다.

가족처럼 기능하는 교회를 비판하는 책을 읽은 적이 있는데, 그 책의 저자는 교회는 가족이 아니라고

주장했습니다. '가족'에 대한 저자의 인식에 어떤 부정적 기능이 영향을 주었는지 궁금했습니다. 사람들이 하나님을 사랑하고 주 안에서 형제자매처럼 서로를 사랑하면, 그것이 모두가 바라는 가족이 아닐까요? 저는 교회를 선택할 때 효율적인 사업이나 협회, 동아리처럼 운영되는 교회보다 행복한 가정 같은 곳을 선택합니다.

많은 사람들이 가족들에게 충분히 사랑받는 축복을 받지 못하고 있다는 사실은 슬프기 그지없습니다. 죄와 병들음으로 인해 문자적 의미에서나 비유적 의미에서나 가족들이 서로 때리고, 화내고, 명들게 하는 비극이

result in too many families battering, berating, and bruising each other figuratively and literally. Abuse and neglect are far too prevalent. Brokenness is rampant, and families need pathways to repair and resilience. This is part of the reason Fuller’s Marriage and Family Therapy programs are so critical for churches and communities. We need Christian therapists, and we need pastors who understand family systems, support intergenerational connections, and frame ministries that are family friendly and strengthening—regardless of legal ar-

rangements or physical reproduction.

Expanding our horizon of what family can be enlarges the witness of churches locally and globally. Seeing relationships as essential regardless of biology, geology, nationality, ethnicity, and the like positions us to help make this world more humane and habitable for children, who are the most vulnerable of all.

V. Michael McKay’s “Koinonia” is a song that may help us to sing more like the family that Jesus wants us to be:

How can I say that I love the Lord who I’ve never ever seen before,

And forget to say that I love the one who I walk beside each and every day.

How can I look upon your face and ignore God’s love, you I must embrace.

You’re my brother, you’re my sister, and I love you with the love of the Lord.¹ ■

1. V. Michael McKay, “Koinonia,” in *African American Heritage Hymnal*, ed. D. Carpenter and N. E. Williams Jr. (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001).

figurado y literal. El abuso y la negligencia son demasiado frecuente. El quebrantamiento es rampante, y las familias necesitan caminos para la reparación y la resiliencia. Esto es parte de la razón por la que los programas de Terapia Matrimonial y Familiar de el Seminario Teológico Fuller son tan importantes para las iglesias y las comunidades. Necesitamos terapeutas Cristianos, y necesitamos pastores que entienden sistemas familiares, que apoyen las conexiones intergeneracionales y que enmarquen ministerios que son beneficiosos para la familia y fortalecedores, independientemente de los arreglos legales or reproducción física.

Ampliar nuestro horizonte de lo que una familia puede ser ampliará el testimonio de las iglesias locales y globales. Ver relaciones como algo esencial independientemente de biología, la geología, la nacionalidad, el origen étnico y similares nos posiciona para ayudar a hacer que este mundo sea más humano y habitable para niños que son los más vulnerables de todos.

Koinonia escrita por V. Michael McKay es una canción que puede ayudarnos a cantar más como la familia que Jesús quiere que seamos:

¿Cómo puedo decir que amo al Señor a quien nunca he visto,

Y olvidar decir que amo al que camina a mi lado cada día?

¿Cómo puedo mirar sobre tu rostro y ignorar el amor de Dios? Debo abrazarte.

Eres mi hermano, eres mi hermana, y te amo con el amor del Señor.¹ ■

1. Himnario de la Herencia Afroamericana, #579, GIA Publications, Inc., Chicago, Ill., 2001.

일어나고 있습니다. 학대와 방치가 너무 만연해 있습니다. 온전치 못함이 너무 흔하고, 가족에게는 회복과 치료를 위한 길이 필요합니다. 바로 이 때문에 풀러신학대학원의 결혼과 가족 치료 프로그램이 교회와 지역 사회에 매우 중요합니다. 우리에게는 기독교 치료가 필요하고, 가족 체계를 이해하고, 세대 간 연결을 지원하고, 법적 합의 또는 육체적 번식에 관계없이 가족체도를 이해하고 세대 간 연결을 지원하며 가족 친화적이고 강화된 프레임 사역을 하는 목회자가 필요합니다.

교회의 증인이 더 많아질 것입니다. 생물학, 지질학, 국적, 민족성 등과 상관없이 '관계'를 가장 중요하게 생각하면, 어려운 환경에 처한 아이들에게 더 인간적이고 살기 좋은 세상을 만들어주는 데 힘을 보낼 수 있습니다.

V. Michael McKay의 코이노니아 (Koinonia)는 예수님이 우리에게 바라시는 가족처럼 노래하는 데 도움이 되는 노래입니다.

제가 어떻게 한 번도 본 적 없는 주님을 사랑한다고 고백하면서도

매일 옆에서 걷는 사람에게 사랑한다 말하는 것을 잊을 수 있을까요?

제가 어떻게 당신의 얼굴을 바라보면서도, 제가 마땅히 품어야 할 하나님의 사랑인 당신을 외면할 수 있을까요?

당신은 나의 형제요, 나의 자매입니다. 주님의 사랑으로 당신을 사랑합니다.¹ ■

1. African American Heritage Hymnal, #579, GIA Publications, Inc., Chicago, Ill., 2001.

가족의 개념을 넓히면 지역적으로나 전 세계적으로



+ In My Father’s Hands by Kristin Young. Ilford HP5 Plus, 120 film, Contax 645, 2012. See more of Kristin Young’s photography in the opening and closing covers and on pp. 34–35, 70–71 and 89.

SLOWING DOWN AND FINDING FAITH

Drawing from her own journey of growing into her faith and vocation, Rachel Lingle practices empathy and presence as she sits with clients in the therapy room.

Written by **MEGGIE ANDERSON**
Photographed by **LINDSEY SHEETS**

It was an ordinary parenting decision that moved the needle in Rachel Lingle's (MSMFT '17) faith journey—and in her vocational calling. “I was in my late 20s looking for a preschool for my kids, and the school within the Nazarene church just happened to align better with my kids’ nap schedule,” Rachel shares as she laughs, recalling the pragmatic decision that led to such formative life change. “I think God uses practical stuff like that,” she says, “and that’s really where my faith began to grow, when I began building relationships with other moms.”

At the time, Rachel had just left her job as an accountant. Earlier in her 20s, she began to have unusual physical symptoms in her day-to-day life, which led to a diagnosis of a chronic disorder that affects her mobility. Rachel's declining physical ability changed the trajectory of her vocation, as she could no longer manipulate the papers that she handled daily as a part of her work. Home with three young children, she was starved for adult interaction. “I was untethered; I had nothing but my kids and my husband that was steady in my life.”

The moms at the preschool became Rachel's safe haven. A group of ten mothers formed, and after dropoff, they'd grab coffee or lunch together. Rachel immediately noticed something different about these parents whose faith guided their lives. She noticed that she would be reactive or easily blown off course by small things that happened with her children, but the other moms were able to remain more patient, calm, and peaceful when challenges arose. Rachel realized that her task-oriented lifestyle—in contrast to the relational lifestyle modeled by some of the other moms—came at the cost of personal connection in her life. While it may have served her well in her previous

career, it was no longer meeting her needs as a mother who was navigating the world with declining physical ability.

Until then, the extent of Rachel's experience with church was attending the required services at her Catholic school as a child. “Faith really was not a part of my upbringing,” Rachel shares. “My dad was not very embracing of faith or people who expressed their faith. He would make fun of people who were strong in their faith.” So when one of the moms from preschool invited Rachel to a charismatic church for Sunday service, she was a little suspicious at first. “I had never really been in a church like that before. In my experience of church, you speak when you're spoken to. You stand or sit or assume a posture when you're told to. Here, people were raising their hands, swaying, and singing.”

It was uncomfortable, even for Rachel, who felt she'd been inoculated against such unease in new situations thanks to growing up as a military kid moving around different states and counties. “It was normal for me to be around people from a variety of cultures. Even in the military, there are people who come from different US territories and cultural backgrounds.” Showing up that Sunday was more foreign to Rachel than sitting with someone from a different nationality or ethnic background. But because of the groundwork that had been laid through relationships with her new friends and the movement of the Holy Spirit, Rachel accepted Christ into her heart.

Rachel's relationships with the moms from the preschool remained steadfast. They gathered monthly at Rachel's home because it was harder for Rachel to leave the house with her disability. She looks back at that decade of her life as a faith-building



season, preparing her to do the work that she is doing now. It was in the vulnerable moments of sharing with other moms that Rachel learned how to slow down, focus on emotions, and hold space for someone so that they can feel heard.

The slowing down that Rachel learned in the context of relationships mirrored the physical slowing down that she experienced when her mobility began to really change. “I am not nearly as fast as I used to be at anything. I need to be much more deliberate than I was. I need to be much more structured now; I used to fly by the seat of my pants.” Rachel says one of the biggest outcomes of her disability journey was taking time to be in the moment. “Being able to slow down and empathize and feel with people—I don’t think that I would be able to sit with people as a therapist and hear difficult stories and stay with them, be open to just holding that space for them to experience hard things, if I hadn’t been through all of that.”

It was a blessing for Rachel to be amidst a community of believers as she received her diagnosis and began to experience its impact on her daily life. “Any kind of a huge life change like that . . . people tend to question everything. Your faith either really grows or it completely hardens your heart.” Rachel experienced an interesting inversion: as her physical ability declined, her faith began to grow. She was surrounded by people who

believed that God had a plan for her—and she believed it, too.

When her oldest child was close to graduating high school, Rachel began asking questions about what was next for herself. “God connected me to a person who went to my church, Wendy Lehnertz, who was teaching at Fuller at the time. She encouraged me to look into the Marriage and Family Therapy program.” As Wendy watched Rachel facilitate a Bible study at church, she saw something in Rachel that would be a gift to others in a therapeutic space. Any time they would get together, Wendy nudged her to look into graduate school. But at the time, therapy was an unfamiliar concept to Rachel. She had never sought out help like that herself.

Rachel applied to Fuller, was accepted, and graduated from the Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) program at the Arizona campus in 2017. Since then, she has been practicing as a licensed therapist with a focus on couples and individuals working through relationship issues. “I don’t have all the answers. That’s not my role,” Rachel says. “But I think my role does include holding space for people to contemplate what the answers are, to be open to hearing the ‘still small voice’ within them. Sometimes in the busyness of the day-to-day, it’s hard to do that. But when you’re sitting in a room with one other person and no other distractions, you are able to do that better.” It’s



the ideal environment for Rachel to live into her vocation: she gets to create space for her clients to feel heard and accepted, and she offers help and encouragement—even challenging her clients at times.

“WHEN I LOOK BACK
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I CAN REALLY SEE HOW
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TO WHERE I AM NOW.”

Rachel did not always see herself ending up here—a licensed therapist with a seminary degree—but, she says, “When I look back over all of the experiences of my life, I can really see how they have pointed me to where I am now.” Without living in different cultures as a military kid, she would not be as aware of and able to connect with the variety of people who come into her office today. The emotional space that Rachel learned how to hold for other women from her mothers’ group equipped her to intuitively hold space for her clients. “And,” Rachel says, “the disability journey that I have been on has pointed me to being empathetic and gentle and accepting of people.”

Now, Rachel has returned to Fuller, enrolling in the Doctor of Marriage and Family Therapy (DMFT) program. She is also stepping into a new role as the director of the mental health clinic soon opening at the Fuller Arizona campus, where she will see clients and supervise current MFT students as they gain the practical experience needed to finish their programs. Rachel’s lived experience will now impact the campus at an institutional level.

“You can’t take clients where you haven’t been” was one of the most important lessons in the classroom for Rachel when she was an MFT student. “You can only take them to the level that you’ve reached. How you are in your personhood as a therapist is really important and something you need to continue to take stock of to ensure growth.” In any kind of suffering—which is what usually brings someone to therapy—Rachel says she finds something she can relate to. “Whether it’s a client with chronic pain or a relational issue, there is something in my personal experience that I can draw empathy from.” As she begins her new role, Rachel is grateful to be able to share the gifts she’s gained from her journey: empathy, seeing commonality across differences, and slowing down and remaining present. ■

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A HOLY MOMENTUM

After moving to LA to work in television, Eric VanValin's curiosity about the foster system sets him on an unexpected path to fatherhood, advocacy, and a new career.

Written by JOY NETANYA THOMPSON

Photographed by NATE HARRISON

It was Christmastime, 2017, and Eric VanValin (current MSMFT student) was at church, wrangling the kids he served as a volunteer as they waited in the wings for their holiday performance. But just before it was time to lead the kids on stage, Eric's phone rang and his wife, Dana, had news—the Department of Children and Family Services had called about a child who needed a home. They had been approved as foster parents just days before, and this was the placement they'd been waiting for. "This is wild, but I have to step out," Eric told another volunteer, and he and Dana made the decision to receive the placement. "You only have whatever information you can get in a ten-minute call," he says. "And you just both have to have peace about it at that moment, and you say yes."

Later that evening, when two social workers brought the child to the VanValin home, Eric instantly became a parent. "From that moment, you are fully responsible for this child," he says. He'd never changed a diaper before, but in no time, he'd changed a dozen. Beyond getting the hang of practical caregiving, Eric was also suddenly thrust into the profound emotions of parenthood—but with added complexity. "A bond is formed very quickly, where you're feeling all the love and wonder of life, and it's amazing," he says. "In the same instance, there is a family that has experienced trauma and what may be the worst moment of their life. There's a child that's not in their care. So you are immediately trying to hold both of those realities."

Eric's journey to becoming a foster parent had begun several years earlier, when he moved from what he called his





“safe Christian bubble” in Virginia to California to pursue a career in the TV industry. “We were moving to an area where not everyone is like us or thinks the same things as us,” he says. Thus, the VanValins arrived in LA with an intentional “posture of learning and listening.” That was in 2014, in the months following the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. In his new environment, Eric noticed “a national awareness of events that I hadn’t seen before as a White guy who lived in predominantly White spaces.” As he opened himself up to these realities, he was also influenced by the people he interacted with in LA, folks who came from many different backgrounds and walks of life, and found himself entering into a season of reflection—a time of “renewing my mind,” he says. As part of that, Eric attended a lecture series at Fuller where he was impacted by talks from Christena Cleveland and Michael McBride, both of whom urged participants to get involved in resisting the systemic inequity in the US, offering suggestions for practical ways to do so. These talks planted a seed in Eric as he started to think about folks who don’t have “the same support systems or safety nets that I have.”

The issue became practical, rather than conceptual, when a group of siblings Eric knew from a youth center where he volunteered lost their father and sole caregiver. The center’s volunteers came together to discuss how to help the kids and where they might be able to live. While the siblings ended up being able to live with a relative, the situation made Eric face the question: what happens to kids when they don’t have a safety net? He knew of the foster system, but he didn’t know much about the ins and outs. “I’d had this shifting mindset over the past three or four years, and I felt it was eventually going to lead to doing something to help others,” he recalls, “but I didn’t know what that specific thing was until we learned about being foster parents.”



The VanValins had been married for more than a decade and had no biological children but shared a desire to have a family. They decided together to look into becoming foster parents, and the more they researched, the more sure they became that it was the path for them. “Dana and I were on the same page, like, ‘Oh, this is how we’re going to start a family,’” Eric says. There was fear, too. “You know this is going to be a challenging endeavor, that children enter the foster care system because of a traumatic event or tragedy.” At the same time, Eric remembers, “we were also learning the importance of attachment and how being a safe, loving attachment figure can help a child.”

“The stakes were so great,” he says, but every step of the way toward becoming certified as foster parents, Eric and Dana felt “almost what you’d call a holy momentum—that feeling that we had to try, we had to at least see if it was possible.” That pull for Eric was directly related to the sense of urgency he’d had since arriving in LA and opening his eyes to the need around him, the “renewing of his mind,” as he referred to it. Becoming a foster family would be “our action, our doing—the orthopraxy that didn’t exist before.”

By 2019, the couple had received another placement and had two children in their care. While they both worked full-time, they realized that two children in their home at any given time would be their limit as a family. But they wanted to find a way to partner with the foster care system in the long term, regardless

of how many placements they could host. “By that time we had gotten this education by experience—how to find an agency, how to become a foster parent, how to maintain healthy relationships with the birth family, even practical things like how to prepare your home,” he says. “We realized it would have been great if we had someone like us at the start to guide us through our journey.” That realization turned into an idea to start a non-profit organization, Our Open House.

Through their nonprofit, the couple mentors individuals and couples who are investigating or on their way to becoming foster families. They also offer practical assistance like providing car seats, cribs, and other necessities to help families prepare their homes for placements. They’ve even partnered with their local child and family services department, directly connecting with social workers who inform them of needs among foster kids and families. “We’ve been able to guide several families through the process who are now foster parents,” says Eric. “Our Open House is also bringing awareness about the foster care system to people like Dana and me, who had the capacity and the desire but didn’t exactly know how the system worked.”

The more Eric spent time partnering with the foster system and supporting families, as well as caring for the children placed in his home, the more he wanted to do. He was also teaching a marriage class at church with Dana, a ministry the couple had found rewarding for the past several years.

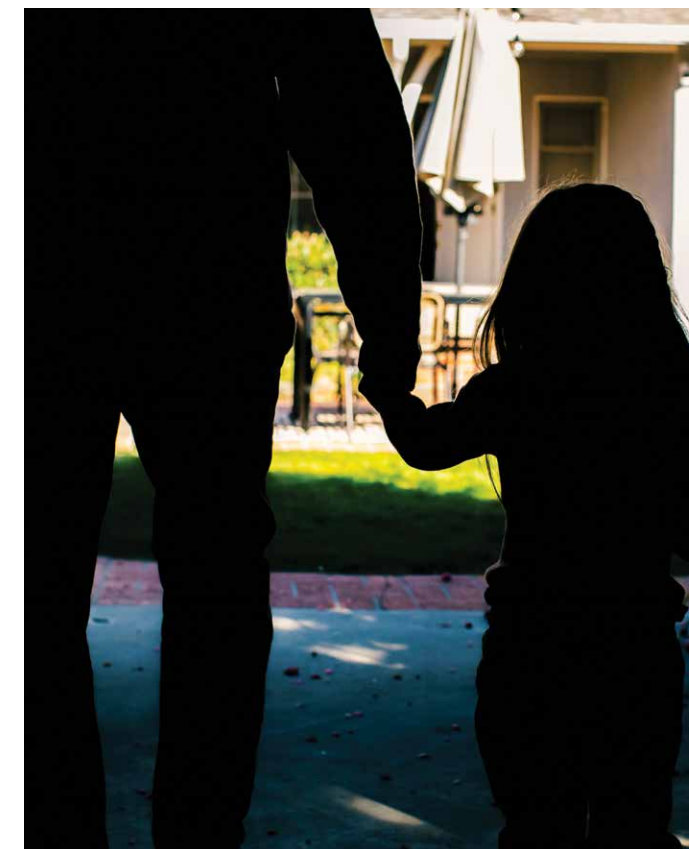


Even though Eric enjoyed his career in television, he found himself wondering, “How is there a way that I could have my professional life match what I’m doing in every other area of my life?” Even more, he wanted to deepen his knowledge and expertise so that he could “help people and help families more, and better, than I currently am.” This desire led him to Fuller’s MS in Marriage and Family Therapy program, in which he is currently enrolled.

“Being a licensed marriage and family therapist is something I could see myself wanting to do for the rest of my life, having my life’s work be around working with families and hopefully providing a safe place for children to develop and grow,” says Eric. And since starting his program more than a year ago, he’s become aware of a direction he might take his career in: specializing in adoption and permanency. “That’s an area of therapy I didn’t know existed before this program,” he says. “There are certain issues that come up once you’ve adopted, and having someone who understands that, who can help prepare families and also work with them as they’re experiencing it, is a huge benefit.” Eric and Dana know about the unique needs of adoptive parents firsthand, since adopting their daughter, Audrey, in 2022.

“IF MY LIFE IS SPENT
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From knowing very little about the system to now mentoring others and even pursuing a career that supports his calling, Eric has come a long way since that first placement in 2017. “At the beginning of being a foster parent, you are on this roller coaster where you’re feeling the most extreme highs, the most extreme lows, sometimes in the same day,” says Eric. “But then the more you do it, the better you are at managing that and understanding that it’s a long journey.” That journey has been full of twists and turns he couldn’t have anticipated. “There are constant surprises,” he says. “Surprise at how hard it is, and surprise that you can do it, and also surprise at how wonderful it is. You’re surprised at how alive you feel in these very routine, mundane moments of diapers and bottles, how you are experiencing everything life has to offer in those moments.” Another



surprise has been Eric’s expanding definition of family as he and Dana navigate maintaining ties with the child who was first placed with them and was reunified with their family after more than a year. “It’s understood that you love your family unconditionally. But foster care has taught me to love others outside of my family unconditionally, in the way that God loves everyone equally, unconditionally, without question,” he says. “It has broadened my perspective of whom I have the capacity to love. It has totally transformed my understanding of family.”

Since Eric moved to Los Angeles with an open mind and heart, he experienced several major transformations: becoming a father, becoming the cofounder of a nonprofit, and even making a dramatic change to his career trajectory. And, while it’s not what he expected when he moved to LA to advance his career in the entertainment industry, Eric is sure this is the right path for him, with all its highs and lows. “It became clear to me very early on: if my life is spent helping a handful of children develop attachment well and being a safe place that sets them up for that—that’s a life well lived.” ■

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CAPTURING LIGHT

After her son's battle with pediatric brain cancer, Kristin Young returns to seminary with a hunger to know God more deeply and a passion to help others discover hope as they walk through valleys.

Written by **CHANTELLE GIBBS**
 Photographed by **KARLEY CARRILLO**

Kristin Young (current MDiv student) can trace her pull to seminary back to when her kids were young. She had enrolled in a certificate program where she could study apologetics, which had always interested her, but with six kids at home and a couple of go-at-your-own-pace modules under her belt, she decided it wasn't her season and shelved seminary for a later time.

But when her 13-year-old son was diagnosed with brain cancer, it was the responses of others that brought what she calls "the rumbling" back to her spirit. "When Colby got sick, people said some crazy stuff to us that I know is not in my Bible," Kristin recalls. "I wanted to go back and pursue apologetics to help people understand what they believe and why they believe it." She knew she wasn't called to church or pastoral ministry, but, she says, "to be able to teach and to write—that has always been something that's interested me."

So, after her son's first round of chemotherapy and with hopes for remission, she applied to a local seminary. But within a month of her studies, Colby experienced a relapse, then entered a clinical trial, and seminary went back on the shelf.

"We knew going in that the clinical trial was not going to cure him," she says, "but perhaps it would prolong his life." Their focus turned toward preparing their son for heaven and their other children for the impending loss and grief. Colby had a bucket list of things he wanted to do. "So we hit the list with a vengeance," Kristin says. "And we took pictures."



Kristin had first gotten into photography when Colby was born and had since developed a thriving photography business. When she began taking pictures as he battled cancer, they thought he was going to beat it. At the time, she thought, “I’ll take pictures of the journey because these pictures are going to say how far you’ve come, what God has got you through.” She also started writing, as another way to process her grief, which came naturally alongside the photo documentation. Later on, however, she remembers thinking, “I need to document every piece of my son because he is not going to be here.”

Rather than turning away or growing disenchanted with Jesus, a desire to understand it all led her to lean into Jesus more. “Where is Colby going? What is it going to be like? What does that mean for me, for my family? What does it mean for what I believe, and how am I going to live this out?” Kristin recalls the questions she ruminated on at the time. “I needed to know more,” she says. “I needed to know more and more. And then, I ended up in seminary.”

After a valiant two-year fight, Colby passed away at the age of 15. But even then, Kristin remembers living in hope, more reassured that God is in the valley. Upon her return to seminary, she arrived “gung-ho to help believers understand what the Bible says and how to walk through valleys and hope.”

About a year into her program, Kristin was visiting Israel with two friends who happened to be graduates of Fuller. She confided in them about her disappointment with her seminary experience so far. At the seminary she was attending, Kristin had no professors who looked like her, “either as a woman or as an African American or as any person of color. And for me, there was a tragedy in that.” National events and local politics had permeated the classrooms, but she was hearing professors say things she couldn’t agree with. She wondered if this was the way she was supposed to experience seminary.

Her Fuller-alum friends were the first to say it. “You need to apply to Fuller. It’s gonna check a whole bunch of boxes while you’re learning: having people who look like you, learning from a breadth and a depth of people, learning things that you may not agree with but you still gotta wade through it and not be scared of the slippery slope.”

So when Kristin returned home from Israel, she decided to apply to Fuller.

She transferred in as an online student and immediately clicked with a classmate during her first quarter. They started following each other on Instagram and have now been each other’s champions online and in real life, particularly in the Hebrew class they were taking together. Kristin reflects on how those first integrative classes were formatted in such a



way as to build community and connection with familiar faces turned friends. “Having that community with my friend has made online learning palatable; it’s made it feel less lonely. I can text her and ask, ‘How are we doing this week?’ These are my people.”

Before she started studying at Fuller, Kristin thought she had to make a choice between her creative pursuits and her theological ones. Either she would work in the creative space with her photography business, or it would have to go on the back burner if she was going to pursue teaching or apologetics. This was how it had to be—or so she thought. But then she took a Theology and Culture class at Fuller, which got her thinking, and by the time she finished her Theology and Art course, it was “the nail in the coffin” for that false belief. “I don’t have to choose,” she knows now. “I refuse to choose.”

Today, Kristin combines her enjoyment of writing and her heart for vulnerability by speaking and presenting publicly on her story and journey with Colby. While her intention to share her raw thoughts, prayers, and photos on her online blog

and her Instagram did not begin as a means to help others, her platform has gained traction, and she's glad it has helped many. "I do use a lot of the photos with him that I took from our cancer valley, and I put words with them, and it's powerful! Sometimes I have to stop and check to make sure people in the room are okay. Colby got cancer. God knew Colby was gonna get cancer. And God was able to use—and is continuing to use—it in a mighty way."

Initially transferring in as an MA in Theology student, after the first couple of quarters, she decided she wanted to do the Master of Divinity (MDiv) because she wanted to teach. "Just like the church, there's no perfect seminary. But for the way I want to learn and teach, Fuller has felt a lot more freeing to do that."

Even before Kristin began her seminary studies, she was of the camp that she needed to fit everything into their perfectly siloed sections, including theology. Sitting in class her first quarter at Fuller, Kristin recalls having a "crisis of the soul"

because, rather than being told what she should think, she was presented with the space to research and process her own thoughts. "To me, it was refreshing because it meant that there are no rectangular tables with somebody sitting at the head and someone saying this is how we should interpret this."

"THAT'S WHAT THEOLOGY IS ABOUT. HOW ARE WE ALL EXPERIENCING GOD?"

Kristin hopes to incorporate this into her own ethos and mindset when she begins to teach. "What I would love to do as a professor is to sit at a round table and to have everyone pull up a chair. And everyone's pulling up the same chair; nobody's in a lawn chair and nobody's in a high chair. We are all in this. What does the text say to you? What can I learn from you that



I'm not getting because that's not my experience? That's what theology is about. How are we all experiencing God?"

In reflecting on her road to seminary, Kristin says, "It was peppered with a lot of sadness. But also goodness. I originally thought seminary was a way for me to process what I believe to be true, to understand what I believe to be true, and to help other people. But what seminary has become is a confidence in myself and how God shows up in me, how God shows up in my life, and how God shows up in my experiences."

As for what subjects to teach, her burning heart's desire is to teach theology and culture, and to weave in the lessons she's learned and is learning through her own photography and writing. As a creative, Kristin maintains her own discipline of regularly embarking on personal projects.

One project she is currently working on came about when she was admiring the light in her home one day. She noticed the light in her bedroom, which was completely dark except for a strip of light cascading over her crumpled sheets. Normally, it wasn't a setting conducive to taking a photo because of the lack of light. As someone who shoots primarily on film, she knew even with the best of exposure settings, everything would likely

end up pitch black. But as she wrestled with it, she decided to get her camera out anyway. "Kristin, there's just enough," she said to herself.

"In photography, you usually want to shoot for the light. But I'm trying to shoot for the dark. Because all it takes is a little bit of light to break up the darkness."

"ALL IT TAKES IS A LITTLE BIT OF LIGHT TO BREAK UP THE DARKNESS."

She laughs, admitting the project is not a fully developed creative idea and might only go as far as the one photo she grabbed that day. "It could stop and end this week," she says. "Or I could keep it going, trying to find light in the darkness." ■

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A CHURCH FOR ALL

As they pastor in a diverse Hong Kong neighborhood, Ebson Simick and Tryfina Phipon testify to the beautiful ways God works across the many relationships we have with one another.

Written by **JEROME BLANCO**
 Photographed by **RICKY NYHOFF**

On a Sunday morning in 2017, around 70 people gathered to worship and celebrate the launch of Hope for All Church. Planted in the Yau Ma Tei neighborhood in Hong Kong's Kowloon district, Hope for All had been many years in the making, as husband-and-wife pastors Ebson Simick (MDiv '16) and Tryfina Phipon (MDiv '16) had long envisioned starting a church in this part of the city. "We felt really good," Ebson says. "It was incredible when people gathered to support us." But when attendance dropped into the single digits in the week that followed the launch and the weeks after that, Ebson and Tryfina were hit with the reality every church planter faces: it's difficult work starting a church.

Hope for All's mission is summed up in its name. The church yearns to be "an inclusive body of Jesus Christ that is a living manifestation of the kingdom of God." Ebson and Tryfina explain how they've specifically sought to minister in this particular area of Hong Kong. Many of the churches in the city cater to the highly educated or to those more socioeconomically well-off; there are also many other churches that tend to draw in homogenous communities. "But there was a middle that was missing," Ebson says, "those in between the cultures, especially younger generations, coming from different countries, who've settled here, who work here. They have different difficulties, different challenges, and at the same time many strengths as well. This entire generation gets missed." Many of these people live in the densely populated and diverse Yau Ma Tei neighborhood.

Both Ebson and Tryfina had worked among this community for many years. Each of them had come to Hong Kong separately as missionaries from India and served in different organizations.

As Ebson's work with Inner City Ministries and Tryfina's with Youth with a Mission intersected more and more, and after they were eventually married ("a story for another time," they say with a smile), they grew a shared recognition of the deeper needs among the people they served. They dreamed of a more holistic, long-term ministry of discipleship that would allow them to walk alongside people in all the areas of life. They imagined a church as the fitting way to do this, but neither felt adequately equipped for that work. So, at the encouragement of mentors and with the blessing of their mother church, they went to Fuller to be trained for three years before returning to Hong Kong to plant Hope for All.

The church has grown in the time since its launch, while seeing its fair share of ups and downs. As pastors, Ebson and Tryfina led the church through years of pandemic and Hong Kong's political tumult, on top of the regular challenges of waning attendance and burnout that come with a budding plant. (They share how, on some of those early Sundays, they and their children were the only ones to show up.) Amidst it all, God has been present and faithful.

Reflecting on the way that Hope for All has grown over these years, the couple talks about the importance of relationships and community. And how a key aspect of their ministry is recognizing that nobody—from those who minister to those who are ministered to—is ever an individual separate from the people around them.

A distinct ministry approach of theirs has been to reach out not only to individuals but to individuals' families as a whole. Tryfina says that if a church is to help any single person holistically and to

+ Ebson Simick walks down the street in the Yau Ma Tei neighborhood.





disciple that person in every part of life, it's necessary for a family or other loved ones to be part of that formation. Ebson offers an example, saying, "If someone is dealing with an addiction issue, a drug issue, it isn't just the issue of that one person. It's the issue of the whole family. So, we actually have to reach out to the whole family to help them." Incidentally, Ebson says this approach has shaped the way their church has grown: "Whole families were coming to the Lord!"

This idea of togetherness and walking alongside one another is a central value for Ebson and Tryfina. And they hope for the church to be a place "where people can grow together as a family." This is as true for them—the church's pastors—as it is for anybody else. Planting and leading a church is an impossible task without the relationships and communities who help to sustain them.

In many ways, they say, it starts with one another. Ebson and Tryfina say that being each other's support system is what carries them through the regular challenges of ministry. Ebson says, especially of those early days, that "the vision of church planting sounded so good, but when we had to do it with our hands, every day, and deal with all kinds of issues, we often felt like giving up. There are days when 'the vision' sounds ridiculous, and it doesn't work out in reality. But through those times, we could rely on God and on each other." He says there was so much value in simply being able to ask each other, "Am I on the right track?"

"It's a blessing to work together," Tryfina says. "There were many times when Ebson had to pick me up and remind me, 'you are overreacting.' He had to remind me, and I had to remind him. And as husband and wife, we can be utterly truthful with one another but with so much care and love."

Other relationships are sustaining and formative in their own ways too. Ebson

shares how their children's budding faith is a constant inspiration to them, offering gifts of insight into God from young eyes. Tryfina says the mentors and pastors who've walked with them from the beginning have made and continue to make an impact on them. She says that for the faithful work of leading a church, "You have to be prayed for. You have to be mentored. You have to have hands laid on you. You have to be released for what God has for you." They both also talk about the core leaders of Hope for All, who spend hours in prayer with them, who take ownership of different areas of the ministry, and who help carry the load of logistical responsibilities that keep things running. Tryfina adds that it's important for newcomers to the church to also be given the opportunities to grow into the leadership roles God calls them to.

At Hope for All, *all* is the point. And the couple have witnessed God do amazing things as they've fostered connections and relationships with those inside and outside the church's walls.

"I WANT TO MAKE
THIS A PLACE OF
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FOR PEOPLE,
ESPECIALLY THOSE
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IN THEIR LIVES."

There's a story Ebson and Tryfina like to share about seeing God's faithfulness at work in this way: In 2017, Harman attended Hope for All's inauguration service. He wasn't a Christian, but his Christian wife had asked him to come along. He didn't visit again, but years later, Ebson received a phone call. Harman, a restaurant owner, had gone through a long season of depression over the years of pandemic and protest in Hong Kong. Ebson says, "He began to search for the truth, and somebody had given him a Bible at his restaurant, so he began to read." When Harman decided he wanted to come to a church, he thought of Hope for All—because Ebson and another church leader had paid him a single follow-up visit after that initial service, and had left a box of strawberries as a gift. Soon, Harman came to Christ. Today, he leads a men's fellowship at the church. The invitation from his wife, the gift from a coworker, the kindness of church leaders, the spurring of the Spirit—many relationships brought him into this new family. And Harman's is only one story of the many in their church.



Recently, Hope for All celebrated its fifth anniversary. Five years and many Sundays since that first worship service, and five years of witnessing God at work. With about 60 people in attendance week by week, including a growing children's program, they're even searching for a larger space. "We've had valleys," Ebson says, "but God is good, and God is faithful."

As the church enters a new season, Tryfina says God has placed on their heart a particular image from Isaiah 54: "Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes." It's a vision less about growing in numbers and more about welcoming people in, more and more—about becoming a church sharing the good news for everyone to everyone. Ebson says, "I want to make this a place of hope and healing for people, especially those who've been battling in their lives—physical, emotional, economic, spiritual battles. We're focusing on healing and hope. That's the vision God is giving us."

As pastors, as a church, and with the Spirit, they are setting about widening their tent. They're stretching curtains, lengthening cords, strengthening stakes—creating a community of hope for all in their corner of Kowloon. ■

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✦ The Laundry Room by Kristin Young. Ilford HP5 Plus 35mm film, Leica, 2012. See more of Kristin Young's photography in the opening and closing covers and on pp. 11, 70-71 and 89.



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FAMILY

Miyoung Yoon Hammer, Co-Guest Editor
(with Michael Hardin, Cameron Lee,
and Alesia Starks)

In the 1960s, my parents left their families in South Korea to immigrate to Winnipeg, Canada. As immigrants from poor families in a poor country still recovering from war, my parents lacked the financial, cultural, linguistic, and social resources to establish themselves with as equal footing as the majority of their neighbors in Winnipeg. With no family and few friends, they embarked upon a life in a new country with low resources but high hopes because they believed they possessed two of the most invaluable resources available: their faith and their membership in the body of Christ. With that conviction, they believed that the local church should be and would be their primary locus of connection, commu-

FAMILIA

Miyoung Yoon Hammer, Coeditora invitada
(junto con Michael Hardin, Cameron Lee
y Alesia Starks)

En los años sesenta, mis padres dejaron a sus familias en Corea del Sur para emigrar a Winnipeg, Manitoba. Como inmigrantes de familias pobres en un país pobre que aún se recuperaba de la guerra, mis padres carecían de los recursos económicos, culturales, lingüísticos y sociales para establecerse en igualdad de condiciones con la mayoría de sus vecinos de Winnipeg. Sin familia y con pocos amigos, emprendieron una nueva vida en un nuevo país con pocos recursos pero con grandes esperanzas porque creían que poseían dos de los recursos más valiosos disponibles: su fe y su pertenencia al cuerpo de Cristo. Con esa convicción, creían que la iglesia local debía ser y sería su principal lugar de conexión, comunidad y familia. Para que nadie

FAMILY

Miyoung Yoon Hammer 공동 객원 편집자
(with Michael Hardin, Cameron Lee,
and Alesia Starks)

1960년대에 저의 부모님은 한국에 있는 가족을 떠나 캐나다의 매니토바 주 위니펙으로 이민을 가셨습니다. 저의 부모님은 아직도 전쟁에서 회복 중인 가난한 나라의 가난한 가정에서 온 이민자들이었기 때문에 위니펙에 있는 대부분의 이웃들과 동등한 지위를 유지할 재정적, 문화적, 언어적, 사회적 자원이 없었습니다. 가족도 없고 친구도 거의 없었던 부모님은 부족한 자원 속에서도 큰 희망을 가지고 새로운 나라에서의 삶을 시작했습니다. 이것은 무엇보다도 두 분이 귀중한 두 가지 자원을 가지고 있다고 믿었기 때문에 가능했습니다. 그 자원은 바로 믿음과 그리스도의 몸속에 속한 구성원이라는 것이었습니다. 그런 확신 속에서 부모님은 지역 교회가 자신들의 관계, 공동체, 그리고 가족의 주된 초점이 되어야 하고

nity, and family. Lest anyone romanticize their situation, be assured that by no means were those early years of their immigrant life easy or ideal. The majority of the congregants of their church were ethnically German with cultural assumptions and relational ethics that were as diametric to my parents' values and experiences as one might imagine. However, their shared faith was sufficient for my parents to *know* that they belonged even though they did not always *feel* like they did. In the absence of their biological families and the cultural familiarity they enjoyed in Korea, their chosen family through the church helped bridge some of the gaps that existed in their immigrant life.

idealice su situación, les aseguro que de ninguna manera esos primeros años de su vida como inmigrantes fueron fáciles ni ideales. La mayoría de los feligreses de su iglesia eran de etnia alemana, y como uno podría imaginarse, con unos supuestos culturales y una ética relacional tan diametralmente opuestos a los valores y experiencias de mis padres. Sin embargo, la fe que compartían era suficiente para que mis padres supieran que pertenecían a algo, aunque no siempre se sintieran así. A pesar de la ausencia de sus familias biológicas y de la familiaridad cultural que disfrutaban en Corea, la familia que habían elegido a través de la iglesia les ayudó a cerrar algunas de las brechas que existían en su vida como inmigrantes.

또 그렇게 될 것이라고 믿었습니다. 누구라도 저의 부모님의 경험을 낭만적으로 미화하지 않도록, 저는 이민 생활의 초기 시절이 결코 쉽거나 이상적이지 않았다는 것을 확실히 말씀드리고 싶습니다. 부모님이 다니시던 교회의 대부분의 교인들은 저의 부모님이 가진 가치관과 경험과는 정반대인 문화적 가정(假定)과 관계 윤리를 가진 독일 민족이었습니다. 그럼에도 불구하고 그들과 공유할 수 있었던 믿음은 두 분에게 자신들이 함께 소속되었다는 것을 상기시켜 주기에 충분했습니다. 물론 항상 그렇게 느낀 것은 아니지만 말입니다. 친가족이 없고 한국에서 즐겼던 문화적 친숙함도 없는 상황에서 교회를 통해 부모님이 선택한 가족은 이민 생활에서 존재하는 여러가지 괴리들을 해소하는 데 도움이 되었습니다.

It was in 1976, when we made our final move to Southern California for my father's career and joined an immigrant Korean church, that we experienced what psychologist and family therapist Celia Jaes Falicov refers to as "la cultural cura"—the culture that cures. When we were able to be among others who looked, ate, spoke, smelled, thought, wept, and laughed like us, we experienced a deep sense of belonging that was like a healing balm over the wounds of grief and loss that are common in immigrant narratives. We did not have any biological extended family in the United States and thus the Korean church became our extended family. This time we knew and felt like we belonged. I

Fue en 1976, cuando nos trasladamos definitivamente al sur de California por la carrera de mi padre y nos unimos a una iglesia coreana de inmigrantes, cuando experimentamos lo que la psicóloga y terapeuta familiar Celia Jaes Falicov denomina "la cultura que cura". Cuando pudimos estar entre otras personas que se parecían, comían, hablaban, olían, pensaban, lloraban y se reían como nosotros, experimentamos un profundo sentimiento de pertenencia que fue como un bálsamo curativo que cubrió las heridas de dolor y pérdida que son comunes en los relatos de los inmigrantes. Como no teníamos familia biológica en los Estados Unidos, la iglesia coreana se convirtió en nuestra familia extendida. Esta vez sabíamos y sentíamos que pertenecíamos. Me crié con cientos de

1976년, 우리는 아버지의 직업을 위해 남가주로 마지막 이주를 하였고 한인 이민자 교회에 다니기 시작했습니다. 그 때 우리는 심리학자이자 가족 치료사인 실리아 제이스 팔리코프(Celia Jaes Falicov)가 말하는 "치유의 문화(la cultural cura)"를 경험했습니다. 우리와 비슷하게 생각하고, 먹고, 말하고, 비슷한 냄새가 나고, 우리처럼 생각하고, 울고, 웃는 사람들과 함께할 수 있을 때, 우리는 이민자들의 이야기에서 흔히 볼 수 있는 슬픔과 상실의 상처를 치유하는 향유 같은 깊은 소속감을 경험했습니다. 미국에서는 생물학적 확대 가족이 없었기 때문에 한인 교회가 우리에게게는 확대 가족이 되었습니다. 비로소 우리는 우리가 소속되었다는 것을 알았고 또 그렇게 느꼈습니다. 저는 수백 명의 이모, 삼촌, 조부

grew up with hundreds of aunts, uncles, and grandparents whom I never knew by name but rather by their honorific, familial titles such as halmoni (grandmother) and halaboji (grandfather). My experience growing up in the Korean church was my first lesson about how conceptually agile we need to be when we define family. Who we consider to be family, how we tolerate the tension of uncertainty and pain, and how we remain open to growth and learning within our families is informed by a myriad of factors including our diverse lived experiences and cultural norms.

In this family-themed issue, readers are challenged to expand their conceptualization of

tías, tíos y abuelos a los que nunca conocí por su nombre, sino por sus títulos honoríficos y familiares, como halmoni (abuela) y halaboji (abuelo). La experiencia de crecer en la iglesia coreana fue mi primera lección sobre la agilidad conceptual que debemos tener a la hora de definir la familia. A quiénes consideramos como familia, de qué manera toleramos la tensión de la incertidumbre y el dolor, y cómo nos mantenemos abiertos al crecimiento y el aprendizaje dentro de nuestras familias depende de un sinfín de factores, incluyendo nuestras diversas experiencias vividas y normas culturales.

En esta edición dedicada a la familia, los lectores son desafiados a ampliar su conceptualización de la familia de diversas

maneras, por ejemplo, teniendo en cuenta que las familias de elección son tan legítimas como las familias de nacimiento. Esta edición también explora la noción de la iglesia como un sistema familiar, invitándonos a aplicar los principios de la dinámica familiar—tales como la dinámica de conflicto y los recursos de resiliencia—como una forma de comprender y abordar tanto los retos relacionales como las oportunidades dentro de las iglesias. Una y otra vez, los colaboradores también emplean la Biblia como brújula para redirigir a los lectores tanto hacia las bendiciones como hacia los retos de la familia. Las lecciones e historias descritas en esta edición ejemplifican la verdad de que las relaciones son los crisoles del cambio, y esto es especialmente cierto en las relaciones familiares. ■

가족을 주제로 한 이번 풀러 매거진을 통해 독자들은 다양한 방식으로 가족의 개념을 확장하도록 도전받을 것입니다. 그 중 한가지는 선택한 가

family in a number of ways, such as considering families of choice to be as meaningfully legitimate as families of birth. This issue also explores the notion of the church as a family system, bidding us to apply principles of family dynamics—such as conflict dynamics and resiliency resources—as a way to understand and engage with both relational challenges and opportunities within churches. Time and again, contributors also employ the Bible as a compass to redirect readers to both the blessings and the challenges of family. The lessons and stories described throughout this issue exemplify the truism that relationships are the crucibles for change, and this is particularly true in family relationships and how we define them. ■

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족을 출생 가족만큼 의미 있고 합당한 것으로 여기는 것입니다. 또한 이번 매거진은 가족 체계로서의 교회의 개념을 탐구합니다. 우리가 교회 내에서 경험하는 관계적 어려움과 기회를 함께 이해하고 이에 적절히 관여할 수 있도록 (예를 들어, 갈등의 연관관계 및 회복을 위한 자원과 같은) 가족 역학의 원칙을 적용할 것입니다. 저자들은 계속해서 성경을 나침반으로 사용함을 통해 독자들이 축복이면서 동시에 어려움의 대상인 가족을 향하여 방향을 되돌리도록 도와줄 것입니다. 매거진 전반에 걸쳐 소개된 교훈과 이야기들은 관계의 문제가 변화에 결정적이라는 다소 진부한 진리를 매우 구체적인 모습으로 예측해 줄 것입니다. 특히 이것은 가족 관계에서 더욱 그러하다는 것을 일깨워줄 것입니다. ■



FAMILY IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK: THE COSTS AND REWARDS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Chris Blumhofer

Chris Blumhofer is associate professor of New Testament. He completed his PhD at Duke University in 2017, focusing his research on the significance of John's engagement with the Old Testament and Jewish traditions. Outside of his work on John, Dr. Blumhofer's interests include theological interpretation of Scripture, the Synoptic Gospels, and the relationship of Christianity to Judaism. Dr. Blumhofer is the recipient of several scholarships and grants, and has presented at various conferences on topics related to the New Testament. He coauthored, with Richard Hays, the chapter "The Canonical Matrix of the Gospels" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels*. He is a member of the Society of Biblical Literature and ordained as a Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

In a 2012 opinion essay in the *New York Times*, Stephanie Coontz, then one of the foremost researchers on the family in contemporary society, observed the irony of American politicians citing the Christian faith as a defender of "family values." "In fact," she wrote, "a radical antifamily ideology permeates Christ's teaching, and the early Christian tradition often set faith and family against each other."¹ To make the case, Coontz cited how Jesus calls his disciples to leave their families. She also noted Paul's own preference for people to remain unmarried.² Coontz is not alone in such observations. Biblical scholars often encounter descriptions of Jesus "relativizing" or "destabilizing" ancient expectations around family. One of the strongest statements about how the teachings of Jesus challenge natural family relationships was offered by the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, who saw with clarity the fundamental reorientation of identity and loyalty that Jesus requires of his followers. Kierkegaard wrote:

To become a Christian in the New Testament sense is such a radical change that, humanly speaking, one must say that it is the heaviest trial to a family that one of its members becomes a Christian. For in such a Christian the God-relationship becomes so predominant that he is not "lost" in the ordinary sense of the word; no, in a far deeper sense than dying, he is lost to everything that is called family.³

With testimonies such as these, we might wonder how Jesus and his followers ever came to be presented as champions of the family!

In fact, the New Testament consistently portrays family as both a potential stumbling block to faith and a promising setting

for lives that are faithful to the gospel. The teachings of Jesus challenge conventional assumptions about family and simultaneously lay the groundwork for a new concept of family marked by discipleship. In this article, we'll consider how these challenges and revisions are present in our earliest record of Jesus' life and ministry, the Gospel according to Mark.

Jesus' Family: Whoever Does the Will of God

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke both portray Jesus as the child of parents who were remarkably faithful. In contrast, the Gospel of Mark omits this backstory. Jesus enters the narrative unattached—defined entirely by his relation to God (1:1, 11) and his mission of announcing God's kingdom (1:14–15). The first appearance of Jesus' biological family occurs in Mark 3:20–21. Jesus is attracting crowds, and his family appears on the scene trying "to seize him" because "they were saying, 'He is out of his mind.'" In Greek, it is unclear if it is Jesus' family who holds the opinion that he is crazy or if Jesus' family has simply heard the slander about Jesus that is circulating among others. Either way, the family of Jesus appears on the scene first with the

aim of curtailing his mission. This is not a promising introduction to Jesus' family.

What follows in Mark 3 is a teaching that can only be taken as a warning: Scribes from Jerusalem come with a different slander. They are not saying that Jesus is crazy; instead, they claim he is demon possessed (v. 22). With this willful misinterpretation of Jesus' ministry, the scribes are dangerously close to blaspheming the Spirit of God (vv. 28–30). Now Jesus' family returns. Like a good playwright, Mark positions all the characters with care. We can see the scene with our mind's eye: Jesus is inside a house. He is seated, teaching women and men, who form a circle around him. Someone enters with a report: "Teacher, your mother and brothers are outside seeking you" (3:32). Of course, all would expect Jesus to receive his kin, to go to them or let them in. But Jesus does not break the circle. Instead, he asks a question: "Who are my mother and brothers?" Then he looks around him at those in the circle and makes an astonishing declaration: "Behold, my mother and brothers! For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (v. 35). In the space of a few sentences, Mark shows Jesus radically redefining family around the will of God. Jesus' biological family (mother and brothers) and his religious

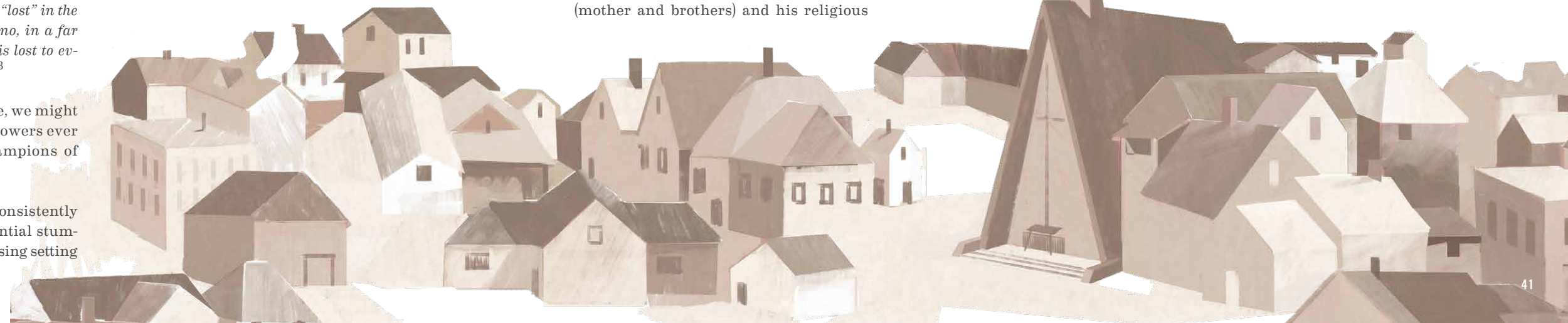
family (the scribes) are not only physically outside and separated from him, they are relationally outside as well. The way "in" is through commitment to the message of the gospel—the kingdom of God that has come near and that Jesus and his followers proclaim and enact.⁴

Further, Jesus' family is no help to his reputation when he travels to Nazareth in Mark 6. There, in his hometown, the crowds take offense at Jesus, essentially saying, "We know this man's family. How could the son of the carpenter, of Mary . . . how could the brother of James, Joses, Judas, Simon, and his sisters . . . how could someone from *this family* proclaim *this message*?" Jesus makes no effort to recover family ties. Instead, he sees family alienation as a corollary to his calling: "A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown, among his kin, and in his home" (6:4). Later in the Gospel, when the women who followed Jesus observe

his crucifixion from afar, we read that "Mary, the mother of James the younger and Joses," belonged to this group (15:40, 47; 16:1). All signs point to this being Mary, the mother of Jesus (6:3). But Mark does not designate her as Jesus' mother. Mark does not admit Mary any special claim on her son.⁵ In Mark's worldview, the position of Jesus' mother belongs to one who does the will of God (3:35).

Loyalty to Jesus and the Division of Families

Mark's ambivalence about family exists in other elements of the Gospel, too. James and John respond to the call to discipleship by leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with hired hands (1:20). Peter looks back at the high cost of the decision that he and the other disciples have made: "Look," he says to Jesus, "we have left everything to follow you" (10:18). Surely this "everything" includes family because Jesus' subsequent teaching focuses on the cost of discipleship in relation to the household: "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children[!] or fields for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and



fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life” (10:29–30).

Discipleship has the power both to dissolve natural family ties and to reestablish them through the bond of the kingdom. In fact, the whole of Mark 10 has been interpreted as a “household code” for followers of Jesus: first addressing marriage (10:1–12), then children (they are model disciples; vv. 13–16), the possessions of the household and its boundaries (vv. 17–31), and finally the role of slaves (the most prominent members of Jesus’ family are called to be servants; vv. 32–45).⁶ The hierarchy of the ancient family is radically upended in the family of Jesus, in which humble service is the criterion for the exercise of authority.⁷

When we take these points together, we see that Mark recognizes the enormous, painful cost that the kingdom of God can introduce into a family. Pledging allegiance to Jesus and his message entails renouncing all other claims to identity and loyalty. The reorientation of a life around Jesus can dissolve the relationships within a biological family. Jesus recognizes this cost

in the searing prediction he makes about the troubles his disciples will experience: “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise up against their parents and will put them to death” (13:12).

Jesus’ Father and the Family of Believers

In the ancient world, the figure of the father traditionally defined the family and the household. It is not a coincidence then that the familial language which Mark is most comfortable using is “Son” and that, in Mark, the “Father” is God in heaven. It is Israel’s God, Jesus’ Father, who claims Jesus as his “son” both at his baptism and on the mountain of the transfiguration (1:11; 9:6; cf. 1:1). Jesus pours out his lament before God in Gethsemane, addressing his “Abba, Father” (14:36). When Jesus dies, the centurion rightly exclaims, “Truly this man was God’s son” (15:39). The new family that sits in a circle around Jesus contains mothers, sisters, and brothers, but no human father. Those who have left houses, families (including fathers), and fields receive back all

of those things, except they do not receive back fathers (10:29–30). For disciples, the Father is always God in heaven.

Jesus is the son and the brother of those who have come to entrust themselves to him and follow after him. This is the family that Jesus establishes. It is a family defined not by blood or marriage but by faith and discipleship. It includes tax collectors and sinners, men and women, fishermen, a zealot, and no small number of ordinary folk—some related by blood, but not most. The relationship that creates and defines this family is their belonging to the same Father and their commitment and obedience to the Father’s will (3:35; 14:36).

The Natural Family and the Kingdom of God

The points above trace the enormous pressure that loyalty to Jesus and the kingdom puts on traditional family relationships. This loyalty undercuts the presupposition of family hierarchy and stability that would have been assumed within ancient Jewish society—as they

still are in many societies. In the tension between honoring father and mother and following Jesus, Jesus wins every time. Yet this survey of family in Mark would be incomplete if it did not mention the Gospel narrative’s consistent positive engagement with family relationships. A remarkable number of interactions show Jesus engaging with the realities of family life without engendering conflict.

As we’ve noted, James and John leave their father in the boat (1:20), but the Gospel does not highlight their ongoing estrangement from their family. Simon and Andrew respond to Jesus’ call in 1:16, but, before long, we see Jesus in Simon’s house, healing his mother-in-law (1:29–31). Instead of dividing Simon’s natural family, faith in Jesus and the kingdom he announces seems to have begun to define it. In Mark 5, a man is healed from a brutal demonic possession that caused him to live in isolation among tombs. After he is healed, the man begs to join Jesus on his mission. Instead, Jesus gives him a different vocation: “Go to your home, to your people, and report all that the Lord has done for you and how he

has shown you mercy” (5:19). It should not be lost on us that, in this family that had been torn apart by a demon, the requirement of discipleship for this man was not an enthusiastic adventure with Jesus in a distant land but a return to home and a command to herald the mercy of the Lord in that home and among neighbors.

Families offer the context for some of our most significant visions of the kingdom’s power and lessons about what it means to entrust oneself to Jesus. Jairus is called to faith, even in the shadow of death, as he pleads with Jesus for the life of his daughter (5:21–43). The Syrophenician woman is a mother acting alone; she too pleads for the healing of her daughter, and her interaction with Jesus calls forth a daring faith that Jesus affirms (7:24–30). Another desperate father intercedes with Jesus for his boy who is possessed and often throws himself into a fire (9:14–29). In these scenes, parents experiencing desperate fear and heartbreak for their children are summoned to faith and prayer.

In Mark 7, some Pharisees criticize Jesus for being lax in his commitment to purity. Jesus returns a scathing indictment: “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your ‘tradition!’” His case-in-point is a Pharisaic practice that allows a man to take money that should be used to support aging parents and to devote it instead to God. (Imagine tithing your savings rather than supporting your aging parents!) The tradition makes a person choose between honoring parents and devotion to God. Jesus sees the financial support of dependent parents as implicit in the command to “honor your father and mother” (7:1–13). A few chapters later, in Mark 10:1–12, Pharisees ask Jesus if he permits divorce. Again,

on the basis of the Old Testament—“the two shall become one flesh”—Jesus affirms the marital relationship, that is, the relationship that is central to family. In 10:17, the rich man asks what he must do to inherit eternal life, and among the commandments that lead to life is, again, the fifth commandment: “Honor your father and mother.” If this is an antifamily ideology, it is surely a strange one!

Instead of being “for” or “against” family, our survey of Mark offers a complex picture of how Jesus and his message of the kingdom relate to the topic of family. As pastors, therapists, teachers, leaders, and, of course, people who live in some kind of “family,” we should consider three threads that run through Mark’s portrayal:

1. Commitment to Jesus and his redemptive mission ushers a person into a new identity. This identity is primary and definitive. For the church that Mark knew, it was more common for a person’s faith in Jesus to rupture a family than to restore it. Mark does not celebrate this but does acknowledge it.

Mark holds that whether or not a person is alienated from natural family by faith in Jesus, disciples of Jesus relate to everyone and everything *through Jesus*. The call of discipleship is stronger than the bonds of any human family. It was with a deep awareness of the pastoral, psychological, and political reorientation that discipleship entails that Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “Christ the mediator stands between son and father, between husband and wife, between individual and the nation . . . *There is no way from us to others than the path through Christ, his word, and our following him.*”⁸



Importantly, just as Jesus claims a person's primary loyalty, he also unites his followers to one another, particularly by establishing the new family of God.

2. In God's household and the family of Jesus, God is our Father, and Jesus is our elder brother. Believers are brothers, sisters, and mothers to one another. This new identity in the family is one of the great gifts of the Christian life. The family surrounding Jesus is the "hundredfold" blessing that we receive in exchange for all that our discipleship calls us to renounce and the persecutions that accompany it. Life in this new family is not perfect. Jesus' first disciples were not immune from rivalry or betrayal. What defines this family is fellowship with Jesus and a life characterized by forgiveness and a striving toward selfless service (11:25; 10:41–45). Mark's view of family should summon all of us to embrace our identities as sisters, brothers, and mothers in the faith. In many churches, people refer to one another as "brother,"

"sister," "aunt," or "uncle." May we all grow more fluent in using such language in the family of God!

3. Discipleship to Jesus includes a particular call on natural family relationships. That is, discipleship revises and refines the relationships within a family. The poignant image from Mark 5 of the demon-possessed man *being restored* to his house offers a vision of discipleship coming to bear on natural family relations by making the mercy of God the experience from which a believer approaches family life. Jesus' repeated quotation of the Old Testament in support of holding together marriages and of honoring parents means that the common (and complex!) relationships within a natural family are the site where many believers are called to express the love of God and neighbor, and where power is to be channeled into humble service. Our natural families—like our spiritual family—will invariably fall short of the ideal. Jesus faces this reality directly when he repeatedly models the centrality of

prayer and forgiveness in the life of his followers (11:25; 14:36). The natural and the spiritual family are sustained by prayer and forgiveness.

In the end, Kierkegaard was correct: discipleship to Jesus puts an enormous strain on the natural family. In many times and places, disciples have lost one family and have experienced the hundredfold blessing of the family of God. For those who are still embedded in a natural family, however, discipleship is not the end of the matter. The family is the site where believers live out their faith and their service. It is where they are challenged most sincerely to let Christ mediate all of their relationships. It is where they earnestly seek forgiveness. It is where they suffer their deepest griefs, and it funds their most heartfelt prayers. ■

ENDNOTES

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2. Though, of course, Paul concedes marriage, and by implication family, as a faithful form of life (1 Corinthians 7).
3. S. Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon Christendom*, trans. W. Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 221.
4. On this point, see S. P. Ahearne-Kroll, "'Who Are My Mother and My Brothers?': Family Relations and Family Language in the Gospel of Mark," *Journal of Religion* 81, no. 1 (2001): 13–14. For an in-depth consideration, see N. F. Santos, *Family Relations in the Gospel of Mark* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2021).
5. Compare here John 19:25–27. See also K. Poetker, "Domestic Domains in the Gospel of Mark," *Direction* 24, no. 1 (1995): 16.
6. K. Mills, "Family and Anti-Family in the Gospel of Mark," *Lutheran Forum*, Spring 2018: 23–26.
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WHEN ROLE EATS SOUL: THE SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF THE PASTOR'S FAMILY

Cameron Lee

In her youth, Anne Jackson vowed never to enter full-time ministry. She had grown up in a pastor's family and seen firsthand how the congregation had mistreated her father, witnessing the verbal abuse he suffered from people they'd counted as their brothers and sisters. Her father resigned that position and took another with a church that seemed much healthier.

But three years into the new position, another crisis loomed. Her father had been encouraging members to share the gospel with their neighbors. An influential faction of the congregation took a stand against this, arguing that he was the one being paid to evangelize the community, not them. To the extent that he taught others to engage in outreach, they insisted, he was shirking his duties. Not long after, at a business meeting, her father read aloud his resignation letter. Some of the church members were shocked. Some defended him and his position on evangelism. His detractors, however, jumped on the opportunity, even threatening his family if he didn't follow through and resign.

The teenaged Anne was at that meeting. Angrily, she stood and interrupted the proceedings. Bible in hand, she chastised them for the un-Christian way they fought all the time. Then she stomped out, slamming the door on a stunned congregation.

Wounded and burned out, her father retired from ministry altogether and tried to find another job. The family rarely went to church anymore. Anne herself was traumatized, and her life spun out of control as she tried various ways to numb her painful emotions. Years later, when she went to hear friends play music at a church, she had what appears to be an anxiety attack:

"The moment I stepped into the church, my heart started pounding and my stomach tightened up into an uncomfortable little ball. I couldn't breathe. I started to sweat."¹

Yet for all this, Anne never entirely gave up on God. She soon found herself working full-time at that church, despite her fear of being hurt all over again. The good news was that she loved the work and threw herself into it. The bad news was that after a year, she was physically exhausted and spiritually dry. In her own words, she would have to learn for herself the difference between "spending time with God" and "spending time doing things *for* God."²

If the ministry literature is any indication, she was not alone in needing to learn that lesson. Pastors must tend to their own spiritual lives and maintain the vitality of their relationship to God. The ever-present temptation is to substitute doing for being, breadth for depth, scurrying about trying to keep everyone in the congregation happy. This can have negative personal consequences not only for clergy but for their families, who may only get what is left of a pastor's time, energy, and attention at the end of the day. In this article, therefore, I will briefly sketch an overall picture of clergy stress before drawing out implications for the spiritual life of the pastor's family.

Clergy Stress and Burnout

By now, it is commonplace to recognize that congregations demand much of their leaders, and that burnout and emotional exhaustion threaten when the demands are not managed well. There can be ongoing tension between a pastor's own developing sense of vocation and the congregation's





expectations of what the pastor “should” do, as well as contradictory expectations within the congregation itself. Clergy must wear many hats, being thrust into a variety of roles for which they may have received little to no training. They may have been taught to exegete Scripture, for example, but not how to manage staff; they may preach with passion but feel lost when trying to navigate conflict.

Congregational conflict, unfortunately, is distressingly common. In one study, only one-fifth of pastors surveyed reported that their churches had been conflict-free for the past six months. A full 61 percent, however, reported some minor conflict, while an additional 19 percent reported major conflict—and nearly half of the latter cases resulted in the departure of church members or staff.³ If such numbers are at all representative, then some congregational conflict is the norm rather than the exception. It should not be surprising, then, that many pastors struggle with exhaustion, burnout, and their mental and spiritual health.⁴

When there is a long and ever-growing list of things to do for God and the church, clergy may let their personal relationship with God atrophy. As one pastor put it, “We cannot assume because of the position we’re holding that we’re connected to God.”⁵ As Donald R. Hands and Wayne L. Fehr write,

The alienation from God is concealed by the cleric’s immersion in “the things of God”—teaching, preaching, visiting the sick, praying with others, presiding at liturgy. While sincere, this kind of activity can coexist with an almost complete absence of private, personal presence to God.⁶

Unfortunately, as reported by the Barna Group, 44 percent of pastors find it at least “somewhat difficult” to find time for their own spiritual development, while an additional 9 percent find it “very difficult.”⁷ Roughly half of pastors, it seems, struggle in this arena.

Like Jackson, Ruth Haley Barton is another pastor’s kid who found herself in ministry as an adult and on the edge of burnout. In an unguarded moment with a friend, she was surprised to hear herself say, “I’m tired of helping other people enjoy God; I just want to enjoy God for myself.”⁸ Similarly, Barbara Brown Taylor laments that before she left the parish ministry, she had “become so busy caring for the household of God that I neglected the One who had called me there. . . . As long as I fed them, I did not feel my hunger pains.”⁹ Or put even more pithily: “My role and my soul were eating each other alive.”¹⁰

Caring for the needs of a congregation and helping them grow in their relationship with God: this is good and holy work. Yet the work, while important and deeply rewarding, can also be endlessly demanding, particularly when clergy and their congregations have not established realistic expectations, appropriate boundaries, and a shared vision of collaborating in Christ. The demands can take a toll on the minister’s physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. As we’ll see, they can also take a toll on the well-being of the pastor’s family.

External Pressures on Clergy Families

Much more has been written about pastors than about their families, so the empirical research on pastors’ kids (often known as “PKs”) is sparse compared to that on pastors. Still, several PKs have written of

the challenges of growing up in a minister’s home.

Some pastors manage the pressures of ministry relatively well, to the benefit of their families. Many PKs, however, complain that their needs end up taking a back seat to the needs of church members:

At times I didn’t feel as important as the ministry. The main reason is the time commitment. Most “ministry” occurs in the evenings and on weekends when the family has the most available time to be together. All ministry is supposedly of God and seems more important than family commitments (the family will “understand”).¹¹

The children do, in fact, understand. They know that ministry is important, and that it requires much of their parents’ time and energy. What they need emotionally, however, is to know concretely that they are cherished and valued. Parents need to help their children feel loved and supported.

In a demanding ministry environment, then, it is important for parents to set firm but flexible boundaries that protect time together as a family. As one grateful PK told me,

Although Dad’s schedule was extremely busy, he always took time for us—a day off a week, if at all possible, for family times. Also, no matter what the schedule, we always met for dinner as a family—this continued through our teen years.¹²

For their part, many pastors recognize the need for such boundaries, as the following comments from pastors suggest:

“I fear losing my family because I am too busy.”



“If I did everything I needed to do for the church, I’d wind up divorced—on grounds of abandonment.”

“I need to learn how to better structure my time so I can accomplish more for the kingdom and spend more time with my family—making sure I don’t neglect my own personal growth as a Christian and a leader.”¹³

Clergy also wish that church members would be more respectful of these boundaries:

“I wish my congregation would show more respect for my personal time with my family. That would be a great stress reliever.”

“I wish my congregation realized that all of my life doesn’t center around the church, but instead, I work toward a time balance between God, family, marriage, kids, church, self, and community.”¹⁴

Congregations, however, may need help recognizing and accepting the need for such balance. This is particularly true when the shared church subculture strongly emphasizes sacrificial service and implicitly or explicitly accords greater status or honor to those who give their all, even to the detriment of their personal well-being or that of their families. Pastors in such environments should do more than merely advocate for appropriate boundaries for themselves and their own families; they should advocate for what all families in the church need to thrive.

Internal Pressures on Clergy Families

The challenge of ministry is not merely about time demands and external pressure from the congregation. The challenge is also internal. People pursue ministry

careers for a variety of reasons. The theologically or ecclesiastically correct reason is that they sense a “call” from God—though the nature and evidence of that call may vary from tradition to tradition. Such a calling, however, is not easily separated from the more self-serving reasons that motivate ministry involvement. Sadly, as recent highly publicized church scandals have shown, this can sometimes take the form of narcissistic abuses of power.¹⁵ But other, less extreme expressions of narcissistic need are common to many who enter the pastorate. We need to be needed, to be admired, to be told that we are doing great things for God (even as we point heavenward in a gesture of humility).

Some pastors are busy, in other words, not merely because there are so many things to do but also because they need to be busy to drown out the internal chatter of shame, inadequacy, or failure. To some extent, of course, everyone relishes admiration and fears criticism; everyone wants to be liked and to believe that their lives have significance. But to echo Taylor, the public nature of the pastor’s role can begin to cannibalize the soul. Churches want pastors who project confident, impressive exteriors, giving pastors ample reason to play the part and mask whatever drama may be occurring at home. As one PK lamented:

My father preached from the pulpit about love and respect and then came home and hurt us. My mother wanted perfect children who were no trouble. My dad was also an alcoholic. People saw him as the most wonderful minister there ever was. At home, he was drunk, sometimes maudlin, often abusive. Mother did not protect us.¹⁶

This is the even darker counterpart to Jackson’s story. On the one hand, PKs may

struggle to make sense of the bad behavior of congregations. On the other hand, however, the bad behavior and hypocrisy aren’t just “out there” in the congregation—they can be “in here,” within the pastor’s family itself.

Children are always trying to make sense of their world. Imagine what the ministry environment and congregational relationships look like from a child’s point of view. Imagine the questions, and sometimes the confusion. What do you do when you hear the gospel preached but don’t see it lived? Ideally, you would go to your parents so they could help you figure it out. But what if your parents also felt the need to keep up appearances? What if you had internalized the message that you shouldn’t make waves or speak inconvenient truths, lest you be shunned? Where do you go, and to whom do you turn? And what becomes of your own spiritual development, your perception of God and the church?

The Spiritual and Emotional Needs of Clergy Families

Pastors need to be attuned to the spiritual and emotional needs of every member of their family, including themselves. Their own personal spiritual practices not only embody their devotion but support their resilience to stress and burnout.¹⁷ For the children growing up in a pastor’s home, such practices model discipleship and lay a foundation for the PK’s own spiritual life.

Spiritual needs, however, cannot be neatly separated from other social and emotional needs. While that is true of any family, the additional challenge for pastors’ families is the push and pull between role and soul. To be clear, it is not always a matter of hypocrisy. Sometimes, for example, the ministerial

role can colonize the parental one in ways that unintentionally skew the PK’s spiritual development:

My father would occasionally take us into his room when we were being bad and would make us read passages from the Bible, ones that usually applied to lying or fighting or cleanliness or temper. . . . That really bothered me and gave me some negative feelings toward Bible reading. If all the Bible did was condemn, then I wasn’t interested.¹⁸

PKs don’t want to be preached at, as if they were just recalcitrant parishioners in need of pastoral correction. They want their parents to be parents first, pastors second.

In church and at home, PKs witness things that have direct bearing on the steadiness and authenticity of their faith. In the face of hypocrisy or even trauma, pastors’ children need help making sense of what has happened, and its implications for what everyone says they believe. At stake, potentially, is the conviction that God is good or the gospel is trustworthy.

For pastors, an attuned sensitivity to the spiritual and emotional needs of their children may require some honest self-examination. To that end, I offer the following list of questions for pastors to consider prayerfully:

- *How depleted are you, physically, spiritually, and emotionally?* Exhaustion makes you less available to your family, not just with respect to time, but also energy and attention.
- *What boundaries do you need to protect your ability to be fully present to your family?* Both *quality* time and *quantity* of time are needed to keep family relationships strong: intimacy and together-

ness aren’t established on a hit-and-run basis. Remember that the same is true of all the families in your church, so consider how to establish this as a shared value in the congregation.

- *How comfortable are you dealing with conflict or dissension?* The path of least resistance is often to lay low or give in, to “keep the peace,” even if it compromises deeply held values. This is playing a role at the expense of the soul, and such “peace” is both illusory and temporary.
- *How do you understand your own pastoral vocation, especially with respect to how you are supposed to handle conflict?* This is an extension of the previous question. As some ministry experts have suggested, many pastors believe that it is their job to keep people happy, to help them in whatever way possible to avoid anxiety and discomfort.¹⁹ But such a belief, coupled with a personal need to be needed, liked, or admired, is more likely to result in the hypocrisy of being nice to church members while complaining about them in the privacy of your home.
- *To what extent are you willing to listen fully and compassionately to your children when they say things about the ministry that stir your own anxiety?* This is where trustworthiness is built. You don’t have to have all the answers. What matters is that you



show that you understand and empathize, and are willing to keep talking and exploring even as you wrestle to make sense of things yourself.

The tension between role and soul is typical to the ministry environment, and the children growing up in that environment are watching to see how their parents deal with that tension. They will form their own perceptions of what is real and what is not, of whether the faith has substance or is more of a high-stakes social game. If allowed, they may have hard truths to speak. For the sake of their spiritual development, someone needs to listen. ■

ENDNOTES

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11. Quoted in C. Lee, *PK: Helping Pastors' Kids through Their Identity Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 131.

12. *Ibid.*, 128.
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15. See, e.g., C. DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020); D. Puls, *Let Us Prey: The Plague of Narcissist Pastors and What We Can Do About It* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020).
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19. E.g., E. H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2017); W. L. Menking, *When All Else Fails: Rethinking Our Pastoral Vocation in Times of Stuck* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013).



A FAMILY WEATHERING THE STORMS

J. Derek McNeil

I was recently reminded by a friend that “healing” can come from exploring your family’s story. As a genealogist, she is trained to document the stories of people’s lives, tracking their twists and turns back through time as they navigate life. Unlike psychologists, trained to look first for pathology, she pursues stories of linkage and connection across a family’s movement through time. These explorations can reveal a family’s best moments and their worst, but there is still something powerful about knowing where you come from, who you come from, and what they have come through. Growing up, my parents talked about the Great Depression (1929–1939) and what their families did to find work and survive as African Americans living in the South. They weren’t always forthcoming about this period in their lives, but with some probing, they would share stories that helped me make meaning of what they had come through and who they had become.

My father had a few hoarding habits that I thought were quite strange until I better understood the impact the Depression had on him. His family was poor, and he learned to save almost everything that held any possibility of reuse. It should be no surprise, then, that his stories of lack often followed our childhood attempts to persuade him that we needed some new thing that other kids around us were getting.

My mother’s stories of her family were also of struggle and persistence. After losing his wife in childbirth (1925), my maternal grandfather joined with his mother, a widow, to form a multigenerational household to care for his three children. As the Depression took hold, he left Tennessee, traveling north to pursue work.

Shortly after leaving, tragedy struck again when his mother died and left him to raise three children alone. The oldest was my mother, who was only seven years old at the time. Forced to grow up quickly, she became the maternal figure for her two younger siblings. As an adult with her own three children, there were times this child of seven years re-emerged, orphaned and anxious. There were other times she arrived playful and silly. We, as her children, adapted to her quirks and her giftedness, but these unique aspects of her are now the stories my siblings and I tell.

I didn’t know it at the time, but my parents were rehearsing the stories and myths of survival, resilience, thriving, and faith. I’m sure my parents’ first purpose was to temper our expectations, but they also shaped our ability to engage the unfairness of Black life and still hold in our bodies a knowing that G-d loved us.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most challenging and disruptive events on family relations and individual well-being in many decades. Unfortunately, this pandemic hit us when health issues—particularly those often called “deaths of despair”—were already on the rise. The polarized political environment, economic uncertainty, and racial tensions worsened. And this storm further exposed our institutional weaknesses, eroded familial resources, destabilized the work world, and overwhelmed our bodies with stress-induced hormones.

Froma Walsh believed that family “resilience was forged through adversity, not despite it.”¹ However, there is a point when coping strategies are overwhelmed, and families can no longer effectively adapt, fragmenting in the face of failing institutions.

Pandemics have complicated recovery periods. Like a tornado striking a town, they leave destruction and turmoil in their wake. Clearing the storm damage and rebuilding takes time. This pandemic is no different, as we’re likely to linger in this later stage of COVID for a while, weathering more strains and slowly coming to realize the long-term damage. Major medical, cultural, and social events can rip through family systems, shaping and reshaping them in powerful ways, straining bonds and leaving families more fragile. However, this can also be a moment in a family’s story to rebound and overcome the crisis.

I feel quite fortunate that during the pandemic my connections with my sister and brother have grown. We’ve recommitted to regular Zoom and phone calls, and we’ve recommitted to sharing our stories. This has been such a gift to me—knowing they are there and learning what has shaped life for them. It’s not unusual for us to spend the first minutes catching up on the current challenges and then the next twenty laughing about memories of growing up in the same household reinterpreted from three different points of view. We always end our time in prayer, a legacy from the people who came before us. As my brother says, “We don’t pray like they prayed. They made things happen when they prayed.” The laughter and joy of remembering are surprisingly soothing, and the prayer at the end is reaffirming and grounding, but the stories hold us together and allow us to weather the storm.

As their adult children, we eventually fall into three generational stories about “the parents”—stories of their shaping and limitations that often reveal our own wounds and blessings. Our parents’ stories hold gener-

ations of cultural learning, some from failure, but most from their stubborn persistence to make life meaningful for their children. In turn, we tell our stories, repeat their stories, and weave in our children’s stories, creating another generation of stories, a recursive dance of family resilience.

Now, as I reflect on these stories, I see them as woven threads adding to the oral history of a Black family that always had to weather difficult circumstances in challenging times. Ours was not a collective story of increased status, nobility, or conquest, but a persistent testimony of the hope we have in a G-d who can make all things new. In a season of cultural disruption and change, we do need to look back to look forward. We must learn again how to draw on family legacies to help us navigate the current cultural realities. ■

ENDNOTES

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ECCLESIAL FAMILIES AS PROTECTIVE AND HEALING COMMUNITIES FOR CHILDREN AT RISK: LESSONS FROM THE LETTER TO PHILEMON

Cara Pfeiffer

Children at risk often grow up in contexts of toxic stress, where their family members can come to a point of near or complete absence in their lives. Children can be left physically alone by caregivers who die or who are overwhelmed by the grind of responsibility, or children can be left psychologically alone in the wake of abuse, neglect, or vicarious trauma. Whatever the reason, when children are left to experience the toxic stress of their environments without reliably supportive relationships, their stress regulation systems can become overwhelmed and they can experience a host of deleterious outcomes. Thankfully, while the role of biological family is critically important in promoting healthy childhood development, other community members can successfully play that protective role of family as well.

As neuroendocrinologist Bruce McEwan explains, “supportive relationships,” even with non-family members, can help create a buffer between the child and their stressors so that the child’s stressors go from being “toxic” to “tolerable.”¹ In this way, McEwan’s research can offer guidance to churches wishing to participate in mission to, for, and with children at risk. What children at risk need more than anything are supportive people who are willing to “wrap around them”²—and, ideally, their families—with compassionate presence, as extended family would in a healthy family system. Put differently, what children at risk need from the church is for the church to be family to them in real and practical ways. Such a role should be natural for the church, since the New Testament describes the church with a variety of familial metaphors. But what does it mean for the church to be family today?

The New Testament authors do not say the church is “family” in a singular way. Rather, they define proper relationships within the church with a host of contextually situated familial metaphors. Some of the familial metaphors used in the New Testament include brotherhood and sisterhood (e.g., Matt 12:46–50; Acts 11:12), adoption (e.g., Rom 8:15; Gal 4:5), fatherhood (e.g., Phlm 10), motherhood (e.g., Gal 4:19–20), heirs (e.g., Gal 3:29; 1 Pet 3:7), joint-heirs (e.g., Rom 8:17), and members of the same household (e.g., Gal 6:10, Eph 2:19). In speaking in such ways, the authors drew from people’s lived experience of family to express to the ecclesial community the new ethical commitments that were required of them as Christ followers. Moreover, though there was flexibility in the metaphors, the idea always remained the same: people within the church community had a responsibility to live lovingly and sacrificially toward one another in real and practical ways now that they were bound together as family in Christ. As a result, old, exclusive ways of relating to one another based on gender, class, ethnicity—and, I would add, age—were no longer to apply. In Christ’s family, every member has been leveled by Jesus’ work on the cross, every member has value and purpose, and every member owes one another a continuing debt of love.

Yet notionally accepting this idea of the church as family and actually behaving as a healthy family system within which children can develop well are two different matters. In what follows, I would like to explore lessons that the very practical letter to Philemon, which is packed with familial language, might offer us regarding the kind of ecclesial families we need to become if we want to offer healing spaces to the children at risk in our midst.



Philemon: A Case Study in the Liberative Power of Church as Family

In his letter to Philemon, Paul urges Philemon, a wealthy householder, to make the decision to free his slave Onesimus on the grounds that, through Christ, Onesimus and Philemon should no longer relate as master and slave but as “dearly beloved brothers” (v. 16). According to Paul, Onesimus and Philemon’s connection to Christ required a revision of their former relationship, and that revision was to be more than sentimental. Paul was asking Philemon, in particular, the more socially privileged member of the pair, to engage in the economically costly act of

releasing Onesimus from his responsibilities to Philemon’s household in order that Onesimus might become Paul’s coworker in the gospel.

Throughout the letter, Paul makes his case by weaving together language of self-identification with the more vulnerable Onesimus in tandem with the familial language of brotherhood, childhood, and begetting in order to compel Philemon to recognize the transformed relationship that must be forged between Philemon and Onesimus. Accordingly, Paul asks Philemon to recognize that Onesimus is not only Philemon’s beloved brother but that Onesimus is also Paul’s begotten child and Paul’s own “innards” (v. 20)—that is, his very own self.

In so doing, Paul engages in notable social pressure by making a public and very personal request of Philemon in a letter that would have been read before the entire worshiping community. Moreover, Paul all but assures a favorable response from Philemon by asking Philemon to use his resources to prepare a hospitable welcome for both Onesimus and Paul himself. Nonetheless, throughout, Paul maintains that Philemon must freely choose to release Onesimus rather than being forced into that decision. Paul’s repeated mention of his own “chains” seems to underscore Paul’s identification with the forced slavery of Onesimus over the privileged freedom of Philemon, a freedom that Paul is now asking Philemon to freely give to Onesimus as well.

Looking at the letter to Philemon in this way suggests that, in our fellowships of faith, we are expected to be deeply bonded together in relationships of love in service to the gospel as beloved sisters and brothers in tangibly practical ways that will neces-

sarily be culturally situated but will also break through culturally conditioned social expectations that create barriers to the full and relationally leveled inclusion of more vulnerable members. Such deeply bonded, countercultural relationships will emphasize the relational bondedness of believers together as family in ways that will also involve an expectation of familial care for one another in practical terms. The following recommendations, then, are meant to constructively create some parameters around how ecclesial families might operate, particularly with children at risk in mind.³

Creating Protective and Healing Communities: Lessons from Philemon

First, in Christ’s family, *we are called to voluntarily lay down power and privilege for the sake of our more vulnerable and oppressed family members.* This includes, but is not limited to, children at risk. Within ecclesial families, there is to be no lording it over one another. Even Paul’s own posture toward Philemon displays a new way of relating to others as those compelled by love, not force. As such, ecclesial families must continually consider ways in which power imbalances might still exist within the church and work to reform those areas. For instance, one can imagine how long it might have taken Philemon to stop treating Onesimus as a slave. What changes would Philemon have needed to make, mentally and relationally, in order to treat Onesimus as a dearly beloved brother instead?

We must begin asking ourselves the same questions regarding the vulnerable members in our own community, including children at risk. Namely, how have young people’s marginalization outside of the church remained unchanged within the

church family? Related to this question, Joyce Mercer, in a chapter called, “What Child is This? Religious Ambivalence Toward Children,” identifies a number of North American cultural views of children that have seeped into the North American church in negative ways.⁴ For instance, she writes about how children are often viewed as “innocent” in ways that disempower them by stripping them of their agency; how they are viewed as consumers to be entertained and placated with programs and productions that do not ultimately nourish their souls; and how they are viewed as weak and innately sinful in ways that encourage adults to “[break] the will of children” in controlling and sometimes abusive ways.

Unfortunately, Mercer’s insights merely scratch the surface of ways in which children are marginalized in the broader global context. What of contexts where young girls are being married off as child brides, or where children are being conscripted as soldiers, or where only males or wealthy children can be educated? What oppressive views of children must be pervasive in a context for such practices to exist? Consequently, since the church has a responsibility to set captives free, the church in every locality must pay attention to the plight of children around them and ask searching questions for themselves.

As such, churches would do well to engage in the following queries: What barriers exist in our context that keep children from reaching the fullness of their God-given potential?⁵ What capacity do we as a congregation have to begin chipping away at those barriers? Within our congregations, are young people given space to speak, belong, and act as dearly beloved brothers and sisters? Are we recognizing them as

positive and capable contributors to the ecclesial family? Or are they functionally living at the outskirts of our communities? Would we be willing to flip our ecclesial family practices and resources on their heads in order to place our more vulnerable members at the center? Ultimately, if we view our ecclesial communities as real families, then we have a responsibility to advocate for the well-being of the whole child in the same way biological families are meant to nurture every aspect of a child’s life across the lifespan.

Second, *those who have been recognized as more spiritually mature members of the ecclesial family bear an especially greater responsibility,* as did Paul, to intervene in any out-of-balance relationships with their very selves as they mentor, guide, protect, and patiently walk with diverse parties through situations of conflict or inequity within and without the ecclesial community. Inasmuch as the language of brotherhood levels, Paul’s mediatory posture as Onesimus’s father recognizes the need for spiritually weighty members to assist the ecclesial family in maintaining a healthy balance. This is important when considering the role of children at risk in our ecclesial families. Children must be treated as equals in the family of Christ while also being treated in developmentally appropriate ways. Specifically, children have a developmentally distinct need for protection and guidance, but also, with each stage of development, they offer the church unique, and often overlooked, gifts and abilities.

Resultantly, at a baseline, churches need to take seriously child protection policies within the church, but they must also make space to listen to the voices of children and young people regarding what they feel they need inside and outside of the church.



Children are often intuitive, creative, and willing to share what moves, frustrates, or scares them when they are asked in developmentally appropriate ways. As Paul did with Philemon and Onesimus, those who are leaders in any ecclesial family must make including and responding to the voices and needs of children at risk a critically important task.

Third, *the church’s commitment to the children at risk in their midst cannot remain limited to their lives within the ecclesial family.* Rather, in the same way healthy family systems strive to protect and advocate for their children in every aspect of life, ecclesial families should do the same. This will require ecclesial families to listen to the voices of the children in their midst, to observe their gifts and needs, to advocate for them in and out of the church, and to partner with them as they grow and develop across the lifespan. To this end, children at risk in our midst will need the full resources of the ecclesial family at their disposal, especially for those children who have experienced an array of traumas, abandonments, and losses that

make their lives complexly difficult. In this way, each ecclesial family will have its own resources to offer. Some will have monetary resources, some will be adept at political organization, while others will be creative in the arts. The power of missional approaches to ecclesiology is that no church is meant to be an exact replica of another. Instead, each church is meant to bring the strengths of all its members, children included, together in partnership with the Holy Spirit to engage the distinct needs and assets of their local communities. Maybe a community needs safe spaces for children to gather, and churches have rooms to spare. Maybe low-income children need trauma-counseling, and a church has licensed therapists willing to donate their services. The possibilities are endless when churches are willing to listen to the Spirit while they also listen to children's voices.

Fourth, and related to number three, just as Paul asked Philemon to relinquish the

“economic asset” of Onesimus his slave, *personal resources like money, food, time, and space all matter in ecclesial families.* None of us can greedily withhold ourselves or our resources from those among us who are in need and then continue to be in right relationship with God and the community. In an ecclesial family, community members must be willing to take on the social responsibility normally reserved for biological family to provide a safety net for more vulnerable members of the faith fellowship. Learning to cooperate with resources will very often test the limits of the community, but it will also provide opportunities for creativity, accountability, honesty, collaboration, discipline, discernment, and forgiveness. Despite the potential struggles involved, learning to share resources with one another in community seems to be one of the only pathways through which church communities can exist as more than just metaphorical families.

Fifth, *ecclesial families will naturally put people into the kinds of relationships where their very lives and hearts will become intertwined with the lives and hearts of others.* Such deep bonds naturally open us up to experience the incredible gifts of mutual love, patient endurance, and magnified joy, but conversely, they can also open us up to the potential for pain, frustration, and worry. As such, Paul's reference to his “innards,” and his request that Philemon “refresh” his “innards,” reminds us that being part of an ecclesial family can affect us viscerally. Consequently, we should not be disheartened by the challenges of ecclesial family life, especially when working with children at risk and their many struggles. Instead, as Paul models for us, when we experience brokenness and pain in our familially-bonded fellowships, we must pursue one another in love, in truth, and in community in order to bring an equitable and edifying resolution. Moreover, we must remember that at times there may be need for strong words, community discipline, and the leveraging of social pressure to bring about change, especially if vulnerable members are being excluded. The example of Paul's letter to Philemon provides a model of such an encounter with the hope that the relational depth and committedness of the community can withstand the pain of conflict in order to strengthen the community in new ways.

Finally, within an ecclesial family, *each member has a role to play in the “family business” of partnering together for the sake of the gospel.* Since each community and context is different, each fellowship will have its own take on what the gospel is and on its particular role to play in the gospel work. Yet each member of the ecclesial family should feel that they have more than a superficial role to play in the work of the gospel in their community. This is especially important for children at risk and other vulnerable members who can easily be relegated to the role of needy receivers. Instead, when the habits of the ecclesial family include space to center the voices, experiences, and gifts of people who are often marginalized, the commu-



CHOOSING FAMILY: WHEN BLOOD ISN'T THICKER THAN WATER

Nicole Boymook

The idiom “blood is thicker than water” has always felt constricting. When I was young, my parents often used the phrase when they thought I had given *too much* energy and time to my relationships with my friends. While the phrase has multiple interpretations and possible origins—from a 12th-century German fable to a 3,000-year-old Middle Eastern saying—it is now commonly understood to mean that family bonds and loyalties are more substantial than other relationships outside of the familial structure. But my experience has led me to know that friendships are equally important to my biological family relationships.

I met Brad at a small Bible school in Alberta, Canada, through a mutual love for music, humor, and throwing theme parties. Little did I know, at the time, how much beauty, tears, and fun would stem from our friendship over the next 33 years. Later, when we both found ourselves in South Dakota several years after we started college, we established deep and lasting roots with

Bill, Joy, and Ann, forming what became our “chosen family.” But as 18-year-olds and first-year college students, we couldn't have expected where our friendship would lead us.

The chosen family Brad and I are a part of now consists of six adults, three young adults, and several “first cousins” (other friends who are connected to the entire family). Geography had much to do with the growth and development of our family. Most of us were in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, at the same time for school. Then, one by one, after graduate school, we migrated west to work at a private Christian college in Washington state. Now, we live across the United States and get to be together once or twice a year. Our bond is strong, and we are committed to one another through sickness and health. We have been together through miscarriages, births, job losses, parents' deaths, weddings, and 24 Thanksgiving meals.

Like a birth family, we have rituals and traditions that are

a part of our family norms. For example, we have a Thanksgiving tablecloth where we write, with a permanent marker, what we are thankful for each year. Then, when the tablecloth gets washed, we have a family book where we transcribe what we've written that year. The book includes favorite ridiculous quotes that each of us has said over the years and summaries of the activities and memories we have made. In the past, we sent out a family photo Christmas card that we gave to our birth families and people who know us all. The customs we have constructed add to the richness of who we are as a chosen family.

If it were not for this group of nine people, I would be a different human. They have shaped and stretched me in ways only trusted friends or family could. I am eternally grateful for my chosen family and the joy and light they bring to my life.

Do you desire to expand the idea of what family can look like for you? Who are the friends that feel like family? I encourage you to

commit to these people in a new way. Commitment looks different to each of us, so find what that means to you and your friends: show up, celebrate, mourn the losses, and create rituals and traditions together. Life can be so difficult and so filled with joy, and through it all, we need one another. ■



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nity itself can grow together in new and healing ways.

In conclusion, the lives and needs of children at risk are complex. Yet when churches commit to the process of becoming healthy family systems for the children at risk and other vulnerable peoples in their midst, the ecclesial family can become a place of stability, hope, protection, nurture, and purpose that provides a buffer to the extreme and destructive stressors many of these young people experience in life. That process is healing not only for the children at risk involved but for the ecclesial community as well. ■

ENDNOTES

1. B. McEwen, “The Role of Stress in Physical and Mental Health,” in *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: An Update: Workshop Summary* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2012), 14–18.
2. Wraparound models are a specific approach to caring for struggling youth that view such youth and their communities from a strengths-based perspective and seek to engage the fullness of a youth's relational network in caring for that youth. I believe the wraparound model could provide needed insights for churches wishing to care for the children in their midst in similarly positive and caring ways. L. Colburn and L. Beggs, *The Wraparound Guide: How to Gather Student Voice, Build Community Partnerships, and Cultivate Hope* (Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press, 2020).
3. While the letter to Philemon does not address the matter of children at risk in our ecclesial communities

directly, Paul's argument throughout the letter—that followers of Christ are familially bonded in ways that require more socially privileged members to make practical and costly decisions to relate to more vulnerable members in ways that lead to their liberation and healing—has direct bearing on how the church operates in its relationships with perpetually vulnerable children at risk.

4. J. Ann Mercer, “What Child Is This? Religious Ambivalence toward Children,” in *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 117–61.
5. See Lausanne Consultation on Children at Risk, “Who Are Children-at-Risk: A Missional Definition,” *Lausanne Movement* (blog), December 3, 2015, <https://www.lausanne.org/content/statement/children-at-risk-missional-definition>.



LEAVING CHRISTIANITY: NAVIGATING FAITH AND RELATIONSHIPS WHEN BELIEFS CHANGE

Michael Hardin

Michael Hardin is professor of marriage and family therapy. He came to Fuller in 2020 with 16 years of teaching experience and over 22 years of experience counseling couples, families, and individuals. Dr. Hardin has partnered with churches by leading marriage retreats and marriage seminars for the past 15 years. As his clinical concentration has grown toward couple work, his research interests have developed to explore a need for ongoing sex education for married couples, as well as the impact on marriage when one in the couple leaves the Christian faith. He is a licensed marriage and family therapist (LMFT) in California and Texas and a Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE). He is the founder and director of LIVEConnected Relational Therapy, where he maintains a private practice.

In recent years, an increasing number of people have been leaving the denominations in which they were raised—a phenomenon that I've found to be consistent across denominations. In 2019, I started taking notice of how often I heard stories of people leaving Christianity all together. The recent pandemic only exacerbated this trend. It has been a difficult time for many individuals and families; Christians have dealt with political division, issues of racial prejudice, and a general spirit of intolerance. In addition, the effects of illness, isolation, anxiety, and death, as well as the closure of face-to-face church services, allowed hurting members to fall between the cracks. If some were asking tough faith questions before 2020, the last few years only added to the fire.

In 2020, a good friend and colleague, LynnAnne Lowrie, and I decided to collaborate and research the phenomena of both deconstructing and reconstructing faith beliefs, as well as the decisions surrounding the choice to disaffiliate from Christianity. Along the way, we also connected with Tommy Lazo, a marriage and family therapy student here at Fuller, who has since graduated. As part of our research, we wanted to better understand the experiences of couples who shared a Christian faith when first married but who later developed differing views—namely, where one of the persons, in the process of deconstructing their belief system, chose to leave Christianity. We wanted to understand how they navigated this major shift, how their marriage was impacted, as well as the effects on their parenting.

As a clinician, I have begun to ponder to what extent therapists, the church, or even families are able to walk beside a questioning friend or loved one. I wonder how well

we do in responding, when we, in our own anxiety and fear, perceive questions as dangerous or a risk to a person's soul. I wonder how much a discipleship that encourages seeking would better help—instead of making sure we always have the “right,” but usually inadequate or unsatisfactory, answer to all the tough questions. As marriage and family therapists, Dr. Lowrie, Tommy Lazo, and I anticipate that those of us who work in the mental health field may see more and more families who struggle as one of their members goes through a faith crisis and who need guidance as they hope to provide loving support.

We concluded the interviews for a qualitative research study into the experience of leaving Christianity in January 2022. We interviewed ten volunteer participants, some who no longer identify themselves as Christians and some who were in the midst of deconstructing their faith beliefs. While we are still in the process of sifting through all the data, we are already observing similar themes emerging, giving us a fuller understanding of our participants' deconstruction experience: All participants grew up going to church. They described church life as an all-encompassing culture that provided a comforting structure, a community to belong to, and a life perspective that gave meaning. Family involvement was an important part of each of the stories we heard. For many of the participants, contradictions between the teachings in Scripture and the corporate practice of those beliefs were not the direct reason for a crisis of faith; rather, frustrations began as a result of not experiencing permission to raise questions when teachings did not match life experience. Without a perceived safe place to turn within their family of origin or church family, many continued their search for answers in isolation.

The following is a narrative summary of Jeremiah's (pseudonym) experience.

An Unraveling in Isolation

Jeremiah, a married, 30-something, heterosexual, White male “stopped believing” the teachings of Christianity approximately 12 years ago.¹ Jeremiah describes what it “meant” to be a Christian in a rather holistic way. Growing up, the Christian story appealed to him. He enjoyed reading the Bible and felt a “soft spot” for the stories about the biblical prophet whose name Jeremiah shared. As an adolescent and young man, Jeremiah discovered the writings of C. S. Lewis and resonated with the ideas set forth by the atheist-turned-Christian. Being a Christian also meant having knowledge about biblical Scripture and the foundations of the religion. He also describes his interest in and acquisition of knowledge of Scripture and theology to have been largely self-directed. He took the initiative to read about and learn things outside of his time in church; such activities were not something forced upon him or overtly expected by his parents but freely chosen. This idea of being able to freely choose his own beliefs without undue influence from others, including family and his church community, is an ongoing theme that followed Jeremiah into adulthood.

Out of Jeremiah's knowledge of Scripture and Christian beliefs came a moral code and an expectation to “behave in a way that reflected those beliefs” or to “do the right thing.” Being a Christian also included the spiritual discipline of regular prayer, something that Jeremiah did throughout his day. Talking to God reflected Jeremiah's understanding that Christianity included a relationship with God.

Finally, Jeremiah's parents always made sure the family attended church. Church attendance intersected with the relational component of Christianity, being part of the Christian community and family of God. Despite describing himself as “socially awkward” and being socially uncomfortable as a child, Jeremiah later found pleasure in the social activities of his adult church. He enjoyed Sunday school classes, small groups, and the communal practice of congregational singing.

Over time, however, Jeremiah's childhood and adult experiences of Christianity began to flip. As a child, social situations were uncomfortable, yet Jeremiah felt drawn to the teachings of Christianity. As an adult, he greatly enjoyed the relational aspects of practicing the faith, yet he began to grow increasingly frustrated with some of the faith's teachings.

When Jeremiah married, he joined his wife's denomination. He greatly enjoyed the community of the church and described it as “the most Christian I'd ever really tried to be.” The group was more dogmatic in some of its teachings than churches Jeremiah had encountered before. He grew up attending multiple denominational churches, and described himself as having a more “fluid and open-minded” view of doctrine than his new church. While he enjoyed the relationships, activities, and communal worship practices, he also knew he wasn't considered a Christian by some at this church because he had not been baptized according to the teachings of this group. He also grew frustrated with some of the “expectations” Christianity placed upon believers, particularly around areas in which science and Christian teachings, from his perspective, did not line up. His frustrations and questions fueled a season

of questioning and inquiry that was not shared with church members or his wife. Ultimately, Jeremiah attributes some of the dogmatism to the change in belief he later experienced. His frustration with such things coincided with an introduction to other ways of conceptualizing the world.

During this time, Jeremiah met an atheist at work and became aware of online atheist groups. While he wasn't convinced by their beliefs, he did gain a deeper understanding of them. Interestingly, the decisive point in Jeremiah's journey away from Christianity was not a buy-in of an atheistic worldview; instead, it was the experience of reading a fictional description of the universe and reality. As he read, Jeremiah had a



dawning realization that he didn't believe any more strongly in Christian teachings regarding reality and the universe than he believed in this fictional account. It's as if Jeremiah had quit believing in Christianity sometime before but had not yet come to accept that this was his new perspective until that moment. This experience shined a light onto a personal reality that had been hidden from everyone, even himself.

Jeremiah describes this realization as creating a lot of fear and uncertainty, and he felt his “relationship with reality” start to “unravel.” The most poignant example of this was in his practice of prayer. Prayer had been self-soothing and an effective form of self-care throughout his life. Recognizing he no longer believed in the Christian god forced him to confront that what he had believed to be making a difference in his life had never done so. He says, “It was very disconcerting. I don't believe that that is anything that's going to help me. So, what do I do?”

Jeremiah's greatest fears centered on the impact his changing belief would have on his closest relationships, most of which were based on a shared understanding of Christianity. His deepest fear was connected to how his wife would handle this experience. This prompted him to keep his new beliefs a secret. But the fear of losing relationships and the resulting secrecy created a deep isolation in which he felt “completely alone”:

For those reasons, it became a secret, which is the worst thing because now you're feeling scared and alone. You know your worldview is shifting a little bit and your experience of your day-to-day life is changing, and then now you also feel isolated, like you can't just bring this to

these people. At the very least, I didn't feel like I could.

Jeremiah knew that others around him might believe that he could be talked into changing his mind. However, despite his fear and confusion about how to navigate life with this new belief system, once Jeremiah realized his belief system had changed, he knew he would not return to it. He recognized that this was difficult for those around him:

People did try and talk to me, like a couple of people at the request of my wife . . . And I would talk to them, and we'd have some mutual respect and then kind of realize that there wasn't really anything else to say.

Jeremiah reports that some relationships with family and friends remain awkward even many years later. It has been his experience that without shared belief, it is very difficult—though not impossible—to maintain a relationship with another person. A great strain was put on his relationship with his wife in particular. Jeremiah describes a time when there were feelings of strife, distrust, and betrayal. Now, in a follow-up conversation with both Jeremiah and his wife, Gail (also a pseudonym), it is obvious that they have a loving and nurturing marriage. They both experienced what Jeremiah calls an unraveling of reality as a part of their journey but found a way to love each other deeply, being respectful, and even supportive, of each other's beliefs.

While some Christian practices have changed in Gail's life, she maintains a strong faith. She credits the survival of their marriage to her prayer life, her Bible study, the supportive and loving relationships within her Christian community,



and her and her husband's desire to hold their family together. The couple is very honest about the hard journey they took to get from where they were 12 years ago to how they live and love each other today. Bible stories and prayer remain a part of their children's lives. All four children have attended Christian preschool and Gail feels the freedom to nurture their faith in God. Jeremiah views the biblical story as useful to his children and is not bothered by the way his wife wants to raise them. Jeremiah's desire is that their children know of his beliefs when appropriate and that they have an opportunity to choose for themselves what they want to believe.

What Active Discipling Might Look Like

Like many others, I have had conversations with people I love who were experiencing faith crises, and I felt a need to defend God or convince the other person toward "truth." While I knew, as a cli-

nician, that it would be better to listen and support, I found myself tempted to provide my knowledge of Scripture before making sure they received my compassion. I have also served as a leader in my church, and I have wrestled with what it means to disciple someone both in times of thriving and times of spiritual struggle. After this two-year study and after sifting through all our research data, I have come away with a different definition of what it means to actively disciple someone who is in the midst of deconstructing their faith. Families are experiencing this all around us, and the families I have talked with all seem to be on a journey of trying to figure out what their responsibilities as Christians should be to their questioning spouses, children, brothers, sisters, and friends. I believe that, when motivated

more by love than by fear, families can be more present and helpful to the suffering seeker, the frustrated questioner, and the morally injured.

Gail's story and others like hers can teach us about how families can be present to those going through a deconstruction. Gail saw Jeremiah as a whole person who was more than his nontheist beliefs. She experienced her husband as a loving man who was gentle with her, hardworking, kind to others, moral, and a good father. She had always been drawn to him because of how brilliant of a man he was. Initially, it was easier to just be mad at what seemed to be a violation of their marriage, or to placate in silence and maintain the status quo. But over time, Gail realized that she and Jeremiah had to find a way to work through the chaos these new differences generated.

While it was difficult not to react out of fear when their Christian marriage seemed threatened, Gail honored her own experience by communicating her thoughts and

feelings, but in ways that also honored her husband's gifts, strengths, thoughts, and feelings. Many tears were shed, but Gail arrived at the transformative idea that it was the Holy Spirit's job to do any convicting needed, not hers. Gail's mindset differed from other family members we heard about. She does her best to create safe places in the home where the family can thrive, and where Jeremiah does not feel judged. Gail has integrated new ways of being Christian in this world. In a new status quo, Gail continues to live rooted in her faith. If she teaches the gospel in her home, it is mostly through example. She actively discipled her children and models how to love others daily. She loves others, and she deeply loves her husband. She cultivates a space where questions are allowed, and conversations are invited. Giving Jeremiah the ability to remain connected and have a sense of belonging in his home has become central to the family cohesiveness.

At the recent 2023 Integration Symposium hosted by the School of Psychology & Marriage and Family Therapy at Fuller, keynote speaker Julie J. Exline highlighted ways churches and families can walk with loved ones experiencing spiritual struggles. Her observations parallel what we are finding in our research. Dr. Exline shared the following:

1. It is important to provide a safe space for those who are in spiritual crisis. People need to know that spiritual struggles are common and that anger at God may arise as a part of their struggle. Anger at God or questioning of God should not be met with reactive fear. Questions should be welcomed, and anger will only result in a person experiencing isolation and shame for their experience.

Her research suggests that supportive responses are associated with more approach behaviors toward God and a strengthening of faith.

2. We need to be wary of "the quick fix." The things that seem to bring us comfort may not be the things that comfort others. When we don't know what to say, or when we want to provide "the right answer," we can easily impose our own theological assumptions. The more helpful approach is communicating simple compassion and acceptance.
3. It is also helpful to encourage private exploration of struggles. Many individuals find it helpful to have the freedom to engage experiential practices, such as meditation, reading sacred texts or laments, writing a letter to God, journaling, and other creative expressions.
4. When an individual feels safe enough, and without sidestepping pain and distress, those who are actively discipling should aim toward wholeness, integration, and connection. For a spiritual struggle to be a growth experience, we must curiously look for what is life-giving. Those who wish to be helpful can seek growth, meaning making, and gratitude in the midst of pain and struggle.

This article is not meant to suggest definitive answers but rather highlight stories that are unfolding all around us and provide suggestions for how to respond in love. Families and individuals are hurting and asking big and challenging questions. Sometimes they are brave enough to ask their questions out loud. Sometimes people in our midst are struggling alone. Many spouses, parents, friends, therapists, Bible

professors, and church leaders want to be more helpful (or non-injuring) when a Christian they love is struggling with their faith beliefs. I hope when our analysis is complete, the results of our research will be a helpful resource for these family members and friends, and ultimately help those who have real questions about God to feel less isolated, misunderstood, and hopeless. For now, I invite you, the reader, to sit a while with your own thoughts and reflect on what went on within you as you read Jeremiah's narrative and Gail's response. Take notice of your feelings of compassion, but also of any assumptions or judgments. Think through the "answers" that came up for you as you may have inevitably problem-solved during your reading. If you are a church leader, you may have had thoughts about how you would want to have engaged Jeremiah and Gail if they were a part of your flock. Families like Jeremiah and Gail's are all around us—all in differing stages of their journey. How we engage them can either reflect our fear or reflect God's love. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Jeremiah describes a sensitivity about the language used to describe the process of ending one's belief or participation in the Christian faith, pointing out that many terms used to describe the experience are coined or controlled by people who retain the Christian faith, and who may thus use particular words that project their own opinions or feelings about the process. For Jeremiah, the term "deconversion," in particular, implies that another person or agent has acted upon the individual to "convert" them away from their faith; this disregards the agency of the person whose faith beliefs are changing. Jeremiah prefers terms that place the agency in his court. Terms such as "stopped believing" or "stopped being a Christian" feel more reflective of his experience and personal agency in the process. A current term Jeremiah does identify with is the use of "deconstruction," particularly in how a changing belief system unraveled his view of reality.

TALKING CHURCH WITH YOUR TEENAGER AND YOUNG ADULT

Steven Argue

When our kids were younger, the task of getting to church on time was our biggest challenge. In fact, there was a period when our middle daughter, six years old at the time, would only go to church wearing her favorite shoes—clogs. The service predictably started at the top of the hour, and we predictably showed up late. Our strategy was to always head stealthily to the back balcony to blend in behind the choir. The biggest obstacle? Walking up the wooden stairs with a clog-wearing daughter. “The Lord be with you.” *Clomp, clomp, clomp.* “And also with you.” *Clomp, clomp, clomp.* “Be still and know that I am God.” *Clomp, clomp, clomp.* The choir got to know us really well. Some of them smiled. Others shook their heads. We were the late-arriving clog family. But we made it to church. And if you’ve been a parent of young children, you count that a win.

We fondly chuckle over those early churchgoing memories. As hard as those events felt, they feel easy compared to ways we have to navigate church with our teenage and young adult kids now. We still believe church matters. We believe that connecting with faith communities enhances personal faith. But now, our kids are becoming their own persons—who make more of their own choices, including choices about church.

We don’t want them to go to church to please us or anyone else. We want them to go because they want to go for themselves. Through the hundreds of conversations my wife, Jen, and I

have had with our friends, as well as the research our Fuller Youth Institute team has collected through our Growing With project, we’re learning a few things that have shaped the ways we talk about church with our growing teenage and young adult kids.

It’s important to remember that if your family has connected with a church community, these spiritual habits and relationships stick with your kids. Even in periods when your growing kids seem less interested in church, it’s still part of their story.¹ Practicing faith has a consistent tempo to it. Yet consistency alone can’t fend off your teenager’s inevitable resistance to church. In fact, their familiarity with church might encourage more open critique. They may start asking questions or making comments that feel rebellious or disrespectful, like “Why do we even go to church?” or “I don’t get anything out of it.”

The parenting reflex, often fueled by fear, is to get combative—blaming them, shaming them, or discrediting their questions and assessments. In these moments, the courageous parenting approach is to listen to their questions and critiques while recognizing that their commentary is less about protest and more about ownership. They are starting to consider how your family’s churchgoing practice (your choice) now becomes their own (their choice). They need their own reasons, not just ours.

Listening first helps parents ask better questions for fruitful dialogue. Our teenagers need our empathy, honesty, and support while they navigate their increasingly complex and stressful lives. Focusing only on their church “attendance” drives shortsighted behaviors that only last as long as you shame or bribe them. Keep listening and remain consistent



church often has less to do with theological reasons and is more likely tied to practical ones. We’ve discovered that:

- *Young people often feel overwhelmed with this new chapter in their lives and don’t feel like they have time to commit to a church right now.*² So we encourage them to do less rather than more their first year out.
- *Young people often are faced for the first time with choosing their own church rather than the church their parents chose for them.*³ So we encourage

with your own church-connecting practices while they find their own paths toward church. Grow with them by helping them choose church for themselves rather than choosing it for them.

Popular news stories of young people leaving church once they leave home do not help calm parents’ anxieties about their kids’ faith. But often, these stories are overplayed and create unfair perspectives. While it is true that post-high school young people typically attend church less, many adults misinterpret why this is happening. As Jen and I took a closer look at research and listened to our kids and their friends, we recognized that young people’s absence from

them to take their time to experience different church expressions.

- *Many churches still hold Sunday morning services, which can be out of sync with most young people’s lives.*⁴ So we encourage them to think about their own daily and weekly rhythms of work, play, and rest.

Grow with them by broadening your church-oriented conversations in ways that acknowledge their emerging life rhythms and values.

Our growing kids’ participation in church requires a relational journey, not a quick fix. I’ll be honest: as a parent, it feels better when they do go to church. But people attend and leave churches for all kinds of reasons. If we rest on whether they go or don’t go to church, we will miss their reasons, motivations, or spiritual quests. Our parenting challenge is to let them experience it all firsthand with less and less parental

interference. So our conversations about church must shift: Instead of, “Do you attend church?” try, “What kind of church do you think is worth connecting with?” Instead of, “You should go to church,” try, “How might you try using your gifts and working out your world concerns through your faith community?”

What we know to be true and what we have experienced with our own daughters is that, while their church attendance varies, they are seeking to make sense of their world, relationships, spirituality, and selves. Our goal is to engage in more nuanced conversations with them and let go of our optimism or pessimism over their church attendance. Grow with them by taking your conversations beyond attendance and toward the opportunities and challenges of living out their faith within community.

Church is not about clogs. It’s not even about attendance. Instead, allow your teenage and young

adult kids’ winding roads of participation be less contentious and more an opportunity for you to grow with your kids through dialogue and discovery. Let it be a springboard for the significant conversations about life and faith everyone—young and old—longs for. ■

This article was originally published on the Fuller Youth Institute blog in February 2019.

ENDNOTES

1. V. L. Bengtson, N. M. Putney, and S. C. Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013).
2. T. T. Clydesdale, *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
3. S. C. Argue, “Beyond ‘New and Improved’ Youth Ministry: Fueling an Entrepreneurial Vision to Support Emerging Generations Where They Need Us Most,” *Journal of Youth Ministry* 18, no. 1 (2018).
4. S. C. Argue, “Undergraduate Spiritual Struggle and the Quest to Remain Faithful,” *Journal of Youth Ministry* 16, no. 1 (2017), 8–29.



Steven Argue is associate professor of youth, family, and culture and is the applied research strategist at the Fuller Youth Institute. A thought leader and researcher, he has served as a pastor and has also led parachurch organizations that focused on youth ministry strategies and leadership development. Dr. Argue has numerous publications ranging from book chapters, blogs, and articles, and he is the coauthor of *18 Plus: Parenting Your Emerging Adult; Growing With: Every Parent’s Guide to Helping Teenagers and Young Adults Thrive in Their Faith, Family, and Future*; and *Sticky Faith Innovation: How Your Compassion, Creativity, and Courage Can Support Teenagers’ Lasting Faith*.





LEADING FROM A STEP BEHIND: HOW CHILDREN MINISTER TO THE FAMILY

Alesia Starks

Alesia Starks is a practitioner faculty colleague and instructor in the practice of marriage and family therapy in the School of Psychology & Marriage and Family Therapy. A licensed marriage and family therapist, she has worked in community mental health and Department of Mental Health contexts, applying her gifts as a clinician, curriculum developer, and trainer. Her areas of clinical expertise span a wide range of specializations including domestic violence, treating complex trauma, and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy. During her master's program, she wrote a thesis titled *Towards a Pan African Community in the US: Defining the Social Space Between African Immigrants and African Americans from the African Immigrant's Perspective*.

Becoming a mother changed my faith. Motherhood is my greatest work and my greatest joy. On the one hand, it has given me the joy of learning the world anew through my children's eyes. On the other hand, it has required such hard work and become one of the greatest catalysts for my spiritual growth. Parenthood requires us to be like Christ. It requires sacrifice, and it requires you to pay forward your love, time, effort, and even your dreams. And beyond the joy of experiencing their joy, I didn't initially have the impression that children gave back. But when the pandemic hit, everything changed. And I began to understand that I needed my children as much as they needed me.

Isolated at home with a two-year-old and a seven-year-old second grader, who was forced to pivot online with minimal computer skills, I was confronted with a sense of helplessness that pushed me into the arms of God. I had to lean into the Lord and put together a survival plan. I felt like a hostage to the horrors of working at home with children. Devotion and prayer walks became our escape. This was my way of asking the Lord to manage them for a while. I set my intentions on instilling faith in my children. I wanted to give these children to God now instead of waiting until they were grown. I figured, "If I can convert them and make them accountable to God, we all might survive." I went all in and ordered a slew of books, not to teach them to read, not to spend time with them (although that was a plus), but to theologize them. I had to subject their spirits to the Lord! "Yeah, that's what I'll do," I thought.

But one particular book changed how I saw my hostage situation. *Maybe God is Like That Too* is a book about a little boy

whose grandmother teaches him that God can be found in every experience.¹ Setting off looking for God, the boy finds God all over the city. He discovers God's love as he interacts with people who love him; he feels God's joy as he finds new heights on the swing. The story spoke to me. Isn't this how God would want us to live life, looking for him, every minute of every day? As I thought about this, the Holy Spirit brought to mind Matthew 18:4, where Jesus says the way of the child is the way to the kingdom. Needless to say, God used this book to change my perspective of this scripture and my experience of my children.

I wanted to understand what God saw in my children that I didn't see: how were they guiding me to the kingdom of heaven? And I wondered what this meant God wanted from me. Observing their childlikeness as a way to the kingdom transformed me, and God used my children in this season to make me more into his image. I discovered the most profound lessons even in the things that irritated me most—with my children leading the way, lighting the path to heaven. The books I ordered for them were paramount to my spiritual growth as much as theirs. God used this time to humble me so I could see him—and the way to the kingdom—through their eyes. I found myself standing before God, as Tamela Mann would say, without "much to bring," but I think that's what God wanted from me.

Reading Matthew 18:1–4 with New Eyes

Matthew 18:1–4 begins with the disciples asking Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus responds, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." I believe whole-

heartedly in Christ dying on the cross for my sins, but reading this passage with new eyes revealed that I lacked some of the most important qualifications to enter the kingdom of heaven.

It took a while for me, however, to attune to the Holy Spirit because I grappled with the apparent sin nature in children that reveals itself with each developing stage. My children are who convinced me that we are born with a sin nature, after all. How could these DNA replicas of Adam and Eve be the ticket to heaven? I needed to see my children differently. I needed new eyes to see them as my tour guides to heaven. What started as my pandemic children's ministry soon morphed into my children ministering to me. I pressed in looking for what Jesus saw in them that he doesn't see in me.

During a time that was reminiscent of the end of times, out of desperation, I was willing to follow "the least of these." Simple cross-referencing the passage revealed that this wasn't a concept found only in Matthew 18. God had sprinkled this concept throughout his word. Psalm 131 mentions the calm of a child in their mother's arms, Luke 18 and Mark 10 speak of receiving the kingdom of God like a child, Matthew 19 says the kingdom of heaven belongs to the children, Proverbs 17 calls grandchildren "the crown of the aged," and Matthew 18 admonishes us to become like children to enter the kingdom of God. Every reference pointed me back to my children with new eyes and understanding. I went to my commentary and zeroed in on my dependence on God and God's sovereignty: "Entering the kingdom means coming under the sovereign rule of God."² The faith and humility of children were a perfect picture of what I was lacking in my life as an adult.

Humility and Dependence

When I first read that Matthew 18:1–4 referred to humility, I thought, "not my children." Children can be self-centered, and many have strong wills that evidence their sin nature almost from day one. But I learned that the humility Christ was talking about is more a picture of dependence than the humility we equate with thinking of oneself as less important. It's the idea of putting yourself under the authority of another. Despite their disobedience, children are rather dependent—even the strong-willed ones. God wants us to put ourselves under his authority to the degree that a child is dependent on a caregiver. From crying to excessive questions, children can teach us something about being under God's authority. In such an independent, self-sufficient society—most of us carrying our self-sufficiency as a badge of honor—it is hard to imagine dependence as godly.

Children tend to be direct, avoiding pomp and circumstance. They ask for what they want without regard for timing, appropriateness, or privilege. Unless life has taught them otherwise, they don't beat around the bush; they come right out and ask you for what they want. They're not afraid to admit when they are overwhelmed and have no qualms about asking questions until they get an answer that satisfies them. I think this is what God wants from us: to come to him and say, "This is too much for me."

What would it be like to ask God for a piece of your sister's cake even if he might say no? It would be an acknowledgment of his sovereign authority and our dependence on him. That is the conclusion I came to the day my son came to me distraught

because he wanted his sister's dessert. He was looking for me to do for him what he couldn't do for himself. This gave me an opportunity to shape his expectations around sharing and fairness, but it also showed me how when we understand God's love for us, we can walk boldly to the throne of grace and ask for our hearts' desires. The point is that we approach the throne with our hearts in hand and walk away changed, whether we get what we want or not. I think that's what God wants from us: hearts that are so open to him that we come to him without hesitation.

One of the most difficult experiences as a parent is when your child is crying and you can't help them. Whether you don't have the emotional capacity or the resources to meet their need or want, you have a feeling of helplessness. During the height of the pandemic, my children and I cried many tears, often at the same time and for the same reasons. They looked to me for answers, rescue, or understanding. When I didn't have those things to give, we cried together—while I looked to God in the same way. This repeated scenario taught me how crying can be a good thing, a symbol that I was at the end of myself and an acknowledgment of my powerlessness to affect or change my situation. Crying does not indicate a lack of maturity, but is rather a call for the one who is greater than I. A child crying out to their parent and an adult crying out to God are both ways of summoning the one under whose authority we live, in recognition of their strength, power, resources, and good will toward us. A child's cry ought to remind us of our dependence on God. When we are weak, he is strong. And when we fall down, he is there to pick us up. When we come to the end of ourselves, God wants us to trust that he hears our distress.



A Big View of God

God used my children to grow my faith in direct and indirect ways. Faith, meaning trust in and loyalty to another, was the second life lesson of childlikeness I had to learn. In their formative years, children are very believing. Because we develop core concepts about our world during childhood, when children learn, their brains seek for and expect their newfound truths to be validated. In fact, their faith is so strong they often hold you accountable to your promises. Our words to them come alive. Mommy said it, they believe it. During the pandemic, I started challenging myself to have this kind of faith in God. Did I really believe God's words to the degree that my children believed in mine? As my children put undying faith in me, I was convicted for my lack of faith in my Heavenly Father. The strength of our faith demonstrates the magnitude of who we believe God to be. I pray God will develop in me the kind of faith that demonstrates the magnitude of who God is.



When I had my son, my second child, the Holy Spirit spoke loud and clear to me one day and said, "Live like I am a member of your household." Can you imagine a great God living in our two-bedroom cottage? My children can. They not only believe he lives with us but that he cares about every aspect of their lives. In my house, God is a healer of COVID and paper cuts. And the prayers for each sound the same. The other day, my son prayed for my arm that was hurting; he prayed boldly, knowing that he was talking to the God of the universe: "God, help Mommy's arm. If it gets broken, attach it back together. And if she needs to pick up something, help her be strong."

These types of prayers encourage me to have a big view of God. I have to admit there are many things I never think to take to God because I believe they are too small or I can handle them myself. But through my son's eyes, I see how big God is. I thought God couldn't handle or didn't want to be bothered with the little things in my life. Exploring my faith in the midst of my children's developing faith, I realized my God was too small. A small God is not worth believing in, and a God who can't handle our little things isn't very big. My son's faith reflects who God really is. I think this is the faith God wants from me too.

The Kingdom of Heaven

I knew my responsibility to build Christlike character in my children. What I failed to realize was how God could do quite the opposite by using my children to sanctify me. Matthew 18 is a picture of God's heart, and my own process of becoming like a child was ironically contextualized by caring for my children. In all of my positive striving as a parent, God used—and uses—my children to make me like them and, in turn, make me



like him. The challenges of parenthood force me into the arms of God, and the joys of parenthood remind me how God feels about me.

I thought the pandemic would be a great opportunity to focus on teaching my children God's Word. But as time went on, my personal devotions were rolled into my children's devotions. My time with them was my time with God. God became simple, and the path to the kingdom of heaven started to appear.

One of the first things I noticed in this season was a desire for God. And as I've reflected on this, the image that frequently comes to mind is an image of my daughter when she was an infant. My daughter was a happy baby in the mornings, and her reaction to me at the beginning of each day always stirred my soul. I remember the gap in her baby teeth as she greeted me with fulfilled expectation as I peered over her crib. The look on her face at first sight of mine always said, "I knew you would come back." The joy of my presence was on her face before she had words. I think this is what God wants from me too.

My parenting has become an indicator of my relationship with Christ. The more I give to my children, the more God uses them to give to me. In this way, my relationship with my children has become the most sanctifying experience of my life. And every day, I still continue to learn to lead from a step behind, guiding my children as I follow their lead to the kingdom of heaven. ■

ENDNOTE

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THE JOYS AND CHALLENGES OF RETIREMENT YEARS

Jack and Judith Balswick

An interview with Jack and Judith Balswick, professor emeritus of sociology and family development and professor emerita of marital and family therapy respectively, by FULLER magazine Editor in Chief Jerome Blanco.

JEROME BLANCO: You were both such pillars of Fuller's MFT program for many years, teaching here for over two decades! It's now been a while since you've retired, yet we thought who better to shed wisdom on family in the "third third" of life than both of you. First, can you share what retirement has looked like?

JACK BALSWICK: A lot has happened since retirement. Now, in our 80s, we're glad to be alive and in good spirits. For one thing, we're living in our same home where we had so many good memories with our MFT students over the years.

JUDITH BALSWICK: One of the best things about retirement is having time and choice. We've enjoyed travel, leisure, family connections, and moving through our bucket list. A particular blessing for me was spending three weeks with Kenyan women leaders distributing water tanks in desolate areas of that beautiful country.

JACK: We also had time and energy to work together with former students and colleagues in the revision of three books. That was especially satisfying to me.

JEROME: You've taught and written on marriage and relationships over so many years. Can you share a little about what has held true for you in this stage of your own marital life?

JACK: The concept of covenant commitment continues to be the foundation of our marriage these 61 years. We've focused on "differentiated unity" as a key to affirming our individual gifts as they've contributed to our marriage, as a whole. Putting the best interest of the relationship as a priority holds true throughout marriage.

JUDITH: Throughout life's ups and downs, "adaptability and cohesion" are as important in later marriage as they were in the early years. Emotional and physical intimacy continues to be a lovely aspect of our marriage. Being together 24/7 requires the enduring qualities of kindness, affirmation, mutual respect, affection, and laughter.

JACK: Don't forget conflict skills! It amazes us that we continue to have differences after all these years. The key is talking about them and working them out. Honoring our different conflict styles has been a great help. For example, I need more time, and Judy needs resolution; but she is more willing to wait, and I come back to the conflict sooner.

JEROME: Are there particular challenges in married life that have arisen in the retirement years?

JUDITH: Physical problems are at the top of the list. Jack was diagnosed with cerebellar ataxia, a brain condition that impacts his balance and coordination. I also went through two cancer surgeries and, after treatment, am happy to report I am cancer free.

JACK: Judy tells people that my condition is in my "small brain," so I make sure they understand she means the small part of my brain. Hah! I am glad to report that I cycle on a recumbent bike for a few hours each day, plus work out with weights for my upper body. Judy does aerobics, and we try to eat nutritionally.

JUDITH: Dealing with the unexpected challenges is stressful for sure. We've learned to be creative in our responses. I do more caretaking and driving since Jack's diagnosis, while he gives me a back rub every night for my extra efforts. Our church community, family, and friends have been a great source of support and encouragement.

JEROME: What has life with your family looked like in retirement?

JUDITH: When we wrote our first book on the family, we didn't even include a chapter on later life. Now we've lived through the many stages! It's been such a privilege to see our adult children and grandchildren develop in their unique ways. We love the cultural richness from our adopted Korean son, Vietnamese daughter-in-law, and their children as we celebrate Asian Thanksgiving, as well as a more traditional American celebration at Christmas with our daughter and her family. And our family has recently expanded to include two teenage "great-grandsons."

JACK: Our church has become a significant "family of families" in retirement. "Mister Jack and Miss Judy" have become fictive kin or surrogate grandparents to several young families. We enjoy the children, and they lavish us with meals when we're in need.

JEROME: Amidst all these ups and downs, it sounds like there's such a fullness, and even growth, that comes during these later years together.

JUDITH: There are joys and challenges during every stage of family life, and it's been a privilege to be companions on this journey. There are times when we fail, but we continue to strive to love unconditionally rather than conditionally, to be gracing rather than shaming, to build up and empower rather than control, and to deepen our connection rather than distance.

JACK: God is good and our life is good. Our time at Fuller was the highlight of our most vital years. We are most grateful. ■



Jack Balswick is professor emeritus of sociology and family development (1982–2017), and Judith Balswick is professor emerita of marital and family therapy (1989–2017). Their specialized research interests include marriage, sexuality, and parenting, as well as family therapy, family communication, and family ministries. The Balswicks are coauthors of multiple works, including *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home*, *Authentic Human Sexuality*, and *A Model for Marriage: Covenant, Grace, Empowerment, and Intimacy*.



✦ Good Morning Bed by Kristin Young. Ilford HP5 Plus 120 film, Contax 645, 2011. See more of Kristin Young's photography in the opening and closing covers and on pp. 11, 34–35, and 89.

Celebration Is a Rhythm

WITH NICOLE ZASOWSKI



NICOLE ZASOWSKI (MSMFT '11) is a licensed marriage and family therapist, speaker, and writer. In addition to maintaining a private practice, her professional work includes leading marriage intensives at The Hideaway Experience in Atlanta, Georgia, and facilitating support and enrichment groups at various churches. She is the author of *From Lost to Found: Giving Up What You Think You Want For What Will Set You Free* and, most recently, *What If It's Wonderful?: Release Your Fears, Choose Joy, and Find the Courage to Celebrate*.

JEROME BLANCO: *In your recent book, What If It's Wonderful?, you write about the practice of celebration and choosing joy in all seasons, even amidst the most difficult circumstances. It's a moving and vulnerable book, as you share about your own journey of seeking joy amidst a series of difficult miscarriages. Some might wonder how one can suggest celebration in such circumstances. How do you position joy amidst such grief and loss?*

NICOLE ZASOWSKI: I think it's important to recognize that joy is not a denial of pain. In my experience, celebration is often misunderstood. We think of celebration as either a reaction to good news or a reward for an accomplishment. But at its best, celebration is a rhythm. It's a practice that helps us experience more joy in the life we are already living—in both seasons of pain and joy. Many of us are waiting for a reason to celebrate. We see our peace and joy sitting on the other side of a dream realized, a problem solved, or a goal achieved. But when we look at the Old Testament, we recognize that God's people didn't celebrate when it was convenient or when they felt they had a good enough reason to do so. Their celebration was a rhythm of remembering God's goodness, not a reward for their own.

JB: *That's a powerful way of reframing it. How does this look on a practical level? In particular, what can celebration look like after loss? Especially amidst the enduring pain that follows in the day-to-day and year-to-year afterward?*

NZ: We rarely talk about the fact that joy is the most vulnerable feeling we feel because, when we hold something, it is automatically accompanied by the possibility of loss. When we've experienced loss or trauma of any kind, it can feel safer not to hold joy than to hold something that might

break. We often protect ourselves by relying on pessimism and cynicism, assuming we will take the sting out of the pain if we practice disappointment and rehearse disaster. But the research is clear that this habit does not lessen the pain should "the worst" happen.

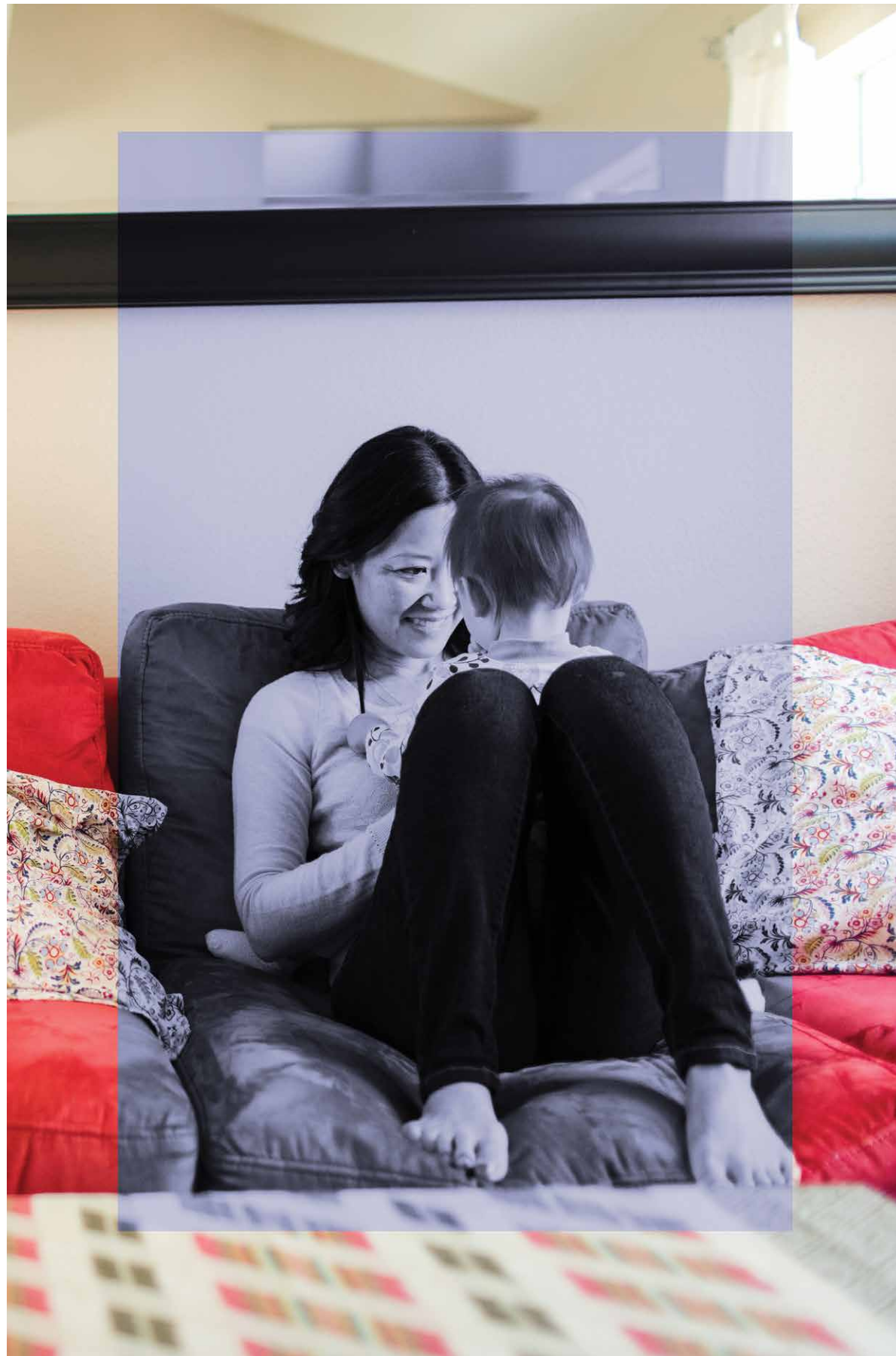
The only way to tolerate the vulnerability of hope or joy is through the practice of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is the expression of the gratitude we feel, and it doubles the joy we would experience had we simply felt grateful in our heart. Expressing thankfulness to people in our lives or to God in our prayers gives us courage to celebrate God's good gifts.

Joy is not a denial of pain.

Another helpful practice is the practice of savoring. Savoring helps us experience more joy in the life we are already living. From a spiritual perspective, it's a practice that keeps us awake to God's presence and movement in our lives. To practice savoring, you take a mental picture of one small moment from your day, and you ask your five traditional senses what they will remember about this moment. This practice helps your brain notice and celebrate a moment of delight in your life that it would ordinarily dismiss as unimportant.

JB: *I'm curious what all this looks like in a wider context of family. I think particularly about your book and your experience, in which you write about losses that affected you but also your husband—although not in the exact same way, of course. I imagine many will relate to having to navigate trauma and joy while doing so in the close quarters of family relationships too. Especially since no one person experienc-*





es the same thing in the same way, what does it look like to practice celebration together?

NZ: As a marriage and family therapist who practices the Restoration Therapy model, I believe our pain is not only shaped by our current circumstances but also by the stories we bring to those circumstances. What this means is that two people can experience the exact same painful circumstance and feel completely different feelings because of the different wounds they were already carrying when they confronted this painful situation. A spouse or other family member's pain may not seem logical to us. Or we might even be tempted to feel alone or take offense if another person's emotional experience is different than our own. But understanding others' stories helps us hold compassion for someone else's emotional experience and helps us realize that, when it comes to feelings, there's no "right or wrong."

Understanding others' stories also helps us have compassion for others' reactions to their pain. As a Restoration Therapist, I believe there are four main ways that people cope with their pain: blame, shame, control, and escape. While there is an important difference between understanding and excusing, it's important to see these behaviors as symptoms of pain in a way that leads us toward compassion and connection. And perhaps most importantly: it's easy to focus and dream about how others should be different in order for us to feel better, but we cannot control others' grief and growth. We are only empowered to be a good steward of our own.

JB: *Going beyond the immediate and intimate sphere of your self and your family, I'm struck by how much your journey of practicing joy in your book is tied to others close to you—friends, mentors, a wider community. How does this community play a part in your own practice and journey of celebration, particularly when others may be enduring their own season of difficulty or going through their own season of celebration?*

NZ: The call to us as Christians to "rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn" isn't always

obvious or easy in practice. It's important to recognize that joy and pain don't cancel each other and can stand side by side. As a marriage and family therapist, I find that many people who are hurting are hesitant to share for fear that they will dampen others' joy. And those who are celebrating breakthrough in their lives are often afraid that their joy will rub salt in others' wounds. Also, we are tempted to assume that unless someone has been through the exact same pain, there is no help or healing that person can offer. While the need for sensitivity is certainly appreciated, these can be isolating mentalities. To be a human being is to know pain. It is far more helpful and healing to stand on the common ground that connects us than to look for reasons that others don't understand. I've learned—the hard way—that both sorrow and celebration are best practiced not through the denial of the other but with an awareness that both exist at all times and that God is present and working in both places. To rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn is a willingness to bend into others' realities, not pretend or perform. There is much joy to be had in stumbling through together. It's better to hold one another than hide.

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JB: *On the other side of that, what does it look like for each of us to celebrate with others in our families and communities when we ourselves struggle with finding our own joy?*

NZ: Since the release of *What If It's Wonderful?*, I've heard from several readers who have confessed that it often feels

easier to grieve with a hurting friend or family member than to join others' joy, particularly when that person is celebrating a dream that steps on the toes of their own.

The story that challenged me on this subject is God's conversation with Moses in Deuteronomy 3. Moses had been the Israelites' leader through years of hardships and victories in the wilderness. Because of Moses' disobedience earlier in that journey, God had told him that he would not be permitted to enter the promised land (Num 20:1–12). Now, Moses was so close to the land that he could spot the Israelites' destination in the distance. He pleaded with God one more time to allow him to enter the land he had been leading God's chosen people toward for decades. But God denied his request and told Moses that this was the end of the discussion (Deut 3:26–27).

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The Bible doesn't tell us how Moses felt in this moment, but we can assume that he was disappointed. What I personally find most challenging is what God says next. Not only did God give Moses a disappointing "no" and end the conversation, but God also instructed Moses to commission Joshua—to encourage and strengthen him for the dream that would not be possible for himself (v. 28). Moses wasn't asked to merely accept that Joshua would lead the Israelites into a land that he would never see for himself. He was told to celebrate Joshua, pouring courage and strength into Joshua as his replacement.

The challenge I take from this is that celebrating others' joy means not only finding a way to accept others' joy, but to actively help prepare them for the dream that we wish was ours.

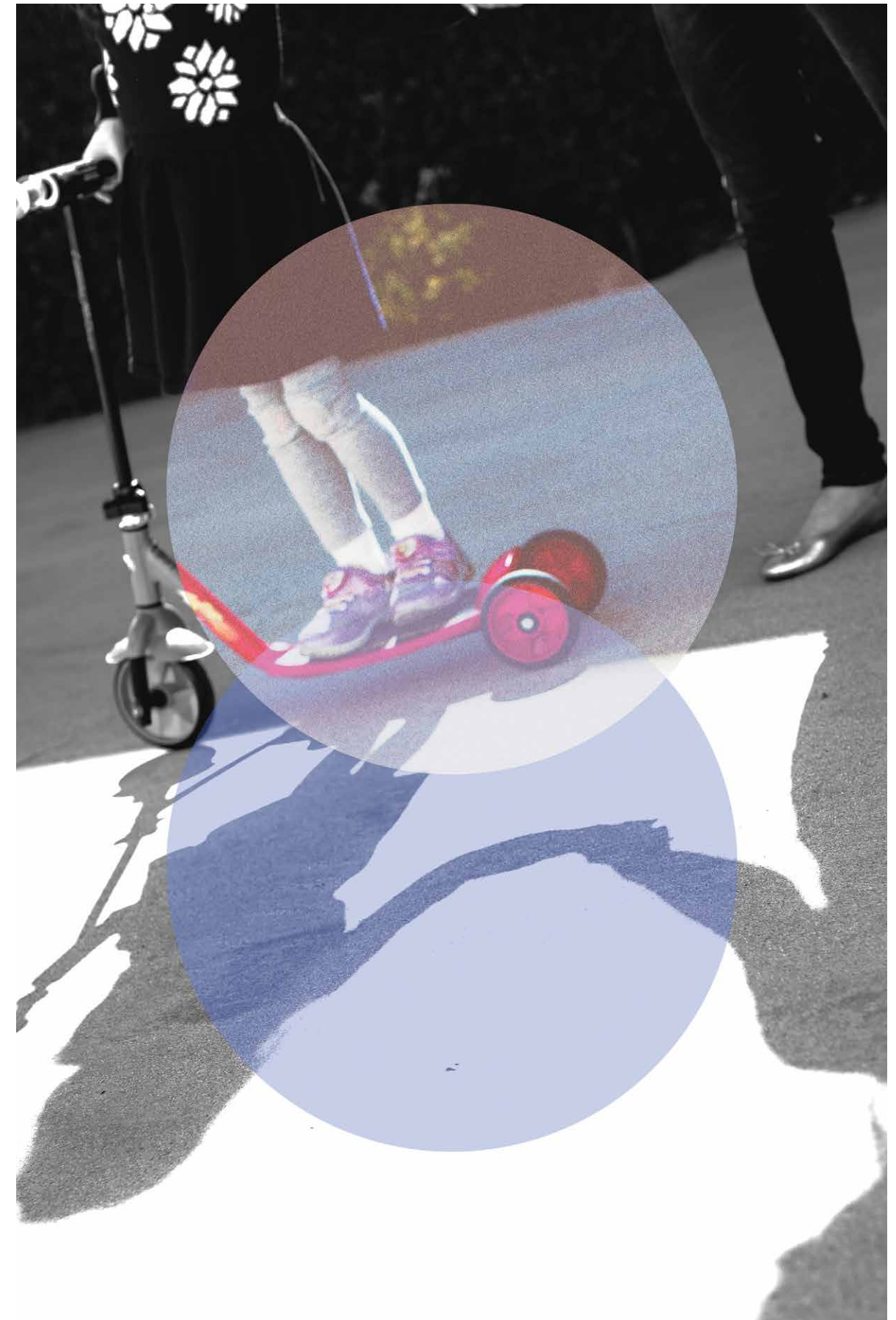
JB: *This understanding of choosing joy and celebration strikes me as both so beautiful and so difficult. It's absolutely one of those things that fall under the category of "easier said than done." What word would you have for those enduring pain and loss, who may feel like they aren't able to get this "right" the first, second, or even third time?*

NZ: Celebration is not a performance. It's important to recognize that God's faithfulness is not dependent on our faith. His goodness is not a function of our goodness. The ultimate celebration is that hope and joy is a person: Jesus. And that hope came to us. We get to come to God with the feelings we actually have rather than trying to have the perfect feelings for God.

The reality is that life is not always wonderful. To be human is to know seasons of waiting, longing, loss, and heartache. We cannot eradicate pain from our lives. But we are empowered to choose how we move through this pain.

As a Restoration Therapist, I believe there are three truths that can help us move through pain with peace and even joy, while acknowledging the weight of our circumstances. The first is that we are not alone. Most of us can name family members, friends, mentors, and others in our communities who tell us we are not alone. And as people of faith, we always have the comfort of the Holy Spirit. The second truth is that, while we are not in total control, we are empowered to make choices that can shape our journey through the pain. And finally, we don't have to call the pain "good." But if we have to walk through a circumstance we wouldn't choose, what can we take with us that will serve us personally and relationally in the future? In other words, if we have to go through it, how can we grow through it? The circumstances may be difficult and painful, but we can celebrate redemption in the places in our lives that we may be tempted to write off as wrecked or ruined. ■

JEROME BLANCO (MDiv '16) is editor in chief of FULLER magazine and FULLER studio.





The Marriage Mission

WITH LES AND LESLIE PARROTT



LES (PhD '90) and **LESLIE** (MSMFT '89) **PARROTT** have been helping couples strengthen their relationships for decades. Bringing together their different perspectives as a clinical psychologist (Les) and a marriage and family therapist (Leslie), they have created relationship assessment tools, training programs, and, most recently, Loveology.org, a free online platform offering short-form video resources on some of the most salient issues couples struggle with today. The Parrotts are the authors of several books, including the bestselling *Save Your Marriage Before It Starts*.

JOY NETANYA THOMPSON: *You've been working in the field of marriage and relationships for a long time, and I'm sure you've seen a lot of changes. What are your thoughts on the state of marriage and couplehood in the US today? What's changed, and what remains the same?*

LES PARROTT: There's so much negative thinking around the future of marriage because there's more cohabitation and people get married later in life. But the research shows that the vast majority—86 percent—of young people in their 20s plan on being married. And not only that, they plan on being married for life. So when we hear negative news about the prospect of marriage and the family and its importance, it's sometimes overreported, in my opinion.

LESLIE PARROTT: But put that alongside what we know to be the reality of the fallout of the last few years that we've all been through [as a result of the pandemic]. It's not only marriages, but all relationships and family life have undergone a level of stress that they haven't been asked to carry before. So we do know there's also a tsunami of relationship issues unfolding in the lives of people, just based on the long-term ambiguous crisis and need of the last couple of years. We're keenly aware that there are unique needs right now for people in relationships.

JOY: *Yes, it's interesting to see how, even now that the pandemic is not the same public health emergency it was in the first couple years, it's still taking a toll on individuals and on our relationships. I've definitely noticed it in my own circles. What other major challenges do you see facing marriages and relationships today?*

LES: The first thing that comes to my mind is mental health and emotional well-being. One of our mantras since we graduated from Fuller is that your relationships are only as healthy as you are. So one of the most important things you will ever do in your relationships is work on who you are in the context of them. And I think that's more important than ever right now.

JOY: *It seems like your new site, Loveology.org, is a great place to start for people wanting to explore emotional and mental health within their own relationships. I love the tagline: "Here for the hard parts of happily ever after."*

LES: Loveology was born out of the need we are talking about here, particularly in moving beyond the pandemic. Because what we've discovered is that people are looking for answers to very specific relationship questions. And because of the nature of our work and our networks, we can bring together some of the world's greatest experts in these spaces. So if you have a question about setting boundaries with your in-laws because they're interfering with your parenting, who is better to answer that question than Henry Cloud, who wrote the book *Boundaries*. We're nearing 2,000 videos at this point; they're searchable and they're all free. This was a nonprofit we started out of the pain of the pandemic.

LESLIE: It's pretty exciting for us to be a part of releasing the insights of other people we've worked alongside toward these big goals of getting people healthy and having better and better relationships. We're so excited that we can put it in a form that's so accessible. And this becomes a tool for marriage champions—counselors, pastors, or mentors—because now they can get equipped to deal with couples who have questions that are outside of their expertise and comfort zone.

JOY: *Loveology seems like a modern take on the work you've been doing for decades, providing resources for couples who are really trying to figure out how to have healthy, happy marriages.*

LES: It's like so many things in life: you see a need that nobody's meeting. Soon after we graduated from Fuller, I was doing a postdoctoral fellowship in medical psychology at the University of Washington, and we both began teaching careers at Seattle Pacific University. We noticed in our work with our students that those who were seriously dating and getting engaged were really struggling to prepare for lifelong love. So we started this pre-marriage event called "Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts," which got a tremendous response. The next year we were getting double the numbers and it just started growing and growing.

JOY: *And that's still such a huge need. I think lots of couples today aren't sure how to prepare for a healthy marriage, or maybe even know what a healthy marriage looks like, since so many of us come from divorced or dysfunctional homes.*

LES: Exactly. Early in our career, we offered a class on our college campus, like a Relationships 101 class. And that was not an easy thing to get approved through the provost's office.

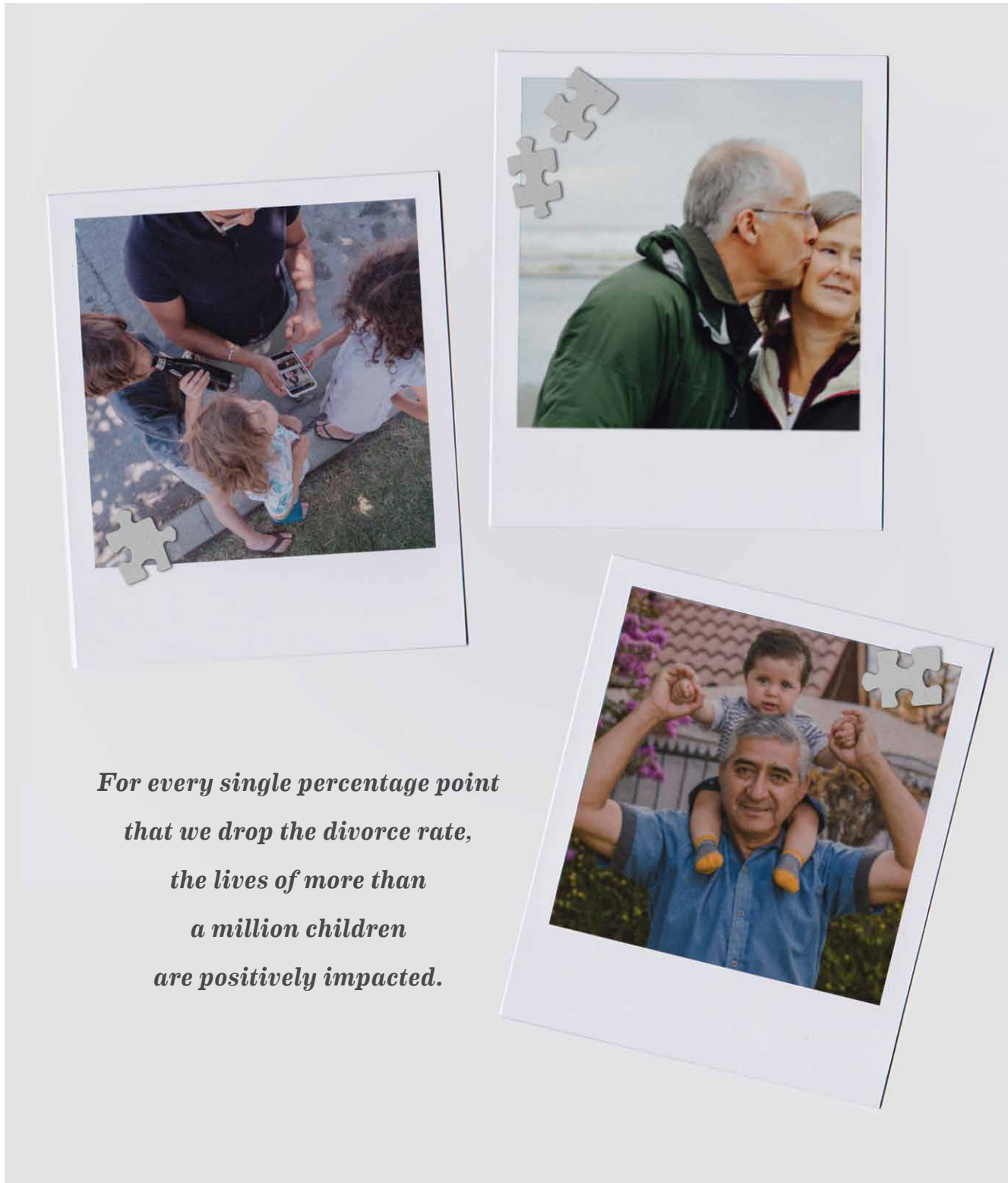
LESLIE: [laughs] It wasn't considered that rigorous.

LES: It ended up being the largest class on campus. Filled up the auditorium. There was always a waiting list to get into it. But one night, early on, I remember Leslie said, "How many of you grew up in a home with both biological parents intact?" And only half the hands went up. And that's when we realized, oh my goodness, they don't have healthy models of lifelong love. And that added fuel to our fire. Then about five years in, we wrote the book *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*, and that suddenly gave us a national platform: we were on the *Today* show, we were talking to Barbara Walters and Oprah and all the usual suspects, talking about launching lifelong love.

JOY: *All that attention makes sense—everyone wants lifelong love but most people are at a loss about how to achieve it. Considering the theme of this magazine issue is "family," what would you say is the significance of a couple's marriage in the larger ecosystem of the family? What kind of an impact can a happy or unhappy marriage have on a family?*



*When you hone your capacity
to see the world accurately
from another person's perspective,
everything changes.*



*For every single percentage point
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LESLIE: That's a big question. And as a systems thinker, I love the many interlocking systems in a family. For the last six years, I've been serving as a mentor to mothers of preschoolers. And when I started, I was overwhelmed with the depth of marriage issues these young moms were coping with in this season of their lives. What I thought would be a compartmentalized experience where they're learning parenting skills quickly morphed into this deep emotional wholeness work. It's relationship work—and mostly marriage focused—so that they have the resources and the resilience to be good parents. Over and over again, I think, wow, the underlying issues of how we connect with each other are so epic. Mentoring these mothers has reaffirmed my sense that the goal is a healthy marriage so that even these precious little preschoolers have a chance to be nourished and flourish.

JOY: *Bringing it back to your current work together, though your methods or modalities have evolved, what would you say your hope is for the future of marriage or couples now? How can the church be a part of that?*

LESLIE: We have what some call a “BHAG”—a big, hairy, audacious goal—that has really been our overarching vision and our call.

LES: It's what has guided us for the last two decades, and it's this: to see the divorce rate reduced by a third in local churches in our lifetime. For every single percentage point that we drop the divorce rate, the lives of more than a million children are positively impacted.

LESLIE: That's for one single percentage point. It would be one of the greatest social revolutions the church has ever seen to drop that rate by double digits. It would have a ripple effect for generations. And it gets to that whole idea of building healthy marriages that build healthy families that build healthy churches. And that's what I think is a light in the world; that's what we're called to, our overarching mission.

LES: And we're pretty optimistic, by the way, about that. Part of our optimism hangs on assessments. Our research shows that to really move the proverbial needle in a positive direction, a reliable and valid assessment tool does that more than just about anything.

LESLIE: That's why we, our team, built an assessment called SYMBIS—which stands for Saving Your Marriage

Before It Starts—for counselors, clergy, and coaches to use with couples (SYMBIS.com). And another for all couples called Better Love featuring the Five Love Languages (BetterLove.com). Research reveals that simply taking the assessment lowers a couple's chances of divorce by 31 percent. How? Because it gets them talking with each other about what matters most.

LES: Not only that, it increases a couple's level of contentment and satisfaction by 30 percent. Also, those encouraging numbers come from independent research and are actually fairly conservative.

LESLIE: That's just somebody who's interacting with a series of the right assessment questions on their own—even without a counselor. Of course, a competent counselor adds even more value to the process.

LES: Really, a good assessment does two things: First, it heightens self-awareness, and that's one of the hallmarks of emotional health. You can't change anything unless you're aware of it. That's why you hear psychologists say “awareness is curative.” And second, a good assessment deepens your capacity for empathy. Leslie and I have long said that empathy is the single most important skill set we have as humans. When you hone your capacity to see the world accurately from another person's perspective, everything changes. Empathy is a rare and valuable gift. It's like handing somebody a gold bar.

LESLIE: Circling back to what we've been through in the last two or three years as a culture, and all the relationship strain and stress: what we do know is that the couples who are thriving are those couples who are practicing mutual empathy. That really is the super skill that stands out, that makes marriages resilient no matter what the strain. So anything we can do to cultivate that is, like Les would say, the point of our spear.

LES: Right. We know what works and what doesn't work. And that's why we're pretty optimistic about our mission—because we now have the tools to realize it in the lives of countless couples. ■

JOY NETANYA THOMPSON (MAT '12) is Fuller's editorial director and senior writer. Find more of her work at joynetanyathompson.com.

Sharing Their Stories, Owning Their Voice

WITH AHREN MARTINEZ



AHREN MARTINEZ (MAICS '18) currently serves as the associate director of children, youth, and family programming at All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, California. A Pasadena native, she is a bilingual advocate, an educator, a mentor, and a diversity, equity, and inclusion engagement champion. Ahren has been working and volunteering within the youth ministry sphere for ten years and is the coauthor of *Talking about Race with Teenagers: A Youth Leader's Guide for Exploring Race, Culture, Immigration, and Power*.

JEROME BLANCO: *You're the associate director of children, youth, and family programming at All Saints Church in Pasadena. I'd love to start by hearing a little about what that role looks like, but then also hear about your particular approach to ministering to youth and families today.*

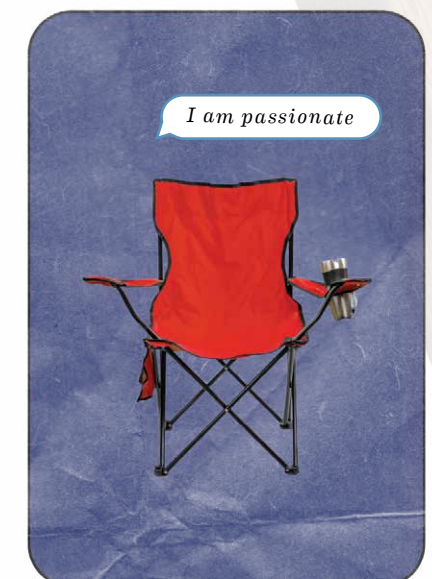
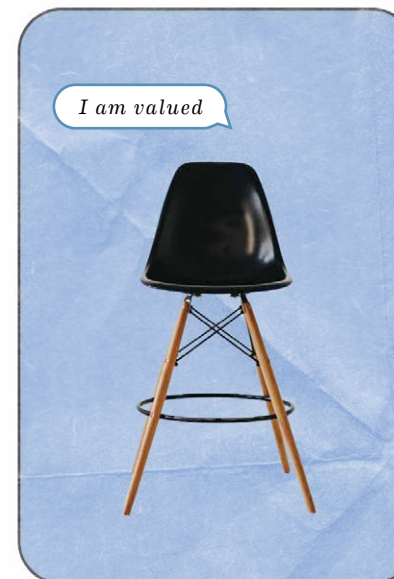
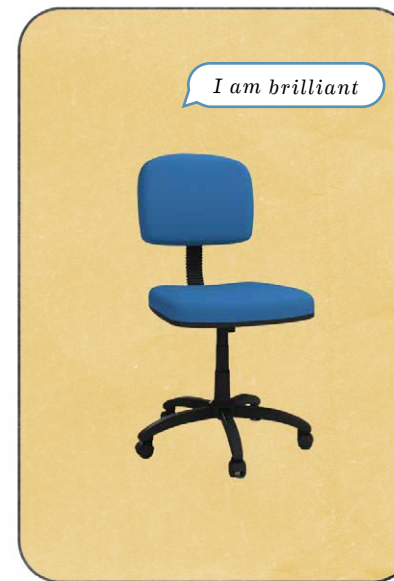
AHREN MARTINEZ: In one sense, what I do is what my title says. I do work on programming for children, youth, and families—pretty much kindergarten through 12th grade and their families. I work on our Children's Chapel on Sundays and our youth group nights on Wednesdays, for example. Really, what I do is work on how to create and incorporate community for our families in the church. A huge part of that is asking: What are the ways in which we can get away from doing programming for the sake of programming, and how do we really build intentional community? How do we have intentional activities that are truly for our kids and families, not just doing things to be doing them? How do we incorporate community in simple ways that are intentional and genuine?

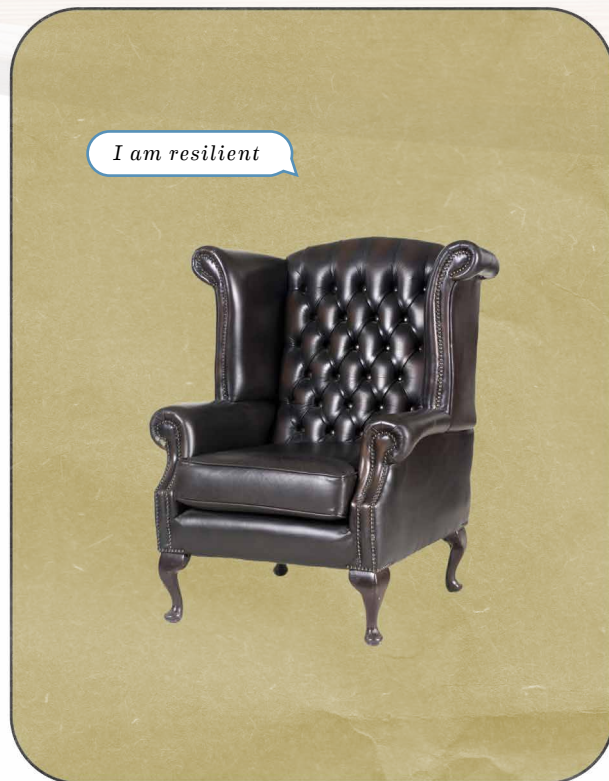
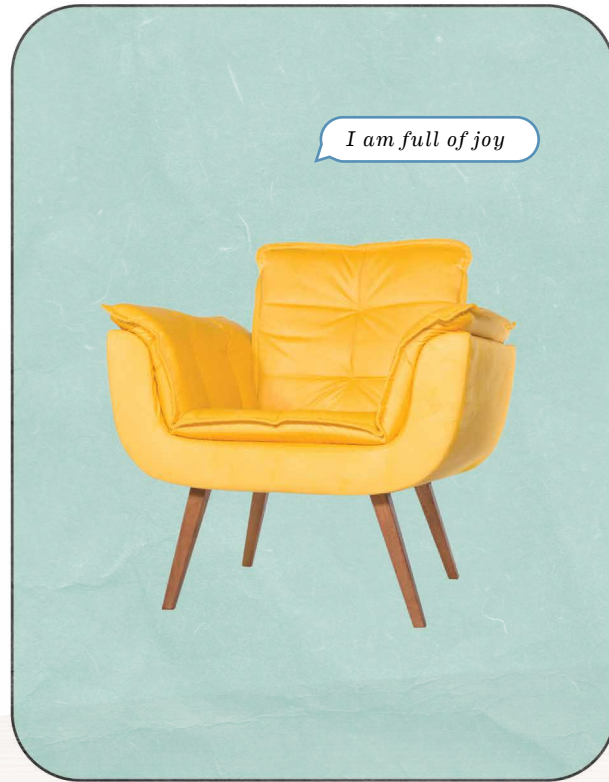
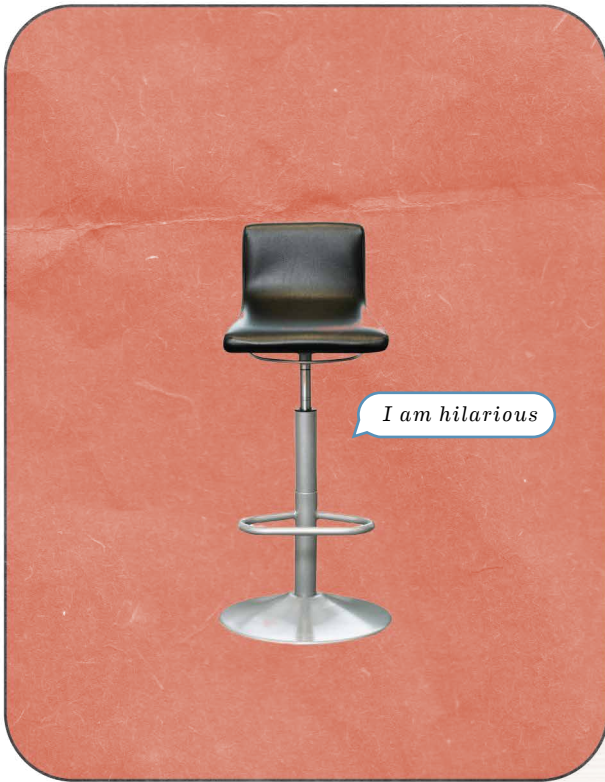
A key to building community in this way is through learning from everyone else, right? This happens with storytelling. No matter what your background, no matter where you come from, we all have a story of how we got here—our trials, our testimony. There are so many stories that we can tell. And so I really emphasize the importance of that. Hand in hand with sharing stories, I especially love bringing people together through food—I have a background as a chef. I feel like food is the great equalizer. It really is such a sacred space when you break bread with other people. It's just such a beautiful way to

bring people together in a genuine and simple way. So, storytelling and table fellowship are a couple of things that are important to me. They're not overcomplicated, but they're powerful.

JB: *I love the idea of something both simple and genuine as a key approach to ministry. I'll share for our readers that you have a background in international relations and intercultural studies, and, as you've mentioned, years of experience as a chef. And I can see how you are bringing those parts of your story—understanding connection among peoples and bringing people together—into your ministry vocation now. I'm curious what it looks like to introduce people, whether younger or older, to these ideas? Sharing stories in table fellowship is natural and simple, in a way, but when programming may be the expectation, how do you form a community in these more intentional practices?*

AM: It looks different for children and for families, and it looks different in different spaces. I do Children's Chapel on Sundays, and it's so fun because kids just love to talk, right? So, in Chapel, I ask everyone to say their names, and I'll have a question. For instance, "What color do you feel like today?" Or "What is your favorite holiday and why?" They'll tell me a whole story around the color or around the holiday. And it'll take probably 30 minutes for a group of ten kids. I always start first because I like to model for them what I mean—how to answer the question. They can choose whether to follow or not, but I think it's important to model. For both kids and adults. And they can take that and run, and they can go with it where they want.





We also have potlucks that we do bimonthly for our kids and families. And people just talk about their kids, about school. We talk about church and what brought us here. And I'm very transparent—about how I didn't always love church—and I tell them about my experiences with church, both good and bad. Very often, they reciprocate, and they tell their own stories of church. Some of them share really painful stories. So everyone has their own personal backgrounds within a church, and everyone has different ways they feel. Everyone's coming from a different frame of reference into the space.

JB: *As you see people come together in those ways, as you see young people and their parents sharing stories with one another around a table, how have you seen that form the community?*

AM: One thing that has been really painful and also really beautiful as of late has been dealing with the trauma and pain of gun violence in schools. In the past two weeks, we've had three different students who've had active shooter threats within their school communities. They've had really stressful, painful experiences. And of course, parents are just in turmoil, and it's tragic, and heartbreaking.

We have dinner for our students and some parents on Wednesday nights before youth group—our volunteer parent ministry is really faithful and incredible at providing food for our kids—and I've been in there with them talking about the pain of the past weeks and how they're feeling. We'll all pray together and love on one another. I really feel like it brings us all closer together; it truly builds community. We check in on each other.

It sucks that you have to talk about these things or that this is something that we're grappling with as a community and as a nation, but having a community to unload with and share those concerns with is really beautiful. It builds a safe and sacred space. The kids share about it with their parents. Or they also share in youth group later—sometimes they feel more comfortable sharing there. This builds a sense of really caring for your neighbor. The kids check in on each other, asking, "How are you?" They'll say, "I remember you shared this, how have you been doing since then?" We actually have a Discord server where the kids talk all week, so they're talking to each other all the time, which is really cool.

JB: *Oh, I love that. Things have obviously changed since I was in high school. You'd have to wait for the next Sunday*

or youth group to connect with your friends, but now technology allows you to maintain that continued community.

AM: Exactly. And the Discord server is how I found out about some of the things happening at the schools. We're checking on our kids, and we're seeing how they're doing, and hearing what's happening and what's going on. And we follow up with them when we see them.

That intentionality really brings accountability and community into the space in ways that we wouldn't have otherwise. So, a lot of people feel safe enough to share what it is they're going through and experiencing. They're transparent because I know that they feel safe enough to be so.

JB: *That kind of vulnerability is such a beautiful part of community, but it comes with its own difficulties, doesn't it? I imagine there are many challenges and a lot of risk that come with trying to build a community of people—especially young people—in this way.*

AM: Yes, you're exactly right. There are a lot of challenges. Because some of our kids don't want to go there all the time—especially some of our middle school youth. They don't want to sit down and talk about stuff often. They just want to do their own thing. And that's fine. We have games, art, and other things for them. There are different ways to engage with each other and the things we're going through.

I think one thing that has been really difficult is that the majority of our youth group is actually LGBTQ+—we have quite a few trans youth in our programs—and I'm a cis-gender female, so it can be hard for them to talk to me and other volunteers (who identify similarly to myself) when they're particularly going through things as a trans person that I don't understand. Especially when our trans volunteers are not at youth group, and when they are feeling emotional because maybe they're not out to their parents or they don't feel safe in their neighborhood because of their gender or sexual orientation. It can be a challenge sharing because they may not feel safe to share. Not that we don't have privacy in our group. They do turn to each other, which is beautiful and great for community, but also, they are the same age, and they'll need other support or help outside of this other person who is a peer. So, we've developed a mentoring program with our volunteers, especially our trans volunteers, so they are able to check in

with our youth weekly to see how they're doing and what's going on in their world each week.

JB: *That makes sense. In a church community, like you said earlier, you're surrounded by so many different stories. People have different backgrounds, contexts, identities, histories, experiences. What makes one person feel safe or unsafe can be different from another person. You're trying to set a table for everyone, but the ground is uneven, with dips and bumps—the surface isn't level. What does it look like to navigate that? Ensuring there is safety for everyone in the community?*

AM: Making space for people wherever they are is really important. And I think you illustrated it really beautifully about setting a table on uneven ground. There's a real importance in creating circles for people where they are safest. And I think part of that is creating relationships with people to see what it is that they need. My partner in the program and I work together and have talked about creating small groups. Different groups for people—LGBTQ+ or BIPOC, for example—in order to create safer spaces for them to feel free to express themselves or communicate safely. Of course, within our larger group, we still want to create safe spaces and cater to our youth's needs. I love our kids, our youth, but it's important to meet youth where they are, to see what they see, and create a space that's led by them and their needs. Ask what those needs are before just saying, "They need this; they need that." That's what it means to form relationships. See what it is they need, and those needs can guide and direct those spaces accordingly.

JB: *There are always limits to our knowledge and experience, and it's important for us to acknowledge that, especially in leadership positions. Do you find you're able to be open about those limits and communicate that with the youth?*

AM: Yeah, I am very honest with my limits. Both my partner and I are. And we definitely do communicate that with them. It's important to be very aware of our frame of reference and where we come from. I can only tell them so much because, as a Black cisgender female, I can't speak to all of their experiences, but I love them all and want to provide them with the most amount of information and mentorship that I can, along with intergenerational relationships that may be of even more benefit to them because of their backgrounds and life experiences.

JB: *I'm curious about what hope and joy and goodness you've seen arise out of these communities and out of you serving these young people.*

AM: They are so full of joy. They are. And they do such beautiful things at our church, in our youth group, and within their own schools. They give me a lot of hope. And they want to tell the adults what they're passionate about, what they want to do in the world, and why it's important for them to speak up. It's incredible. Their voices are strong, and they are brilliant, and they make me laugh every day because they're so hilarious.

But truly, there's just so much beauty in them showing up every week and encouraging each other. I cannot imagine being in high school right now, with all the social media and societal issues they have to contend with each day. Yet they show up and encourage one another, and they fight for change in their schools and in their communities. They also stand up for each other. They show me different ways to pray, different ways to communicate, different ways to experience the world that I've never thought about. They make me think, and they challenge me in ways that I haven't been challenged. It's a really beautiful thing that I value so much. That is really what gives me so much hope and joy. They give me hope in the next generation and in the future in our world. Being around them gives me hope because they are absolutely beautiful souls.

JB: *What would you say is one prayer you have for this emerging generation?*

AM: My prayer for them is that they know they are loved and valued. And I just pray that they own their voices because I feel like they don't feel very empowered a lot of the time. Understandably so. There's so much hard and painful stuff going on in our world, and there is such a stifling of their voices; it can feel so overwhelming. But they're here for a reason, and there're more of them than there are people trying to shut them up, and they're so powerful. So, my prayer is for them to really own their voice and to know how beautiful and incredible and amazing they are, and to shine bright and to exude that joy. Joy is your resistance. Please don't let anyone take that away from you. Continue to show us the way. We need you.

JEROME BLANCO (MDiv '16) is editor in chief of FULLER magazine and FULLER studio.

+ Going Swimming by Kristin Young. Kodak Portra 400 (desaturate), 120 film, Rolleiflex, 2014. See more of Kristin Young's photography in the opening and closing covers and on pp. 11, 34–35, 70–71 and 89.



Announcing Fuller's New MA in Chaplaincy

Fuller is excited to announce the launch of the Master of Arts in Chaplaincy (MAC), which provides holistic training for those called to create new paths and spaces for spiritual care as chaplains. This 64-unit degree is designed for students called to chaplaincy in settings including health care, schools, law enforcement, and corporations.

This practice-focused degree was created by three faculty members with deep experience in different fields of chaplaincy: military, hospital, and law enforcement. The rigorous curriculum intentionally addresses all 31 core competencies shared amongst the major chaplaincy certifying bodies in the US, including the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education and the Association of Professional Chaplains. Additionally, the program's distinctive focus on the wellness of the chaplain allows for students to learn best practices for sustainable, healthy ministry careers.

"This is the degree I hoped for when I became a chaplain: a degree that focuses on practical theology, integrated theory, and tangible skills as well as on chaplain wellness. Fuller's MA in Chaplaincy program helps chaplains to serve from a place of groundedness and peace. The cohorted learning creates a community of fellow chaplains to journey with throughout and beyond the degree program," said Mary Glenn, the program's co-chair and assistant professor of the practice of chaplaincy and community development.

The MA in Chaplaincy will be based in Houston, with most coursework completed online. Students will gather with their cohort at the Fuller Texas campus for occasional intensives for dynamic in-person learning and reflection. The new degree program launches in Fall 2023.

Learn more at Fuller.edu/master-of-arts-in-chaplaincy



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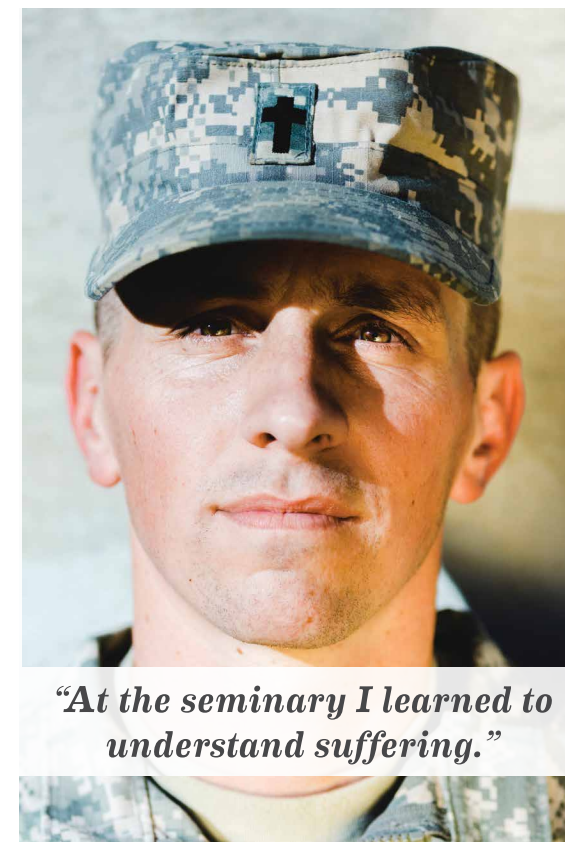
Nate Graeser never planned to be a military chaplain.

But after joining the National Guard and meeting with and listening to buddies who'd been in combat, he wanted to do more.

So, he eventually came to Fuller, earning a Master of Divinity in 2012 with a US Military Chaplaincy emphasis.

Today Nate is a division chaplain with the California Army National Guard and is set to deploy this summer.

"At the seminary I learned to understand suffering," he shares. "I know how to be present, to listen, to pray."



"At the seminary I learned to understand suffering."

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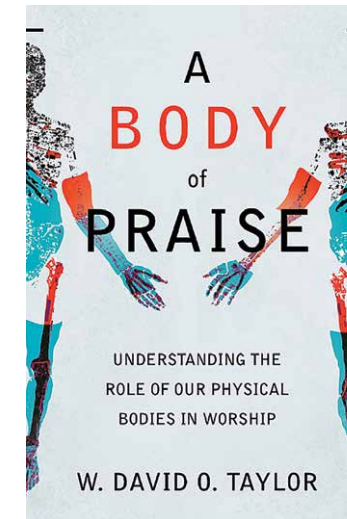
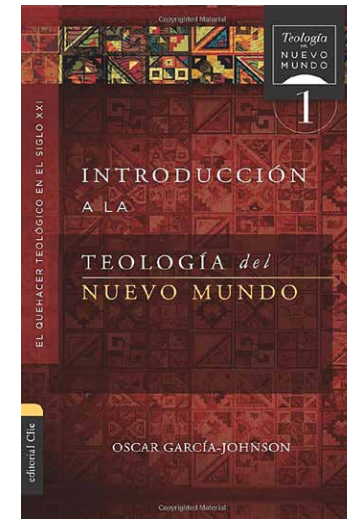
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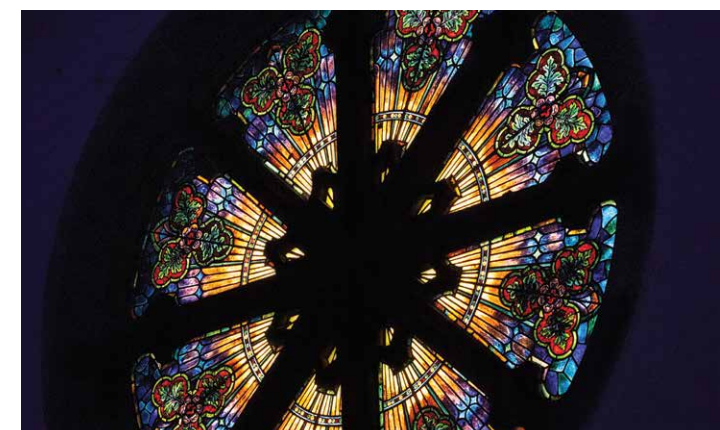
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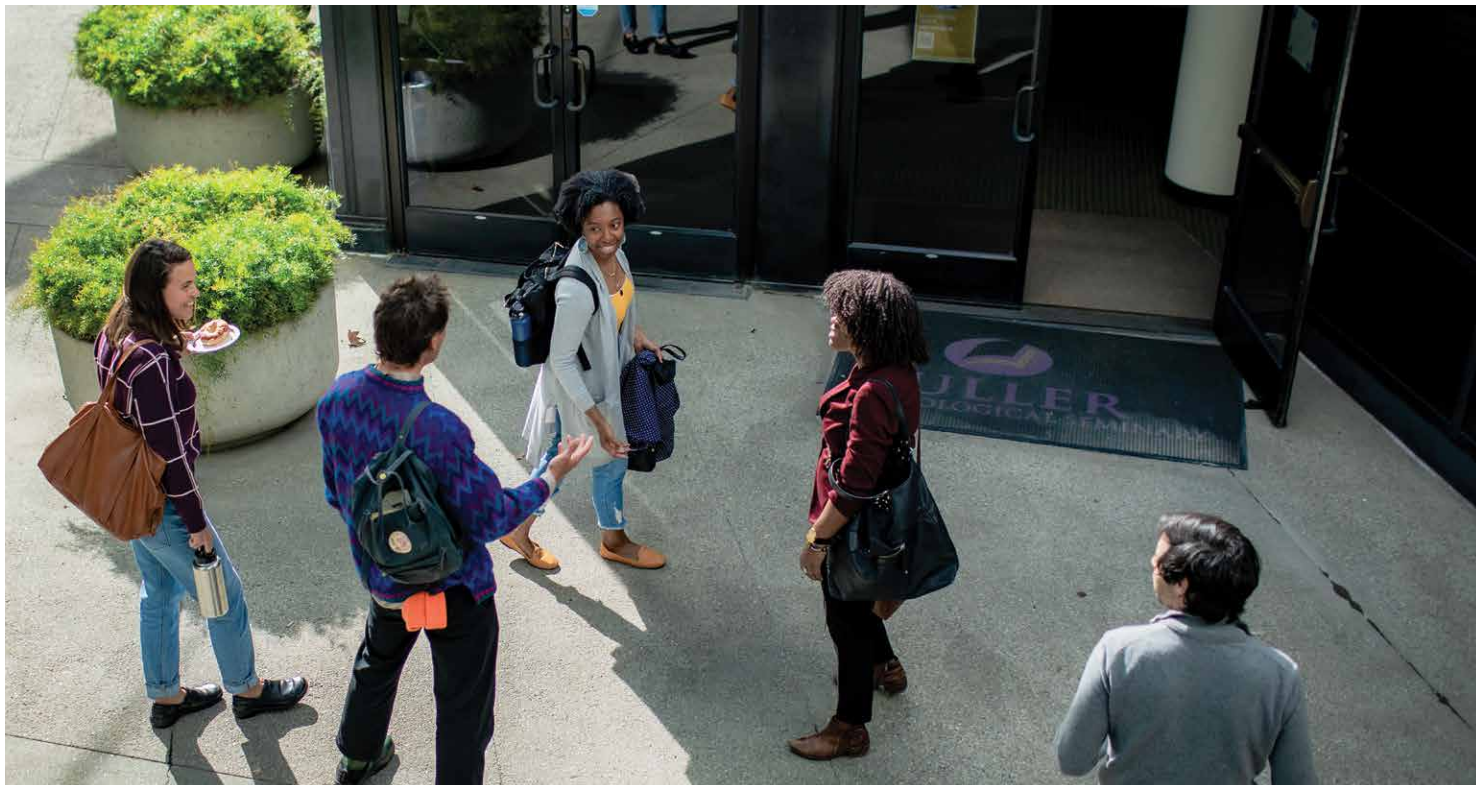


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Fuller Seminary es una institución evangélica y multiconfesional que se compromete a formar líderes globales para las vocaciones del Reino. Respondiendo a los cambios en la iglesia y en el mundo, Fuller está transformando la experiencia del seminario tanto para los estudiantes tradicionales como para los que están más allá del aula: proporcionando formación teológica que ayude a los seguidores de Cristo a servir como fieles, valientes, innovadores, líderes colaborativos y fructíferos en toda la vida, en cualquier entorno.

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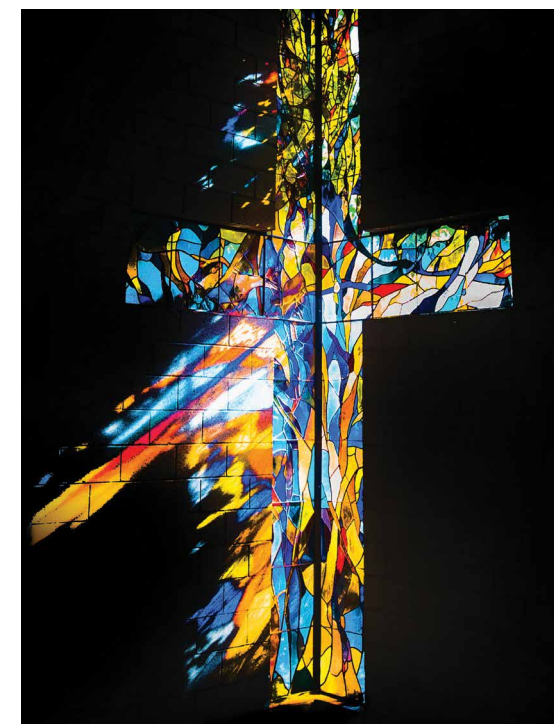
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BENEDICTION:
Kingdom Vision

This past fall, Fuller Arizona’s new student orientation included a tour of the campus. Students visited various offices and departments to learn more about the campus community in an affectionately named “Trot and Treat.” Each office offered a “treat” or small gift that represented them—stickers displaying Fuller’s clinical virtues, “jitter glitter” for first-day-of-school jitters, homemade cookies—when groups came by. Near the end of the trot, as program director Jenny Bayless walked alongside a returning student, the student stopped her and said, “Jenny, I’m looking down at my hands, and they’re full.” They were thinking of the ups and downs Fuller Arizona has gone through in recent years, not the least of which were the difficulties brought on by the pandemic. “And just like my hands, my heart just feels so full!”

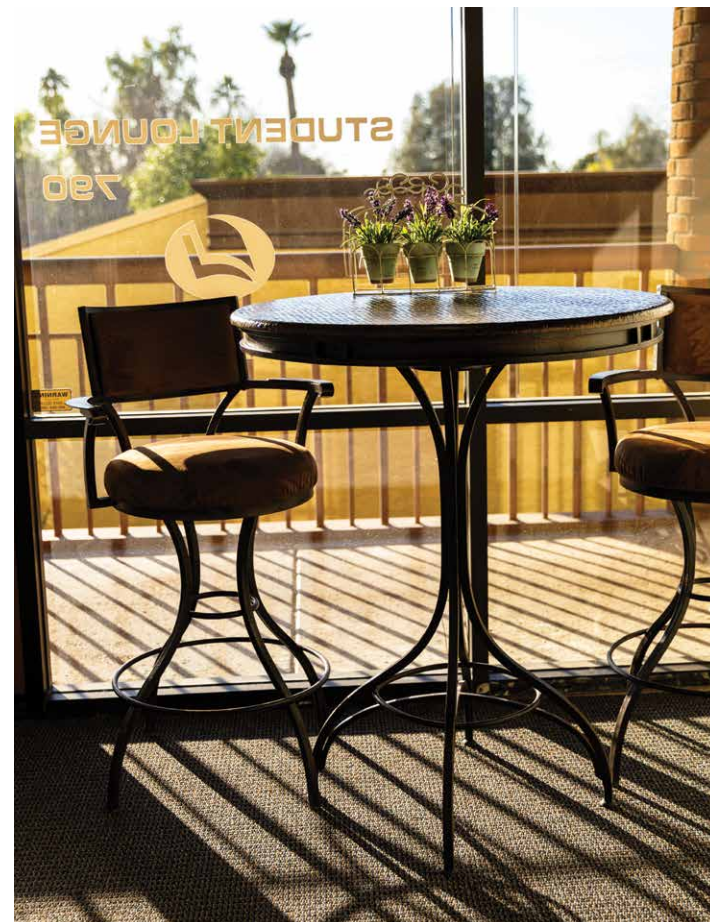
Jenny shares this story as a way of describing what has been a season of renewal for the campus. “There’s this abundance that’s coming,” she says. “And wow, God! Because out of storms and transitions and unknowns and uncertainties, new life is forming.” A major marker of this exciting time is the coming launch of Fuller Arizona’s new mental health clinic.

Jenny talks about “kingdom vision”—a practice of looking to see the many ways God is active all around—which has become a guiding principle of the community during this time. At the weekly Tuesday meeting for faculty and staff, they begin with prayer and with sharing “God signs” with one another. They share what God has been doing in their lives. “It’s exercising a muscle,” Jenny explains, “of seeing God at work.” They share about challenges and losses, and they also share about joys and celebrations—and about witnessing God amidst it all. Jenny affirms that this practice increasingly opens her eyes to see a wider and broader picture of who God is. And above all, being “drenched in prayer” as a community has been essential in the renewal they’ve been experiencing.

This spiritual formation is especially important for the work that Fuller Arizona does of training emerging therapists for kingdom work in the world. Jenny says that therapy can take therapists to many “dark and difficult places” and that it’s necessary to “envision God in all these dark places.” Faculty and staff have a responsibility not only to teach students what this looks like but to model it. As she puts it, “To cultivate that vision at Fuller, it starts with us.”

God has been faithful. And the new life budding all around is palpable in Fuller Arizona. “There’s renewal that’s happening,” Jenny says. “People can see it, and people can smell it. And I’ve been told by many students, ‘It just feels like there are exciting things happening here at Fuller.’”

+ by Jerome Blanco (MDiv '16), editor in chief of FULLER magazine and FULLER studio





✦ Out of the Window by Kristin Young. Ilford HP5 Plus 35mm film, Leica, 2014. See more of Kristin Young's photography in the opening and closing covers and on pp. 11, 34–35, 70–71 and 89.

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+ Fuller Arizona, where Rachel Lingle serves as director of the campus's coming mental health clinic. Read Rachel's story on p. 12 and hear about the exciting work happening at Fuller Arizona on p. 96.

