
Dialogue

Volume 5 Issue 2

Strength for the church's journey into wholeness in Christ

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The subject: *Parenting*

Who'd have thought Circle of Hope would need some dialogue on parenting? To be honest, many of us have thought so, from our inception. In a day when so many of us feel like we are children without parents, at least without parents who had strength of character and faith, we have a lot to learn about raising our own children. What's more, the "parentless" children we keep meeting have many needs we'd like to meet.

So it is about time we invaded the sacred territory of family life with dialogue. Our writers have informative and maybe provocative things to say about how children should be nurtured and how our community in Christ plays its part — and needs to play a big part. — *Ed.*

The Lost Art of Parenting a Healthy Child

Okay, first let's be absolutely clear: There are no perfect parents and no perfect kids so there's no perfect parenting (and no perfect childhood). Let's all run away from that fantasy as best we can.

But what can be said about ways to be nurturing and kind and helpful and loving to a child? Well, lots, but the best of it would happen over a cup of tea or an unhurried dinner so that the deepest concerns of any parent's heart could be identified and honored.

What I hope to do in this brief article is to dialogue, as the title implies. I want to begin some conversation about how to parent and how to allow the process of parenting to contribute to our growing up as adults as well. No one will unveil your psychological quirks quite like your own child!

For the purpose of being brief let me put a framework on this discussion by suggesting that we look at parenting from the perspective of soothing and stimulating. I'd like to look at these two constructs as poles on a continuum with *soothing* at one side and *stimulating* at the other. There's an inherent tension between these two ideas that I believe captures some of the complexity and beauty of the parenting process.



SOOTHING

Kids need soothing all along the way as they grow up. This encompasses needs that are both physical and emotional that must be met by parents and has tremendous spiritual implications as well. Life has frustrating moments and all of us, young and old, must learn to deal with the frustration. Any need that goes unmet causes the need for soothing. When the baby is hungry, she cries and when she is offered nourishment, she calms. Parents do this. It's the basics. But there are many needs being met in this process. The child is noticed and attended to, held close, eye contact is made, etc. The basic premise I'm getting to is this: soothing comes by way of relationship. All the way through development this will be true. So one of the basics I'd suggest for parenting is: be aware of the relationship you are creat-

ing and maintaining.

Kids experience soothing when they, as persons with needs, are recognized; when their emotional and physical needs are identified and addressed, even if at times those needs cannot be immediately or fully met. This last point brings me to the other pole on the continuum, so let me discuss the concept of stimulating, and come back to a discussion of balancing of the two.

STIMULATING

From the beginning children also need stimulation to grow and develop. Parents do this spontaneously with infants. They hold and feed their children (soothing) and they tickle and play with their children (stimulating). Both functions are essential for the child's development. Both functions occur within the context of a relationship with the parent(s). Stimulation, as I'm suggesting we define it here, is a sort of definition of the self through autonomous interactions with the environment. In soothing, the child feels he is understood, and at one with others in his world. In stimulating, the child feels that she is a separate and unique individual, and can offer distinctive gifts to others. Kids experience stimulation as another form of the recognition of them as valuable individuals in the group (family, neighborhood, culture). Ultimately the child will need to learn to find in his/her peer relationships avenues for soothing and stimulation as well. Parenting (and maybe this is what makes it one of life's most difficult and potentially rewarding relationships to sustain) is a process of holding close (soothing) and letting go (stimulating), over and over again.

BALANCING SOOTHING AND STIMULATING

As I've been thinking about parenting recently, I've been considering a problem that I see repeating itself, given some of the current trends in our

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culture. It seems to me that there's been a strong shift in the last few decades that has left the main focus in parenting on the soothing side of the continuum. When children are upset, adults rush to offer comfort. When the child demands more (as any child learns early to do), the adults seem to get caught in an endless cycle of adding more soothing. The demands go up, the parent tries harder to find the "magic" to soothe the child. As I've talked with parents about this, I hear often that they are attempting to be a good parent based on models they're holding in their minds that were formed out of painful experiences in their own childhoods. "I want him to be able to express his feelings. I never got to in my family." *Hidden assumption:* the child knows what to do for him or her self and that all expression is good. "I think she's a bit emotional, but what can I do? It's just the way she is." *Hidden assumption:* the child is a fixed being, no changes possible. These sorts of assumptions lead to the conclusion that the demands for soothing must be met. But the truth is that there are times when a child needs the stimulating influence of some parental limits that reflect the realities of relationship building and maintenance. For the child to grow into a healthy, functional adult, s/he needs to learn about other's feelings and the individual's power to influence others. No better place than in the relationship with parents for this to begin. Besides, parents who are trying to meet only soothing demands without attending to the need for limits and negotiating how needs/desires are addressed in the context of the family usually end up getting angry with the child and acting out of that anger.

Parenting needs to be a balance between soothing and stimulating. To recognize and listen to the feelings of a child is a marvelous gift. It is not, however, necessary to then validate that those feelings (and the desires they represent) are all legitimate and will all be met. Life simply doesn't work that way – thank goodness! We grow when we learn to work with the limits of who we actually are, the limits with our gifts and our shortcomings. It's my suggestion that we need to keep a balance with the stimulation of informed limit setting within our parenting as well as attuned soothing.

Gwen White

This is a major issue of conversation

The Needs of Children in Cells and PMs and Creative Ways to Meet Them

this year, at both our sites and in many of our cells. Both Tracey and Deb have thought for years on the subject. — Ed.

Tracey's thoughts...

O *Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. Luke 18: 16-17.*

The children are coming to us! Praise the Lord! We are growing abundantly in ways we probably didn't consider we would when Circle of Hope started. I always imagine "the next generation" to be college students and those in their twenties. I hope, pray, and work towards Circle always being accessible and attractive to these people. I remember distinctly my own anguish in my twenties as I encountered racism, poverty, and oppression for the first time. Jesus found me in college as I was searching for love and for my place in the world. I am so thankful.

Now as I am beginning my own family I am hearing the struggles of those with young families. How do we continue to be a safe place to explore and express God's love for the next generation; for the twenty year olds **and** our own children? A two year old and a twenty-one year old have very different life styles. It seems to me that in Luke 18 Jesus tells us that this can work out, and bring life for everyone involved. He goes so far to say that if we will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child we will never enter it. I think the children have much to teach us.

As I sat down to write this article I began by considering the needs of the Church, the parents, and the toddlers. I am struck by how similar the needs

are and how important the Church is in the journey to meet God.

- we need to be loved and we need to love
- we need to connect with God and each other
- we need to learn to not be afraid of each other

The next needs are specifically those of the toddlers, but they are also true for adults.

- children need a safe place to play with their friends
- they need adults to care for them and teach them appropriate ways to behave in public meetings (walk, speak with an inside voice, respect and be kind to others, obey those who love them).
- children need to stay on their eating and sleeping schedule as much as possible

As I consider what life will be like as a parent at Circle, I am hoping for times to worship and communicate with God without worrying about the care of my children. I am hoping to continue to meet, love, and be loved by my friends in the in-between times without being consumed by my children. I am hoping this for me and for people who will be visiting us.

Dialogue

WHY? *This quarterly journal is a gift to everyone who wishes to be a part of the ongoing dialogue we share in Christ that forms us and deepens us as a real church. Whether you just arrived or have been with us from the beginning, we want you to be part of the conversation and an informed member of the team. We hope you will work with us to build a safe place to experience and share the love of Jesus Christ. Dialogue is a crucial part of that.*

If you would like to respond to any of the articles printed, that would be great. We have never turned a response away, yet — but we reserve the right to do so.

So how do we care for our children, ourselves, and those yet to come? I think we can first remember Jesus' words and know that in working this out we will grow closer to Him. We can provide a beautiful, safe, clean space to play for our children. We can support and encourage the Children's Team who lovingly provide continuity and care to our children during the public meetings. We can volunteer willingly to care for the children when each of our cells hosts the public meeting. We can join a cell. We can listen and learn from the children. (Recently Bailey has taught me a lot about love as she warmly greets me every Sunday.) We can make an effort to remember the children's names, and use their names when loving them and helping them behave appropriately in a public meeting in the in social times that surround them. It's in those social times it will be the hardest to work out our life together. There will be conflict which also means there will be opportunity for growth.

As I think about those "social" times (like the "in-between" time in Center City), I first think of those yet to come. Many people meet us for the first time in these times. They are meeting Jesus through us during these times. I want them to be attracted to us and Jesus. I know that chaos is not attractive and that kids are good at chaos. I also know that kids don't need or have to be chaotic and that structure helps them to be better learners, more creative, and more comfortable with themselves. They don't want to be ruled by their impulses any more than we do. It is good for the children to know the appropriate way to act at a public meeting. Learning these behaviors helps them to love God, to hear and obey God, and to love others. To me the big question is who is responsible for this teaching? I speak as a teacher, and lover of children. I've been thinking about these things as a future parent, but having no experience as a parent, I'm not sure how this will all work out in actuality.

I think it is very important to be sensitive to a child's eating and sleeping schedule. No matter how disciplined a child is, they will be miserable and cranky if they are hungry and tired. Our worship times present a bit of a problem then. I know Deb Valentine brings dinner along for her two boys. Devin and Josh then can eat during the p.m. or during the in-between time. Then when they get home they can immediately begin getting ready for bed. This is good for her kids but may take Deb away from some visiting

she may want to do. We need to reach out to our parents of young children, for a time their children's schedules will limit them from reaching out to us.

I think a lot of the teaching about how to act around adults in public meeting type settings can be done at home. It may take some time for the children to comfortably behave appropriately without a lot of redirection, but I think it is possible. Redirection no doubt will be needed during the p.m. however. I think I would be comfortable with anyone who loves my child talking with them about their behavior, especially if I wasn't nearby. I do that for children and parents now and believe that it is an important part of the kingdom work. I can imagine however that it would be upsetting if someone else disciplined my child in a way that I felt wasn't loving. It is here that we need to be courageous and do the work of asking for help, offering help, listening, and loving.

I really enjoy the comfort all of our children have in our space at 239 South 10th Street. The children know they are loved, and Circle is a safe place for them to explore and express God's love too. As the children mingle in the crowd and we all delight in them I know we are creating a really wonderful church. We must also keep watch for chaos, however. I have been at a few public meeting where I have been overwhelmed by the chaos. Let's work together to welcome the little children and the new visitors, and enter the kingdom of heaven together.

Tracey Kohl

Deb's thoughts...

I have been asked to write about creative ways to involve toddlers and preschoolers in our cells and public meetings. It's a tough topic. There's not a real clear place for kids at Circle of Hope yet, and there isn't a real obvious path to follow in finding a place for them. But then Circle hasn't been in the habit of following a lot of obvious paths anyway has it? ...and Rod talked about HOPE when I was at the Public Meeting tonight....

I don't think it's too tough to be a toddler or preschooler at Circle of Hope. I think the kids who are around

regularly really know that they are loved and they pick up a lot of good stuff about Jesus and justice and mercy and grace in their relationships with all the adults who are around. There is a lot of good that happens for our youngest ones in and around Circle of Hope.

I think it *is* tough being a *parent* of a toddler or preschooler at Circle. At least it is tough for me, and I know of some others who have left for this very reason. Because we don't know where our kids fit in, sometimes we don't know where we fit in either. How do we manage to attend a cell? Do we split up and attend different cells? Do we get a babysitter every week? What if we want to bring our kids - will other people object or will they help us? And what about bedtimes and needing to get the kids up so they can go to school or daycare in the morning? For my family, even the 5:00 public meeting makes Sunday night really stressful since my oldest started kindergarten and I started working full time. And though I think I learned too much Bible content as a kid, I find that my 6 year old comes home from retreats with my parent's church and I can tell he has really soaked in some of the content he learned, like he's thirsty for it. And, yes, maybe I should be teaching him more myself, but it would nice if he had some of the same kinds of opportunities I have to learn with the spiritual community that we are a part of, just like I do.

So, what does that mean? We change worship to Sunday morning to help families like mine? We institute a traditional Sunday School complete with Bible memorization attendance star charts? Our kids learn the story of Noah's ark because it has such cute animals in it when it is actually a story that involves a picture of God that is pretty terrifying and tough even for adults to process if you really think about it. How do we begin to decide what to teach them? How do we teach without coercing or indoctrinating them. Do we follow an Anabaptist curriculum? A cell church curriculum? Do we create our own and if so, who creates it?

At Circle we seek to be authentic in our experiences with God and with each other. We seek to be honest about the ugliness of life and the ugliness in ourselves. We don't quote a scripture verse and pretend we are okay when we aren't. We do learn content - from

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scripture and other sources - but we don't focus on intellectual knowledge as the primary foundation of our faith. We seek to continually weave the content of Scripture, our experiences with Jesus personally, our encounters with God in our present community, and the knowledge and experiences of Christian from the past. We incorporate aspects of the traditions and rituals of the Church that have helped others to encounter God for generations, but not as law, as disciplines that might lead us to taste more of Life. Every week we are offered much at cells, at the Public Meeting, during worship and whatever form of teaching or preaching is offered and we are free to choose whether or not to participate. We are free to glean what is there for us that week and leave the rest for another time or another person. Isn't this what we want to offer even the youngest among us? A chance to taste the Life and Love of Jesus in a variety of ways regularly when the community of faith gathers together whether for cell, or public meeting, or love feast?

I don't come from an Anabaptist background, so I have only recently come to understand a little about the greater emphasis in this tradition on the importance of being an adult before one can become a covenant member and be expected to carry the weight and responsibility of that commitment. Still, I think that kids can be taught how to worship. They can pray. They can certainly speak God's truth and be His arms of hope and encouragement. They can serve.

Personally, I think that the goals for kids should be the same as the goals we have for adults at Circle. They should have time to fellowship, to worship (through song, dance, prayer, etc.) and to learn more about God, and Jesus and the Church and issue of faith and justice in the world.

Some ways we might think about reaching these goals would be:

- to pray about God raising up someone with true giftedness as a pastor to shepherd kids especially, to be a voice for their needs and their part in our congregation in leadership meetings regularly.
- to form a group who wants to lead our congregation in developing a vision for children that is specific to Circle of Hope.
- to teach kids the meaning of some of the songs we sing regularly, to help them to connect them to their own lives and then to have them stay for part of worship

when we are singing some songs that they can comprehend, so they can truly participate in worship with us.

- to keep trying new ways to do cell that make family involvement more possible. We had a cell for awhile that met earlier and involved dinner, a short time of involvement for the kids and then a time with adults and kids separated. Some cell churches have all their cells set up to be intergenerational with a planned time or worship for kids and adults and the beginning, a separate time in the middle and a time of sharing together again at the end. This might work for some of us.

- to consider the possibility of earlier worship times, love feasts or cells.

- to let the kids participate in the

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public meeting (if they are interested) by sharing a story or song or prayer.

- to have a parent or kid's team adult tell a story of how they saw Jesus through one of our kids, so we could all benefit from their presence in our midst.

- to have all the kids come out to worship during a time when we know the songs will be louder and involve more movement so they won't be a distraction, but they can participate with us in celebrating Jesus.

- to take a child with us when we go to a peace protest, or to serve in a soup kitchen or to witness the awesomeness of God on a hike in the woods

- to do a video of the kids talking about Jesus, or justice or whatever we are focusing on at our Public Meeting.

- to have some public meetings that are intentionally intergenerational when we let go of a little of our usual calm and learn in a different way that enables the younger kids to be with us.

- as parents we may have to ask for help more often since there aren't pro-

grams set up with kids and parents in mind a lot of the time - ask someone to pray regularly for your child, ask a cell if they would help care for your kids so you could attend (I had a cell offer this to me and it meant soooo much!)

I don't feel like I've offered much here. And the sad thing is that I have been thinking about this topic for years - since before I even came to Circle. But it's not easy when a lot of us are trying not to repeat our previous experiences in churches to know what to offer the children in our church. But we are offering them something whether we plan it or not, and I think we do have a lot to pass on that we believe in and care about. We'll mess it up, of course, and they'll get to try new ways as they grow up, but it will be good to be a part of their journeys along the way.

Deb Valentine

God as Parent and Our Mother/Father Blessings

During the last year we have been experimenting with a ceremony that marks the passage of a man or woman into the role of parent. We call them Father Blessings and Mother Blessings. They are designed by the people who organize them with several things in mind: 1) They help a person remember their own childhood and the legacy he/she brings along with them into parenting (good and bad), 2) They affirm the gifts a person brings into their new role and express affection, solidarity and insight, 3) They collect encouragement and advice based on our faith and our experiences and offer future mutuality in the awesome task of nurturing a child. 4) They seek to launch a person into parenting with the assurance of God's blessing and some encouragement to stay connected to the Family Maker.

These events have proven to be very meaningful and interesting experiences. They are much different than the usual "baby shower" and don't replace those parties. They are much more a "shower of blessing" for the prospective mother or father to drink in as they begin the uncertain transition into parent-

ing.

They get their deepest meaning from the recognition that God is our parent. As we are created in his image as male and female, we are born with his "DNA." That character is manifested in a gender identity that most reflects his own creativity when we come together to give birth ourselves.

Our great interpreter, Paul, is very excited about the implications of being "named after God" like that:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family (or all fatherhood) in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge--that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:14-19)

The word in the first line translated "his whole family" or "all fatherhood" is the Greek word "*patria*" You may recognize it as a word that moved directly into European languages from Greek. For instance, as part of the first line of the French national anthem, it is usually translated "*fatherland*." The word has a big vision. It includes: everyone who makes a family, everyone who links into a people group, like a tribe or nation. Every *patria* reflects the One from whom we all come: the same Father who is linked to His Son, Jesus Christ. This linking, connecting, and generating love surpasses all knowledge! It is a fulfilling mystery as deep as God.

Some religions, and secular thinkers, too, are popularizing the idea of God as a genderless "parent." Influential ancient Greeks also thought of God this way. Christians don't think of God that way, however, because they personally know the revealed Father of all who continues to maintain a relationship with every "*patria*" that will make family with him. In our father and mother blessings we are bending our knees and praying for a deep, generative connection with God for our friends who are becoming parents in hope that they will make family with God.

As we do this, we don't merely acknowledge that we are created beings with creative power, we dignify the unique qualities and roles of our complementary genders as children of God. We try to help

each other get in touch with being women and men, together as husbands and wives, becoming family. And we do that at a time in our lives when it really counts. Our children need female and male to find their own wholeness in God, who generates both.

It is hard to accept and nurture one's less-dominant "male" or "female" side if one has not come to terms with being male or female. When we come to the place of conceiving a child, it is definitely the time to get comfortable with who we are! Some of us enter parenthood thinking of ourselves as somewhat genderless and then find that the obvious workings of biology and relationship press us to come to terms with our identity. Our children call it out in us as well, since they naturally search for themselves in us. As we grow to open ourselves to the Spirit of God calling out the mother and father in us, we trust that they will also find the fullness of God when they relate to the Family Maker in us

I can't speak for the mother blessings, since they are wonderfully free of me, and my kind. But the Father blessings often strike me as one of the best places to experience holy male energy. I often think the participants are drinking it up with wonder, while regretting, at the same time, that their cups are so small. Almost all of us missed out on things like the Native American's sweat lodge or long rides on the trail with the men, or the time in the shop with dad, or any sort of careful mating and family-forming ritual of many pre-modern people. Several men have definitely experienced being fathered as never before by God through us.

Maybe this is the deepest motivation for us to keep developing these strange events that seem a bit anachronistic and unusually personal. Many of us missed our mothers and fathers altogether. God has not been fully known as mother and father because "parent" is not a well-understood category for us. Many of us are unaccustomed to expressing our hearts as parent because so few people have loved us like that — even our own parents were absent, unfaithful or mere pals or housemates. By emulating the people of scripture and those among the "*patria*" who know better than us how to mother and father like God, we hope to offer a blessing of nurture and challenge from our common Parent in

whom our children will also find their wholeness.

Rod White

Reactions of First-time Parents

For the past few years Circle of Hope has experienced the natural changes that come when a young, college-aged congregation reaches maturity and grows more diverse. Along with the changing demographics come new voyages that lead many single people into marriage. Whether a direct correlation or not, many of these people also become first-time parents. Over time, our major concerns have increased from, "What should we do if the cops try to bust our punk rock show again?" and "Can I bring beer to the Love Feast?" to add concerns of a more serious nature such as "How do we build a community that promotes healthy families and encourages first-time parents?"

I am not sure why I was chosen to present this topic to you. Perhaps it is because I am the most ignorant person on the subject and might have the most to gain from writing this article (although I may be fifty years away from parenthood). Whatever the case may be, I found myself fascinated with the stories and reflections shared by some of our most recent first-time parents. The major question that I set out to ask seemed a simple one: What changes and major adjustments in your life have you noticed since becoming a parent? The answers I received were complex; ranging from physical adjustments, to learning the joy in simple things, to deeper self-discovery.

On January 4th, 2003, Eric and Shelley brought Chloe Jean Crognale Smelser into the world. After nearly four months of adjustment Eric says that the lack of sleep is still hard to get used to. One of the main things he has learned through all of this is that you have to get rid of your daily agenda when tending to a small child. "I just try to follow her lead and realize that she is, in the end, in charge of the

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schedule no matter what we have planned.” Shelley also realizes this change. She says that the pace of life is just slower. “It’s not controlled by me. At first, that was hard and frustrating for me. I spent most of my life trying not to be controlled by my parents, and now I find myself controlled by this small child.” Yet, in the midst of this changing role there is a peace that comes with this slower paced life. “I know that when life is chaotic I can just steal away and nurse her and the world seems to become quiet and peaceful for that small moment in time.”

Of course, besides the physical and time-related adjustments there are also new opportunities of self-discovery that a child can bring to a parent. Amiri Salim Rivera was born on December 30, 2001, to Julius and Melissa. One of the things that Melissa expressed was the balance that Amiri brought to her life. “I always used to be someone who was very goal-oriented. When I would get motivated and set a goal for myself, there was nothing that could get in the way. Now with Amiri, I must chew on it first. Can Amiri handle it? Handle the change? Can Julius handle the change?” Just knowing that her decisions would now affect a small child, she began to prepare differently for things. “I feel more at peace now knowing that I am able to focus on getting things done right instead of quickly.” Another important thing that Amiri has brought is a challenge to their beliefs of loving unconditionally. “Loving Amiri for who he is has shown me just how beautiful unconditional love is. It’s just a small glimpse into how great God’s love is.”

Contrary to learning insightful things about one’s self, being a first-time parent can also teach you about having joy in simple things. On April 1st, Megan and David gave girth to Zöe Elisabeth Scott. Although they have not had much time to reflect on their changes, David stated that he really enjoys having specific responsibilities for Zöe. “I covet them,” he says. (Strong words when job number one means changing diapers.) “I feel that since Megan has natural physical roles to play in the baby’s every day life, I am almost non-essential. I have to work harder to feel essential. Because of that, I just really enjoy doing the simple things.” He also says that he and Megan can only stay away from Zöe for a short period of time before they start to “crave baby time.” Even with the simple joy and excitement of this new adventure, parenting is just an exhausting duty, especially the role of nursing. “I just wasn’t expecting to be absolutely ex-

hausted,” says Megan.

There are many other first-time parents within our community who are experiencing these same things. As each child grows and develops, the stages of parenting change and bring new challenges. It seems that many, if not all, have experienced this exhaustion, loss of control, newfound joys, and deeper acknowledgement of self-discovery. The list goes on and on. However they experience it, it is a truly wonderful journey that these parents have begun and they deserve our utmost respect and full support.

Zane Kratzer

Kid Free

I visited a church in Kensington a few years ago. As I was meeting people, one woman asked, “How many kids do you have?” I told her none, and she patted me on the hand in a consoling way, saying, “Don’t worry, you’ll have some soon.” At 21 years old, I had no plans of having kids anytime soon, and was surprised that she pitied my childlessness.

So now I have been asked to compile the thoughts of the “childless”, but I’ve never really thought of myself as being “childless”, so it should be interesting to sort that through among friends. That term makes it feel so negative. I view my not having children of my own at this point in my life as a very positive thing. First of all, I’m not married. Secondly, I am in no position financially, emotionally, spiritually, to take on the sole responsibility for another life. So I’ve been sorting through this whole childless thing in conversation with friends, and here are some common themes I noticed among us kid-free people.

Some people don’t trust kid-free people. Several of the “childless” I spoke with described a sense of mistrust they get from those married with children. It seems that people think those who aren’t married with children by a certain age are somehow different or weird. People wonder, “What’s wrong with him?” Conversely, some married people I spoke with find that people trust them more because they are married.

Most of the kid-free people I know find a way to invest in the next generation in some other way. I have a little sister through the Amachi mentoring program, for example. I hang out with a seven-year-old whose Dad is in prison. We’ve been spending time together for about a year and half now. She and I love to play at the playground, do shrinky-dinks, and read together. I treasure this time with her. Another kid-free person I talked with teaches Bible classes to young people every week. She takes great pride in preparing lessons and building relationships. Sometimes, however, it can be difficult to be around the joy of children, and not be able to share fully in the parenting experience.

We greatly respect parents. I’ve always said that babysitting is a great form of birth-control. After spending the afternoon with someone else’s kids, you recognize the amazing amount of time and energy it takes to be a parent. One person I talked with served as a foster mom for a year. She found that being a single mom took a great deal of effort. It was a rewarding experience, and she now has a huge respect for parents.

Being childless is a calling. Several people I talked with were very clear that God has called them to not have children right now. God is giving them greater freedom to serve in other ministries. Children require a rearranging of priorities, and sometimes a kid-free person can more easily serve in specific ministries.

Adoption and foster care are viable options. It’s interesting that I’ve been asked to write about being childless, because I’ve pretty much decided that I’m not going to have my own biological kids. Not that I don’t like kids, but I know that there way more kids than parents out there, so when the time comes, I will probably look into adoption or foster care.

So there’s a snapshot of the challenges and advantages of being kid-free, hope you can identify with some of these.

Alison Handy

Readers Respond

Sometimes people offer pieces that go beyond our theme or respond to past articles. Generally, we love to print them. But we always reserve the right not to.

This Is My Rifle

Art Bucher

The military has always been an important part of my family. I grew up on military bases. My grandfathers both fought in the Second World War; my mother's father was nominated for a Bronze Star after the conquering of Berlin for his part as a chemical mortar specialist in the US Army. My father's father, a colonel in the 5th division of the Marines, got a purple heart metal when he was shot on the island of Iwo Jima on the Japanese front.

My father and my uncle served two tours of duty as Marines in Vietnam. My father was nominated for a Silver Star metal after the battle of Khe San. My uncle sells tanks and long range remote-guided missiles to the US government.

In the church I grew up in Connecticut, most of the church members, including my Sunday School teacher, who is still very dear to me, were employed by the ELECTRIC BOAT company in Groton, CT building nuclear submarines.

And so it was very natural to find myself at the end of high school sitting down with the Army and Navy recruiters, talking about the GI college bill, and going over the scores on my ASVAB test. I did everything but sign the dotted line. I consider it an act of God that my mother asked me not to join the night before I was going to go back to the recruiters. As a military wife and daughter, she had the perspective that came from long years of absence and worry that plagues those married to the military.

Not knowing what else to do, I fasted and prayed and asked God to lead me.

Some years later in 2003 I found myself standing in a protest march, praying with my church for peace without war. It's hard to say how I ended up there. A lot of it had to do with September 11, 2001. I have to thank my cell groups, especially Scott and Nick, for putting up with all kinds of jumbled conversations as I expressed the confusion that most people felt in the months that followed. But I'm walking out

of the wake of that horrible day, realizing that I and my family and my countrymen are deeply entrenched in the cycle of threat and attack and respond, and threat and attack and respond, and threat and attack and respond, unending. And I hear the words of Jesus talking about something else completely: "Love your enemy, pray for those who persecute you," "the meek... will inherit the earth", "do not repay evil with evil," and on and on.

Jesus said, "My peace I give to you, not as the world gives"

I have to contrast this with the words that the world gave my dad and his platoon in his boot camp "year book" in 1965, before they sent him off to war. It's a poem, but the style is written rather rough in a way that only a Marine could truly appreciate. Anyway, here it is, and I think it's telling about the way that the world promises peace. It's titled, "*This is my rifle*".

This is my rifle.

There are many like it, but this one is mine.

My rifle is my best friend.

It is my life.

I must master it, as I must master my life.

Without me, my rifle is useless.

Without my rifle, I am useless.

I must fire my rifle true.

I must shoot straighter than my enemy,

who is trying to kill me.

I must shoot him before he shoots me.

I will....

My rifle and myself know that what counts in war is

not the rounds we fire, the noise of our bursts, nor the smoke we make.

We know that it is the hits that count.

We will hit...

My rifle is human, even as I, because it is my life.

Thus, I will learn it as a brother.

I will learn its weaknesses, its strength,

its parts, its accessories, its sights, and its barrel.

I will ever guard it against

the ravishes of weather and damage.

I will keep my rifle clean and

ready,
even as I am clean and ready.
We will become part of each other
We will...

Before God I swear this creed

My rifle and myself are the defenders of my country

We are the masters of our enemy.

We are the saviors of my life.

So be it, until victory is America's

and there is no enemy, but Peace!

Peace through war is the promise that I just can no longer stomach. Jesus promised peace through the cross. This is the revelation that I banked my salvation on, and the hope of which I want all my countrymen to accept. The cycle of threat and attack is only going to be broken through suffering and forgiveness. Suffering, because there is no guarantee that the people like the ones who flew the planes into the world trade towers will stop enacting violence in the world. There very well may be more September 11ths. But even if there are, I believe in the power of forgiveness more than in the power behind a gun to reconcile even the most awful hurts the world can wreak. I believe in it, because Jesus forgave me, and is perpetually healing all of us who believe in him, even though we are just as culpable as those who killed him. I want myself and my countrymen and my enemies to be like Jesus on the cross, saying to his murderers, "Father, forgive them". And I want myself, my countrymen, and our county's enemies, to be like the Roman Centurion soldier looking on saying, "Surely this man was the Son of God."

Through the help of Jesus, the son of a soldier is breaking the cycle of warring in his family. Among my male cousins and me, mine is the first generation of Buchers to not enlist during wartime since John Bucher the Mennonite minister in the 1800's. I believe that Jesus is also working to break the cycle of warring in America. When will we see the generation of Americans that does not engage in warfare, but opts for true reconciliation?

Goal Check *April 2003*

This is a regular feature of this publication. We want everyone to have some facts so we can have authentic dialogue! We adopted these goals in January of 2003. Every quarter we evaluate our progress toward meeting them.

Network

1. Through an ongoing dialogue, make a secure connection between Northwest and Center City.

After a couple of meetings and lots of other dialogue, the Leadership Team agreed to end what we had been doing in Germantown and try again in new ways. A team has been leading PMs, PM Teams have added music, new cells have begun.

2. Enhance network-wide ways of sharing that augment the cell network

No significant action yet.

3. Increase the activities and awareness of Circle Venture

We hired Megan Scott as Director.

Center City

1. Prepare to multiply the Congregation in 2003-4 – call out an Apprentice Pastor from among us

We have formed a group of potential Apprentice pastors who have met to learn and discern.

2. Prepare to multiply the Congregation in 2003-4-- Find a creative solution to our space needs.

The next Building Team continues to work on a fundraising plan. We continue to look for usable spaces, both

in Center City and other locations.

3. Prepare to multiply the Congregation in 2003-4 -- Grow to a comfortable living size

Our PMs and Cells both grew in number of participants (by about 20% over last year!). We continued to experiment with Week 3 and other PMs.

4. Augment the ministry in our cells by offering opportunities for training and enrichment that stoke the fire of our passion for life in God's kingdom.

No significant action.

5. Educate people about systemic racism

No further significant action this quarter.

6. Raise \$132,000 in gifts from the congregation(s). (See budget proposal)

From January to April we received about \$42,000, about \$2000 less than our goal.

7. Grow the Effectiveness of the Public Meeting

Angie Petersen became a PM team leader. Joshua Grace helped form the new NW PM and the Teach Team. The regular PM planning times resulted in some inventive worship aids for Lent.

8. Devote Ourselves to Peace in a time of war

The Shalom House Team reached a "final stretch" to their finish line. Shane Claiborne and many others lead us in voicing our thoughts about the war in Iraq.

Northwest

We never met to approve new goals when our process was derailed in January. The unapproved goals remain suggestive of where we want to go.

1. Engage the mandate to go into all the world and make disciples

We rented the second floor of our building to our sister ministry, Brotherly Love Urban Youth Services. They lead the rehab from our flood and opened up "The Spot" as well as continued with Hope Café.

2. Raise the overall level and quality of our worship specifically in the area of music. Develop a more culturally diverse PM.

PM teams from Center City contributed to the new PM while we searched for further musicians.

3. Develop a more effective ministry to children under the age of 12.

No significant action.

4. Continue to develop our Youth Ministry

BLUYS exploded with contacts.

5. Create a cohesive environment in our diverse community.

We began to find leadership for our PM in hope that we could refocus our mission and create more gravity.

6. Secure the future of our location by June 1

We invested time and energy in improving both floors of 5619 Germantown Ave. We solved the overwhelming utility costs. The landlord agreed to let us go month-to-month until June so we would have time to see if we had enough passion to make long-term plans for our mission in Germantown and the Northwest.