

Virtual Christian Magazine

Hope And Encouragement For The Real World

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Shaping the Heart and Soul

By Joanne Rutis

Working with young people effectively requires skill. Some are especially gifted. Read about those gifts.



WE HAVE FIVE wonderful children, the oldest now twenty five and the youngest thirteen. During the past twelve years, as one after another entered and passed through their teen years, my husband John and I have placed them in the hands of those who, we hoped, would build on the same foundation we had laid in our home.

Most, if not all, of the people who have worked with our children have been well intentioned. A few have been zealous, but didn't seem to know how to handle young people. And then there have been those who have been truly gifted. They knew just what to say and what to do to bring out the best in our kids.

I couldn't help but notice the characteristics of these gifted folks. For those of us who work with teens, they stand as examples that we should be able to look at and learn from.

They're committed

Those who work with youth have taken on a serious responsibility. We know that the bible tells us, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it."(Prov.22:6)

Training, or working with youth is something that can have a profoundly lasting effect, for what the adult passes on in way of instruction can shape what the child will be when they grow older.

Those who are good at the job are aware of the weighty responsibilities they have assumed and are genuinely interested in the youth they work with.

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When our oldest daughter was sixteen she took an oil painting class at a nearby Community College. Her teacher saw Rebecca's potential and decided she could help develop it. When the class ended, she invited Rebecca to continue to take lessons in her home, at no additional cost.

For these kinds of people, commitment to see the venture through to the end is deep felt and genuine, centered on concern for the young person and not self exaltation. Having clear cut goals helps keep them focused on what they are doing and why.

They take the time

Those who are genuinely interested in youth take the time to develop a close relationship with the individuals they are working with. They know that once they have taken up the plow they must finish working the field.

They have, or, more often, make, the TIME necessary to follow through on their commitment. When necessary, they place less important matters on the back burner to better fulfill their task. Our son, Daniel, began taking tap class when he was nine years old. Now, at age sixteen, everyone is impressed with his dancing expertise. But there was a time when it seemed he would never remember his steps. I clearly remember sitting in the viewing room and watching him struggle as his instructor went over and over the same step with him until she was sure he had gotten it right. And then, the next week, she would do the same thing all over again. This went on for years, until something 'clicked' in Daniel's head. She had commitment and took the time to work with our son on a one on one basis and it finally paid off. Daniel now taps like a pro and is one of her star performers.

They have a tough skin

People who work with youth are always going to run into those well-meaning individuals who express their views on how things should be handled better. The wise instructor realizes that parents can become very emotional where their children are concerned. Many feel that it's the parent's right and responsibility to be interested in what their child is being taught and the way their child is being treated.

Young people who have everything done for them never learn to do things for themselves. Unfortunately, emotions can sometimes override common sense. It's a wise individual who listens to all suggestions and criticisms, letting the negative bounce off while at the same time giving close attention to see if there are any legitimate problems that need to be addressed. "A soft answer turns away wrath" is good advice at any time, but especially when working with an irritated or irate parent.

I remember one meeting where the parents were asked to leave the room. The reasoning was that the young people would talk more freely when the adults (except for the one in charge, of course) were not there. That may have been true for some, but the question is, what sort of message did it send the kids? Those who know how to get the job done don't drive a deeper wedge into the generation gap. Instead, they build bridges, work with parents and teens, stressing the importance of family involvement in all phases of the child's development.

They work hard

Nothing worthwhile ever comes easy is certainly true when it comes to working with young people. Whether it's setting up schedules, developing lesson plans, or hands-on instruction, it will take work. A good leader doesn't delegate the hard work to others and then take all the credit. They realize they are there to serve, not be served. That doesn't mean that they do all the work. Spreading oneself too thin can result in burnout. Sharing responsibilities is another mark of a good leader. Young people who have everything done for them never learn to do things for themselves.

We recently had a local dance where the young people did the bulk of the planning and decorating. It might not have been as polished as an "adult" crew would have produced, but for those involved it was special because they had been allowed to 'do it themselves'. The adults in charge hadn't been afraid to delegate responsibility and, as a result, the teens learned valuable lessons in patience, persistence and finance.

They're sensitive

Those who successfully work with young people are keenly aware that they are dealing with fragile young personalities still in the formative stages. What may be considered a jest, or a light rebuke, can be devastating to a young person. Natural leaders keep their negative comments to a bare minimum while stressing the positive.

I was told of one Bible study in which a teenager gave what they thought was the right answer to a question, only to have the instructor criticize the whole class for not knowing their Bible. The adult in charge hadn't realized how hard it had been for the young person to work up the courage to raise their hand and give what they thought was the correct answer. Because they were insensitive to the feelings of the youth they were working with, the teen was offended and the whole class subjected to negative criticism.

One young person expressed to me the desire to have leaders who were kind. It was another way of saying they longed for an adult who was genuinely interested in young people and sensitive to their feelings and needs.

They treat young people with respect

Showing respect to others goes hand in hand with sensitivity. No one takes kindly to being talked down to. Teenagers, in particular, need to feel that they are being treated as young adults, not children. They may complain about the work involved, but most teens really appreciate Bible lessons where heavier issues are addressed. A 'let's look at this together' comes across far better than lectures or Bible stories.

Sports is another area where young people need to be treated with sensitivity and respect. We've all ran into the coach who belittles, bullies and shows partiality to 'aggressive' players. I recall one case where a coach only put in her "best" players when it came time for the tournament. Those players whom the coach considered less skilled had attended every practice, and had driven a great distance to be involved in the district tournament, only to end up spending all their time on the bench. From a Godly perspective, is winning the game the main objective when dealing with young players? Isn't building a positive self image, developing teamwork among ALL the players, and stressing

One young person expressed to me the desire to have leaders who were kind.

good sportsmanship far more important?

They're resourceful

Keeping young people interested, happy and productive is not easy. At times, many times in fact, things aren't going to go as planned. The Bible study one has worked so hard on may prove uninteresting to the group of youth it is being presented to. A person who is committed enough to have worked up the lesson and sensitive enough to recognize that his class has lost interest, needs also to be resourceful enough to deal with the problem. A good leader isn't afraid to switch topics or change the way the subject is being addressed.

Events that one has planned may, and often do, meet with unexpected difficulties, it is then that those 'gifted' people show their resourcefulness and flexibility by switching from plan A to plan B.

They're up front and honest with the kids

More than anything else, youth appreciate honesty. I was told of one meeting where the subject of sex was addressed. The adult in charge, instead of being honest about it and stating that it was good and wholesome when kept within the bonds of marriage, used scare tactics, going so far as to speak negatively about the act itself. The unfortunate result was that the instructor lost credibility in the eyes of the youth, and a valuable lesson in the right use of sex was lost.

When an adult admits that they haven't got an answer, but will try and find one, they're viewed with far more respect than those adults who try and bluff their way through, wrongly believing they must maintain an authority figure.

They're easy to be entreated

When young people have problems, they don't need to be preached at. Most know when they've made a mistake anyway. What they need is someone to listen to them and offer options without condemning.

What they need is someone to listen to them and offer options without condemning. Sin, of course, should never be encouraged, or condoned. But no one enjoys having their nose rubbed in past mistakes. It's better to point out in a loving manner where the youth slipped up while offering practical ways of rectify the situation if possible.

Anyone who has ever tried to talk to someone who was just waiting for you to shut up so he could get in his two cents, knows that there are different levels of listening. Listening in order to understand is different from listening in order to be heard. Those adults who are successful with young people listen in order to understand.

They spark imagination and drive

As a man thinks in his heart so is he, applies to young people as well as adults. When an adult expects the best of out of a youth, the youth generally strives to live up to that expectation.

Good leaders know how to spark the imagination and drive in the young people they work with.

The young tend to be idealistic. Most want to do the right thing, but often don't know how to go about it. When shown how they can make a better world, the majority respond.

They're firm but fair

No one respects someone that they can walk all over. Young people don't need another friend, or another parent. They do need leaders who they can look up to, and go to for help and encouragement.

One of the most well-liked teachers I knew was one who maintained control over his class, gave hard tests and spoke his mind. Why was he so popular? Because he was firm but fair. He never treated one student better than another, but tried to inspire ALL his class to do their best. He maintained certain standards and the students knew they had best live up to them or suffer the consequences.

Working with young people, be they your own or others, is not an easy task, but it is rewarding. What greater challenge than to help shape a young person's mental, physical and spiritual growth? What greater responsibility than to help a young person develop to their fullest potential?

Lessons from Jonesboro - Helping Our Children Express Their Feelings

By Bill Jacobs

In the aftermath of the Jonesboro, Arkansas children's massacre we are confronted with the WHY questions. Here are some answers to what went wrong with relationships... and what we can do to build proper ones.

WE RECOILED WITH DISMAY the week of March 21, 1998 as we heard the disconcerting news. Another school shooting had taken place, this time in Jonesboro, Arkansas.

As the first photos appeared on television, I was stunned. They were all children, victims and killers alike. They looked just like the boys and girls who play in our neighborhood after school every day.

In less than a year three similar mass shootings have occurred in which children killed children at school. These incredible acts of violence did not happen in major metropolitan ghettos where children are routinely denied the necessities of physical and emotional health. They occurred in three small towns where religion, family values and community support are prized. These communities represent the mainstream of American culture.

As the Jonesboro story unfolded on the news, the initial responses, from shocked newscasters and interviewees alike, echoed a common theme: *"What is happening in America? Why do children kill children in hometown U.S.A.?"* These violent acts imply a serious flaw in the American concept of family. It would appear that even in Middle America our children are not getting what they need for emotional well-being.

What is it about our way of life that creates these terrible events? What are we missing? There are many cultures in which teen crime of any sort is almost nonexistent. Most of these cultures are not affluent. The missing element apparently has little to do with material provision.

One of the first responses from Jonesboro was a call by politicians for more security in schools. We all want our children to be safe at school. We need security. Is increased security a solution that goes to the source of the problem? Or is it a "Band-Aid solution" that deals only with the effect? To find a source solution, we need to understand what we, as a culture, are missing in our families.



The next response came from a state official in Arkansas who said, "Parents should do a better job of raising their kids." This response struck a chord with many. The statement appears to get closer to the problem. We try hard. We love our children. But we are obviously missing something vital in our child-rearing efforts.

My family and I used to live in Jonesboro. Our children, now adults, went to excellent schools there. After school they played with decent children who are now the peers of the victims' and the killers' parents. The community was a wonderful place to raise children. From our

experience there, the people of Jonesboro faithfully represent parent-child relationships in hometown America. The terrible occurrence there does not bode well for the state of parent-child relationships in America.

The TV reporters asked psychologists to explain why a child would kill another child. Counselors on the scene explained that the killers in these three mass shootings were angry children who acted out their anger by perpetrating these destructive acts. Left alone, children are much more prone to act out their negative feelings because they rely more on their emotions for guidance and less on their cognitive or thinking skills.



The key phrase here is "left alone." To weather the storms of childhood, children need the skilled support and involvement of adults: not only parents, but also grandparents, teachers, ministers, coaches, mentors and other involved adults in their schools, churches and communities.

In addition, care givers must understand the emotional needs of children. First, they must understand that *children need help to work through their feelings*. Second, they need to know *how to open channels of communication*, so children will be able to talk.

There is evidence to demonstrate that in American culture, adults do not understand that children and teens need support in dealing with their emotions. We tend to think they will come for help if they have problems -- a most unrealistic expectation.

Nor do American adults know how to open channels of communication with children. In our culture, we are experiencing the deepest separation between children and adults that has ever existed in human history. If we knew how to communicate with our children, that separation would not exist.

Let's look at these two issues more closely. First let's consider a child's need for help in expressing feelings.

Children Are Different

When humans are born, they have little cognitive development. They can't talk yet. Their ability to reason is limited. Babies, however, are keenly attuned to emotions. I once dealt with a teen mother who had a baby that put on no weight after birth. A month later she was still birth weight. She would take a bottle from the nurses in the hospital; but she would not take any nourishment from her mother. This syndrome is called "failure to thrive." It mostly occurs as a result of parental deprivation. When a baby is not lovingly attended by parents, the baby may understand without words that he or she is not loved. Infants rely much on emotional input, and are keenly aware of it.

In the transition from infancy to adulthood, humans gradually develop the ability to think, to talk, to reason. Part of the process of human maturation is a shift from complete dependence on emotional input to the inclusion of thought as well as feeling. When humans are fully mature, they make decisions based on their emotions and their thinking.

Because of this developmental process, adults who want to communicate love and care to

children would do well to remember the following points:

- *Feelings carry more weight than reason.* When I was 4 years old, our family went to Garden of the Gods in Colorado. There were some native American dancers in full costume. I was terrified. No amount of talking or reasoning on the part of my parents would convince me not to be afraid. My emotion was more real than their verbal assurances.

It is interesting to consider that most auto insurance companies decrease rates for young adults at age 25. At this point most young adults are making decisions based more on cognition than on emotional input. We call it maturity. This is to some degree a by-product of culture. Western culture stresses reason much more than some other cultures.

- *Children often do not know how to put their feelings into words.* Feeling is easier than talking. They have not yet developed the verbal and reasoning skills that adults have. For example, if a child feels angry, jealous or afraid, he or she often cannot explain these feelings in words. As children move through teenage, they acquire verbal and reasoning capability, but they still tend to rely on their emotions over their newly acquired cognitive capabilities.



- *Children need help to express their feelings.* Because children are still learning to express feelings in words, it is difficult for them to do so. The more negative the emotion, the more courage it takes. As adults we often dismiss early fears as childish. We forget that when we were children those same feelings caused us real torment. Even teens, who are rapidly developing cognitive ability, need help and practice to put words to their feelings.

Helping Children Verbalize Emotions

Several years ago I received a long distance phone call from a 16 year old, the daughter of good friends. She was upset to the point of tears. True to her age, she was processing her problem emotionally. It seems she was having a crisis with her parents, centered around her boyfriend. I talked to her for no more than 15 minutes on the telephone.

Days later I called her to see how things were going. I also talked to her mother, who informed me that "an amazing transformation" had taken place in their daughter. She seemed to be much less defensive and much more willing to discuss the situation rationally. She was acting a lot more like an adult.

I can't take credit for it. Both the parents and the young lady are high quality people with good principles and deep respect for each other. However, I was consciously trying to accomplish several things as I talked to her.

As my young friend poured out her emotions in words, I tried to feed them back to her in different terms. This helped her enlarge the range of words she used to describe her feelings. It also helped her to use her cognitive abilities to process her feelings, to understand them.

Once the flood of feelings began to subside a bit, we moved quickly to a remarkably adult discussion about what she could do to resolve the situation. She volunteered an admission of disrespectful treatment toward her parents. I asked her to put words on the feelings that came with that behavior. She said she felt ashamed and hated to act that way. Conversely, she also wanted more freedom to spend time with her boyfriend. I asked her to put words on her parents' concerns. She came up with a wonderful analysis of their concerns, admitting that their worry was rooted in love for her.



I asked her if she was willing to give a little to get a little. She told me she knew she couldn't have it all her way, but she didn't want to give up too much, either. "Completely reasonable," I assured her. We then began to develop from her identified list of desires, and the desires of her parents, a plan that she could use to negotiate a more agreeable solution with her father and mother.

This 16 year old was between childhood and adulthood. She had adult language skills, but under duress, as any child will do, she began functioning almost solely on her trusted emotions. She only needed a little adult guidance to trust in and engage her newly acquired cognitive skills. Once engaged, she was able to use her new skills effectively. Our conversation helped her to experience herself as an adult, a feeling so necessary and encouraging to a 16 year old.

Her mother, at one point in our discussion, asked me, "How did you cause her to feel so completely respected listened-to in such a short time?" This leads us to the second issue mentioned earlier: open channels of communication with children.

Opening Channels of Communication

The mother of the Jonesboro child perpetrators was interviewed on television. The reporter told her that counselors said kids who commit such crimes are acting out anger because they have no one to talk to. She responded to the contemporary wisdom by saying that she was home and available for him, but he didn't choose to talk to her. She suggested that perhaps he was embarrassed to talk to her about the problems he was experiencing with girls. She seemed to be as baffled and heart sick as any of the victim's parents. Our hearts go out to her in her grief and bewilderment.

In her comments we can see the problem more clearly. In our culture, as a rule, parents love their children. We try our best to express our love. We remind them constantly they can talk to us if they have problems. We work hard to provide for them. We believe we are physically and emotionally available. We believe we have proven by our actions that we love our children.

Many children, however, experience the parent-child relationship differently. While they may know they are loved, they may also feel isolated and confused about how to deal with the issues of life. Most children in America today experience their life as separated from adult life. They have their own music, their own clothing styles, their own interests and their own activities. When they are troubled by negative emotions, it feels to them like they have no one to talk to, even though Mom and Dad are 15 feet away in the living room. This profound sense of separation, very real to them, makes it nearly impossible for them to talk to adults about their deepest fears, their most frightening feelings, their most embarrassing problems.

How can we help our children open up and talk to us when they are troubled?

Children Relate Differently Than Adults

It may surprise some to understand that children experience relationships differently than adults. Consequently, to build a relationship with a child, we must do things differently. Let's look at how children relate to others.

In our earlier discussion of human development, we saw that children rely mainly on emotional input at first, then gradually include reason and thinking as these abilities develop. Those who work with children notice that they have "emotional radar." Children can tell whether adults are sincere or not, whether they care or not. This input is nonverbal. If you ask children how they know someone doesn't care about them, they struggle to put words to it. They didn't gain the insight by words or thinking. Some social scientists say human communication is well over 50% nonverbal. Voice inflection and tone, posture, dress, hairstyles, facial expressions, body movement and gestures all play a part in communicating emotional content. Children unconsciously read and rely on this information to test and form their attachments.



If we want to build a safe and trusting relationship with children we must communicate with them on the emotional, nonverbal level as well as with words. Until we connect with them on this level, they will not feel secure enough to talk to us.

An example may help clarify the process. A man goes on a business trip, leaving his wife and 3-year-old son at home. He calls every night and talks to both of them. He tells them both he loves them. His wife, using her cognitive skills, reasons that her husband cares about her because he takes the time to call her. She hears him tell her that he loves her, and she connects his words with recollections of their mutual feelings of love. After she talks to him she feels loved. The 3 year old, however, will only feel loved when his father comes home, gives him a big hug, pulls his son up on his lap and listens intently while his son tells him all about what happened while daddy was gone. The child relies more on nonverbal cues to detect that he is loved.



What does all this mean related to children? Children like to go out to eat and they like to receive presents just like adults, but these things do not prove to them that they are loved in the same way they might to an adult. Buying children things, taking them to amusement parks, setting up trust funds or annuities for college tuition, etc., might be motivated by parental love, but do not cause children to feel safe enough to examine their problems

and feelings.

Going back to my childhood experience with the Indian dancers, I recall that my fear did not begin to subside until my father picked me up in his arms and held me close while he promised to keep me safe. Before long, I was a fearless and happy child. Notice that I did not accept his verbal messages as true until he communicated love and safety to me at the nonverbal level.

Teenagers generally respond this way also, even though they are older. At our summer camps we notice that when the staff attends to them with positive nonverbal communication, they feel safe enough to try things they have never tried before. They seem more respectful of each other and the staff. They talk more freely about difficult topics.

Connecting With Our Children

How exactly do we connect on an emotional, nonverbal level with children and teens? In our culture adults tend to consider the opinions, feelings and needs of children less important than those of adults. Children, emotionally attuned creatures that they are, read this and correctly infer that they are not respected. No one wants to open up to someone who disrespects them.

In order to connect with children, we have to demonstrate interest, respect and care to them, at the nonverbal emotional level. Until we do this, we can forget about any trusting relationship with them. Children simply cannot relate to adults unless those adults send them caring, interested and respectful signals. When they sense emotionally that we are interested in them, care for them and respect them, it is much easier for them to open up to adults.

How exactly can we send these nonverbal messages of respect and care to our children?

- *Eye contact.* When an adult listens to a child and makes gentle eye contact, this communicates interest, respect and care, without words, at a meaningful level to the child. If this eye contact is accompanied with a warm facial expression and open posture, so much the better. Eye contact is meaningful to all humans, but relied upon more strongly by children as evidence of interest and respect.
- *Touch.* The day following the Jonesboro school shooting, some child experts were interviewed on television. While talking about what parents could do to help children open up, one of them, a noted M.D., said, "I think we have forgotten the power of the hug." Touch is a powerful vehicle to communicate care, love and respect at the nonverbal level. An adult's hugs and other appropriate physical contact send positive messages to children.
- *Giving our time.* Another way to help children know we respect them is to spend time with them. I know a father who takes each of his three children out to dinner once a month. He sits across a table from them, looks into their eyes and enters into their personal life. He listens to their plans, troubles, successes, experiences. He told me after one such event with his 16 year old daughter, "She's growing up. She has plans. She has purpose." He was amazed and delighted. So was his daughter. She knows her father respects and loves her. She learned it, in part, by his willingness to give some of his time to her.
- *Unconditional acceptance.* Children feel less powerful than adults. They see adults as the authorities. Adults deal out both blessings and punishment. To come to someone of such power, children need to know that when they come, they will be met with acceptance, no matter what they have done. Children will more easily admit their faults and receive correction if they know that they, apart from their actions, are loved and accepted as human beings. We convey this acceptance by engaging our children when

they have done something wrong, rather than venting anger on them, withholding our affection from them or denying them our attention.

Children are wondrous creatures, each possessing unique potential. If they are to fulfill that potential, they need the support and guidance of parents and other adults. Before they will accept our help they must sense, as much as know, that we care about them. We must know how to open a channel of nonverbal communication with them.

The author, a minister of the United Church of God, has served ten congregations in four regions of the United States over 30 years. He coordinates seven summer camps for the United Youth Camps program and is currently completing graduate work on a master's degree in counseling. He and his family lived in Jonesboro, Arkansas, for eight years.

Hello, God! Are You There?

By Roma Camerata

How do we know if God hears our cries and prayers? Here's how little Elizabeth found out.

MANY PEOPLE BELIEVE IN GOD. Some believe He hears their prayers. Some believe He answers their prayers. Some people don't know what to believe. This is an age-old problem, which many people struggle with in various phases of life.

Through good times and bad we call out to God. How do we know if God hears our cries and prayers? Through the years I personally have seen God intervene in the lives of many people, and even in my own life, but not always in the way we expect or want Him to.

Several years ago there was a country song that became a big hit, "Thank God for Unanswered Prayers." The song is about an individual who reflects on his life and remembers some of the prayers he prayed to God. He was grateful that God had chosen not to answer certain prayers the way he had prayed them.

There was a little girl about 9 years old. Her name was Elizabeth and she was the youngest of four. Elizabeth's father was in construction in Iowa and didn't make a good income for the family. They just barely scraped by week to week. All of her clothes were hand-me-downs. The family slept in one big room in the upstairs of their modest home. Elizabeth remembered the day the household finally had an indoor bathroom built in their house. Someone gave them a big square black box TV and finally they installed a telephone.

Elizabeth wanted a bicycle very much. She knew better than to ask her parents. They just didn't have the money. All the kids in town had bicycles. In fact her best friend was just given a new bicycle by her parents.

Elizabeth tried to earn the money to buy a bicycle. She wanted to baby-sit, but she was too young and besides everyone always called her older sister to do that. She also went to her neighbors to see if she could clean house or do errands to earn money, but to no avail.

The only resource Elizabeth had at her age was to ask God. Her mother set the example of studying the Bible and made sure Elizabeth said her prayers before going to bed every night. Elizabeth had never heard of answered prayer; no one talked much about that. But every night when she prayed she would look up to God and say, "Hello God, are you there? Would it be possible for me to have a bicycle?" Then she would continue her nightly prayers.

Elizabeth continued to pray for several weeks. No one knew she was asking God for a bicycle. They would laugh! You don't ask God for bicycles. God does big things, like miracles, so everyone can see! He splits the Red Sea. He burns a bush that doesn't burn. He changes water into blood. He holds the sun from setting. But... bicycles?

Elizabeth continued to pray. Her weeks turned into months. One day her father came home from work later than normal. He had stopped by a friend's house. It was almost dark when he pulled in, but Elizabeth ran out to meet him as usual. He began to explain that this friend gave him an old secondhand... Elizabeth peeked over the back of the truck. There in the bed of the truck lay a bicycle. She couldn't believe her eyes. Her father had no idea she had been praying for a bicycle, but there it was!

Does God answer the prayers of a small child?
Hello God! Are you there? You sure are!



Rekindle The Flames Of Fellowship

By Dan Taylor

Can a Christian survive as a loner? It's possible, but it's much better to be with others as we face our life's challenges.



FEW THINGS are more inviting on a cold winter's night than basking in the warmth of a cozy fire. There's something most captivating, something romantic about watching flames dance over a stack of crackling, red-hot logs.

But if you've ever built one, you know that it takes skill to kindle a few pieces of wood into a roaring fire. And experience also shows that once ignited, an untended blaze soon dies down and, finally, dies out.

Of Fires and Fellowship

Like a warm cozy fire in our home, few things create a more pleasant ambiance among God's people than a congregation where close fellowship is taking place.

How many of us recall the many evenings we enjoyed in the homes of brethren when we were first started meeting. We shared the stories of our callings, our backgrounds and our fervent hope for God's kingdom. As a result, so many of us drew very close as brothers and sisters should.

But it's easy to forget that good fellowship, like a well-tended fire, takes work. It doesn't just happen. Building the strong bonds of friendship among people takes time and effort. Yet, so many just go and put in their time at church and then leave. Sadly, too many of us are strangers to one another.

How about you? Do you find fellowshiping enjoyable? Are you satisfied with your conversations? Do you and those you talk with feel uplifted, better off for having been together? Do you feel close to anyone in your congregation? Or is your fellowshiping merely an matter of shaking hands, talking about the weather or just saying hello. If this is the case, then are you really deriving and giving the most benefits you can during the time you spend with those you call your spiritual brothers and sisters?

Take Time To Get To Know Others

It may seem all too obvious, but fellowshiping, like building any relationship, necessitates interaction. In order to have a relationship

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with God, we have to get to know Him. We do so by spending time with our Father in heaven. Likewise, if we are to have a relationship with our brethren, we need to spend time getting to know them.

fellowshipping, like building any relationship, necessitates interaction.

The bonds of brother and sisterhood that were built in the Apostolic Church of God sprang from the fellowship of those who often shared trials together like Paul and Silas (Acts 16: 19-34), those who like Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2) and Lydia (Acts 16: 14-15) gave of their substance; or Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16: 3-4) who risked their lives for Paul, their brother in Christ. The bonds they built were strong and necessary to prepare them for the trials they had to undergo as individuals and as a collective body of fellow believers. We need those same close bonds today.

A Building Fitly Framed

God brought us together as a Church to be a dwelling place of His Holy Spirit--a building, as the King James Version renders it, "fitly framed together," (Ephesians 2:21-22). If we survey our congregation, can we say it is a solid building? Or are there some areas that need mending?

Our fellowship should include all of our brethren. Young, old, married or single. Paul used the analogy of the body in 1 Corinthians 12:14-31. Noting in verses 21-23 "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'...On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor." In verse 26 he said that "if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together."

Paul left no one out. All are important. This holds true for our fellowship. Our fellowship should include all of our brethren. Young, old, married or single. No matter what socio-economic group, sex, race or background--we are all brothers and sisters in the body of Christ.

God says he is a "Father of the fatherless and protector of the widows," (Psalms 68:5-6). We ought to be careful not to overlook the singles, widows (spiritual or otherwise) and fatherless among us as well.

Finally, in James 2: 1-10 we read a strong condemnation of those who show partiality to those who have wealth or social status over those who are poor among their brethren. But perhaps just as important as who we do not overlook in our fellowship is what we fellowship about.

Good Fuel For Fellowship

A good, long-lasting fire depends on what kind of wood we use to fuel the flames. If we build a fire with pine it won't last nearly as long as a fire made with a denser wood such as oak or pecan. Likewise, the results of our fellowship have a lot to do with what we talk about.

In the book of Philippians, the Apostle Paul urged his brethren to keep their minds focused: "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy

of praise, think about these things," (Philippians 4: 8).

Conversation that uplifts, builds and elevates is often sorely lacking in our day-to-day lives. Even among our brethren, we often find ourselves more focused on our woes than the One who can deliver us from those troubles. But fellowship that centers on binding wounds, opportunities for heartfelt intercessory prayer and comforting those who may be down or lonely not only dispels the air of cynicism that so permeates our modern-day societies, it refocuses all concerned on the hope that lies within each of us.

This doesn't mean we can't discuss the weather, our jobs, our favorite sports team or anything of that nature. But sometimes, these subjects are all we seem to find to talk about.

Godly fellowship also avoids judging and judgmental attitudes. James exhorted his brethren to "do not speak evil against one another, brethren. He that speaks evil against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you that you judge your neighbor?" (James 4:11-12).

Yes, we may be excited about the latest movie, who won the Super Bowl or World Cup, but we ought not forget that our fellowship should build bonds, uplift our spirits and turn our minds and hearts again to God's purpose for us as individuals, as a Church and for all humankind.

The Lone Log

One interesting aspect about minding a fire is observing how a once blazing log will slowly start to smolder and die out if it rolls apart from the others. Yet if we stack it on or push it back with the others, it soon burst back into flames. The logs' collective heat is once more concentrated and their potential is once again released.

It reminds us of what Christ said in Matthew 18: 20: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Like logs that concentrate their heat to produce a warming flame, when brethren are together, we produce a spiritual flame.

Like logs that concentrate their heat to produce a warming flame, when brethren are together, we produce a spiritual flame.

But if we do not attend services, if we fail to fellowship with our spiritual brothers and sisters, we are not contributing to that spiritual flame. Paul reminds us in Hebrews 10: 23-25 "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

Yet some of us withdraw from the fellowship of Christ. Like that lone log that rolls away from the stack of wood, some of us lose our bright flame, smolder and die. It is not only the lone log that loses, however. All those who might be able to enjoy the special gifts that each of us bring into the fellowship of the Church also suffer loss.

Rekindling the Flame

Let's rededicate ourselves to rekindling the fires of our faithfulness to God's word, His way of life and to our fellowship with our brethren. Let's truly get to know one another, pray for one another's welfare and uplift those who need our concern. And together, we can build a flame that will be "the light of the world. A city set on a hill," for a world that desperately needs the hope of salvation through Jesus Christ and soon coming Kingdom of God.

Virtual Christian Magazine Editorial

Welcome!

By Victor Kubik

WELCOME TO OUR FIRST ISSUE of ***Virtual Christian Magazine!*** We are excited about this new means of sharing our faith with you and the world as we launch Volume One, Issue One.

What is the mission of the ***Virtual Christian*** also referred to as ***VCM?***

With each monthly issue we will share our Christian hope and encourage our readers. Emphasis will be articles with practical Christian living principles.

Our Mission Statement is: ***Virtual Christian Magazine***, Hope and Encouragement for the Real World. An on-line magazine of practical Christian living and inspiration for the 21st Century.

We will share stories of how God dwells with and interacts with people. Accounts of faith's power, love's bond and hope's anchor will fill this magazine. Practical solutions to life's challenges will be discussed along with stories about how God has intervened, encouraged or helped us overcome. We hope to include as many first-person true-life stories as possible to inspire and motivate someone to overcome life's difficulties and offer suggestions about how to live a life centered around Jesus Christ.

Also, we want to hear about how people help one another and help others help themselves.

Subject matter will revolve around what's relevant in your life: family, children, marriage, values, strengths, weaknesses, spiritual gifts, relationships, friendships, health, sickness, depression, offence, death...

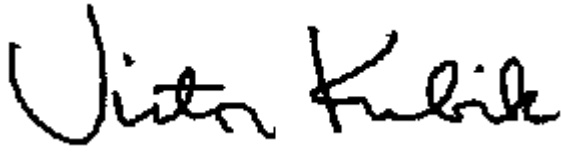
That's just a starter list.

We will talk about solving tough personal problems, and building satisfying relationships with family, friends and co-workers. We will be ready to laugh, but not afraid of tears.

Our objective with ***Virtual Christian Magazine*** is to:

- Use the cyberworld to reach those inquiring about answers to life's biggest questions
- Provide a destination for those searching the cyberworld for life's answers
- Provide meaningful commentary on breaking news
- Use new methods of one and two-way communication to more effectively achieve our objective

An advantage of an on-line magazine is that articles can be timely; they can immediately reflect quickly-developing events in the world while at the same deal with timeless human issues. Our authors will be open to interaction with readers via email. Articles dealing with specific problems will offer Internet links which guide readers to on-line resources for help and support. Suggestions from readers can be easily incorporated into articles already

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vito Kubik". The letters are cursive and somewhat stylized, with the 'V' and 'K' being particularly prominent.

Welcome! We are looking for feedback from you.

And, tell your friends that we can be found at <http://vcmagazine.org>.