

At Home With God

Let me begin by introducing myself.

My name is Becky Widdows. I was born during my father's first curacy in Swindon, the third of six children, five girls and a boy. All six of us are Christians and live lives where we seek to put God first.

Don't imagine that makes us perfect! When we get together there are the same jealousies, frustrations and irritations that there are in all families, but we **do** share a common focus to our lives and we do pray together when we meet.

I trained as a teacher in Cheltenham and then did a Certificate of Theology at St. John's Theological College. I met David, my husband, there and we had four children, three boys and a girl. I began to write this book when the eldest was five and the youngest just born, now they are teenagers.

Even though I'd been brought up in a home where we'd prayed together most days, a home where my parents had tried to put God first, it was only slowly that we began to work out whole-family discipleship, beginning in a very haphazard way. Over the years I cleaned wisdom from my own childhood, my teacher training, my prayer-life and reading and from my 'on the ground' experience as a mother. And it's a distillation of those thoughts and ideas that I'd like to share with you now.

The first material I wrote was Advent Adventure 1, a liturgy for each Sunday of Advent. After a few years it became a booklet that others could use too. This was the last page:

.....and finally

even if you're feeling bad-tempered,

the dinner's burnt,

the children are fighting,

*the dog's been sick on the carpet...and chaos threatens to
break out in every direction,*

DON'T give up!

If one prayertime feels unsatisfactory don't worry,

it's not the individual occasion that matters,

*rather the persistent stacking up of truth upon truth as the
years pass by.*



This page has been written out of past and current experience. You see David and I think our children are wonderful, and we're very excited by the depth of their faith and the outworking of it in their lives, but they also drive us mad and sometimes they behave as if we've never even heard of God.....and so do we!

So as you read on, remember that I'm outlining a vision which we as a family are continually, if imperfectly, aiming for.

Who is responsible for teaching your children the Christian faith?

It seems to me that children are in danger of falling between three stools:

- The church,
- The family,
- The school.

In the past schools saw it as part of their brief to teach Christianity to their pupils, with the rise of inter-faith awareness and secularism this is now rarely the case.

The church continues to teach children through age- appropriate groups and all-age worship, but I would suggest this is the icing on the 'cake' of faith, rather than the cake of faith itself!

Suppose for example your family were moving to France and you all wanted to learn to speak French fluently and you signed up for this:

Learn French

All ages welcome
0-100 years

Meet: 10.30-11.30 most weeks

Plenty of room for a big crowd

Teaching method:

- Listen to French being spoken.
- Occasional speaking.
- No need to practice at home.

I wonder....would you ever learn French?

And so it is with our families.

If we're serious about living as Christians, following Christ and passing on our faith to our children and others, we need an integrated approach where we live out whole-life discipleship. Could we weave together the spiritual and the ordinary in a way that creates a safety net which undergirds our family life and enables us to keep following Christ in the good times (when all is relatively peaceful and easy), and in the bad times (through arguments, illness, adolescence, loss and death)?

As a teenager I reached a point of thinking that God didn't exist, and couldn't be trusted if he did exist. I thought about giving it all up and not being a Christian anymore. But when I considered the practicalities it was too difficult. In my family the spiritual and the ordinary were too tightly woven together to be easily separated, and so the safety net of family discipleship carried me through those often agnostic adolescent years to a new place of trust and commitment.

So how do we do that? How do we weave together the spiritual and the ordinary to create a way of life that is faith building, fun and purposeful?

It seems to me that there are three vital ingredients:

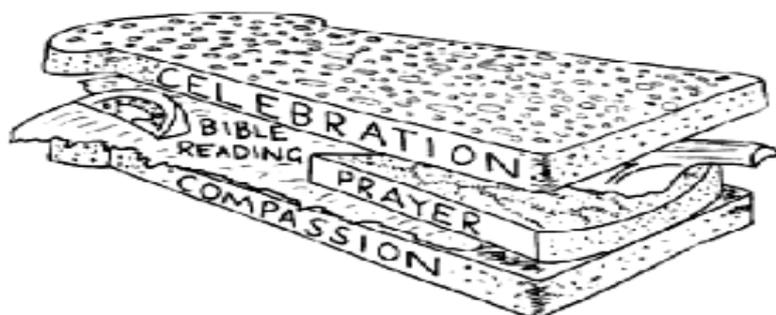
- Celebration,
- Prayer and bible-reading,
- Compassion.

Take away celebration and it's a dreary life – no fun or enjoyment.

Take away compassion and it's a selfish, self-gratifying life.

Take away prayer and bible-reading and it's a meaningless, purposeless life.

...just like a sandwich without one or other of its layers!



Let's begin with the sandwich filling.

Prayer and bible-reading.

In Matthew ch 13 v 33 Jesus tells a parable:

He told them still another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about thirty kilograms of flour until it worked all through the dough.'

If the tiny bit of yeast represents God and the things of God, and suppose the huge amount of flour were the raw material of family life, when we mix the two together, Jesus says the whole of life will be affected, changed into dough.

How little yeast makes so much difference!

Let me suggest five reasons why family prayer and bible-reading are so important.

1. It makes a statement about the focus of our family.

We make time for the things we consider to be most important.

In Deuteronomy ch 6 v 5 God tells the Israelites – this must be the focus of your life:

'Love the Lord your God
with all your heart
and with all your soul
and with all your strength.'

A command so important it's picked up by Jesus in the gospels and called 'the greatest commandment'.

If we make time to pray together, then we assert that the focus of our family is God.

2. Praying together improves family relationships.

It's very hard to hold onto bad temper and negative feelings when we pray together. Parents and children approach God on the same level, as brothers and sisters, children of the same Father, needing his love, acceptance and forgiveness. As we receive that from God we will often find that we've had to let go of our anger, irritability and grievances.

3. Family prayer helps us know ourselves.

A vital part of any prayer is learning to know ourselves, seeing ourselves as God sees us. In family prayer times, as we rub up against each other, we will often come face-to-face with our sinfulness and shortcomings.

There will be moments where we see
our prejudices;
our doubts;
our anger;
our fear;
our hang-ups from the past;
....and the.....

4. Family prayer opens a door for the Holy Spirit to enter situations.

This happens for every member of the family.

The Holy Spirit, invited in by our action of praying together will bring growth and life, moulding attitudes, changing behaviour, challenging lifestyle and mending relationships.

5. Regular prayer combats the drip feeding of worldly attitudes.

Every day we absorb the world's attitudes through friends, school, work and the media. We need to take deliberate steps to open the minds, hearts and ears of our families to God's attitude to the world he has made.

It is worth saying that praying together needs to be a regular habit.

Prayer is like nakedness.

There comes a point in a child's life where they want physical privacy, they have become self-conscious.

Starting to pray, or praying occasionally at this point can be difficult, much like suggesting that the whole family have a bath together.

There can be the same level of embarrassment in spiritual nakedness as there may be in physical nakedness.

Prayer is a friendship with God.

All friendships need different levels of communication:

A heart-to-heart chat,

A short conversation,

A wave or a smile as we pass our friend in the street.

In family life if we wait for the opportunity for deep heart-to-heart chats with God – it may never happen!

As families let's go for the wave or smile option, then we maybe we can pray briefly, but regularly together.

Celebration.

What do we celebrate in today's culture?

Well, from September to December we celebrate Christmas....and then recover for the rest of the year!

Yet we have such a rich heritage of celebration, both from the Jews (God gave them detailed instructions about a variety of different celebrations) and also from our ancient ancestors.

When the first Christians arrived here our pagan forebears had a whole pile of celebrations. Instead of abolishing them, the first Christians very wisely 'Christianised' them. Is the materialistic culture that we live in trying to take them back again?

God wants us to celebrate!

Why does he want us to celebrate?

In Deuteronomy 16 we find instructions for celebrating Passover, Harvest Festival and the Festival of Shelters.

1. He wanted them to celebrate in order to honour Him and remember all that He's done for them. (The greatest commandment again.)
2. He wanted them to enjoy themselves and rejoice. Food features highly in their celebrations.
3. He wanted them to build community through their celebrations, they were to invite others to join the party – family, friends and people less fortunate than they were.
4. He wanted them to rest from normal work, to do something different, rather than the put-your-feet-up type of rest.

BUT! This is quite a challenge to our creativity and energy levels, so why bother, when we already live stressed and over-extended lives anyway?

Sadly we live in an age where stress related illness is very common and at a time where fragmentation of the family results in much isolation and loneliness. Even those who live in families can find themselves living by themselves and for themselves.

In his book 'Live it up – How to create a life you can really love', Tom Sine writes:

'Everywhere I go, I meet people whose lives are busier and more frenetic than ever before. And they no longer seem to have any idea of how to live it up.'¹

As Christian families we have the opportunity to offer an alternative to the stress-laden, isolation of today's culture. Let's pray together and celebrate together, as families and with others. We have so

¹ Sine: Tom. 'Live it up. How to create a life you can love.' Herald Press (VA) (July 1994)

many festivals, seasons and anniversaries in which we can worship, eat, laugh and rest together.

In 'What is a family' Edith Schaeffer² talks about the raw, scattered ingredients of a family needing time in which to become bread, bread which will feed the hungry, and she is right. We need time alone as family, time to talk and pray, time to celebrate and play. But we must not wait until we arrive at faultless perfect harmony before we invite others in – or we will wait forever! It's as we invite others in to celebrate with us that celebration and compassion meet.

Compassion.

Compassion gives purpose to our lives.

For families the beginning of compassion in whole-life discipleship has to be when God's values and qualities are modelled by parents to their children.

We cannot expect our children to give, for example,
acceptance;
praise;
forgiveness;
mercy;
hope and apologies

unless they have first watched us attempting to give those things to them.

Secondly, as we read the bible together, these qualities will be reinforced in our lives through the stories we find there, we will get to know the character of God.

Thirdly minister to others with your children. As our children watch us caring for and ministering to others in the community, they will begin to minister and care alongside us. Share together as much of the work of God as you can, the joy, the pain, the failure, the triumph. Don't be tempted to cut your children out.

² Schaeffer. Edith. 'What is a family?' highland books (UK) (1986)

Fourthly, living compassionately as a family includes taking an interest in the third world, and enabling others to live through our giving. As families we need to be aware of the problems beyond where we live, and give in order to ease the hardship – the whole family caring, praying and giving, and knowing why we are givingand let's face it – financial giving is not just for God's sake, but is one of his best ideas to stop us hardening our hearts against those who suffer.

A spiritual battle.

In Matthew ch 13 Jesus tells the parable of the sower. You will know how the sower scattered the seed and that that which the birds ate, and that which fell on rocky ground came to nothing. But some seed began to grow....and yet it produced no fruit. Why not? It was because the young seed was choked by thorn bushes. As Matthew writes in v 22:

The worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.

This is a constant danger for us.

We have no time, we are over-stretched, stressed and exhausted. We are choked by the drive for a good education, by our need to accumulate stuff and our desire for financial gain. Creeping materialism curls around our family discipleship, until we become materialists with a thin veneer of Christianity. Instead of living out whole-life discipleship, we teach 'God-first', but we live in a way that teaches us to how to be at one with a materialistic, consumer society. Our security and comfort lie in what we possess and achieve rather than in God.

If we remove these thorns from our lives, we make time to put God first. Then perhaps we can invest some of that time, creativity, energy and money in whole-family discipleship. Worshipping, celebrating and ministering together.

There is a spiritual battle involved in any growth in prayer and whole-life discipleship, whether for the individual, the family or the church. And I wonder if the battle can be particularly fierce in family discipleship. For when as families we say and do 'God first', we enter a battle for the hearts, souls, minds and wills of the next generation.

Becky Widdows February 1998

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My children are now grown-up and married, and are beginning to use this material with their own children. As I re-read the introduction to 'At Home With God' my prayer for them is that they will live whole-family discipleship, doing it in the way that is uniquely theirs, but in a way that passes on their faith to the next generation.

For many years I had this poem up in the kitchen, a reminder that Christian parenting isn't easy.....but that if we want our children to learn how to fly with God we have a sacrificial journey to make.

I am persuaded by the dandelion

To take the wings of the updrift

To parachute into enemy country

To fall to the ground

To be walked on

To lose beauty

To die

And so to give birth

To a whole generation of flyers.

(Ulrich Schaffer)³

³ Schaffer, Ulrich. 'Into your light'. Harper and Row for IVP (NY) (1979)
All biblical quotations are from the New International Version – UK