Faithfulness is What Matters
A vision for saying yes to God as a way of life
Acknowledgments

First, thanks must go to God. He has blessed our church in so many ways and led this process powerfully all the way through. He has done something special in Columbus, and we are daily amazed at the opportunity to be a part of it. God is the head of the church, and we are in awe of his ongoing powerful leadership.

Thanks to our adult sphere leaders Gary DeLashmutt, Jim Leffel and Doug Patch, who worked together diligently to make this possible.

A sincere thank you to all who contributed to the creation of this document. Paul Alexander, Liz Sweet and Ben Foust wrote entire sections on the Newborn, Toddler and Teen years. Thanks to Gary and Bev DeLashmutt, Rosie Talarzyk, Ed and Jo Rhodes and Theresa Lyons, Jessica Lowery, and Scott Sweet, who offered key insights and editing. Also Phil Franck and John Ross were critical in editing and gathering information. Steve Bauer and his staff were instrumental in getting it printed on a tough deadline. Thanks to all who submitted incredible testimonies; it was very difficult selecting examples of how God has used so many faithful people in every stage of life.

Also many thanks to Doug McGuire for his work on the cover.

- Ryan Lowery, Xenos Elder and managing editor
Table of Contents

**Preface**  
3

**Introduction**  
4

**Chapter 1 – Married Without Kids**  
7

**Chapter 2 – Parents of Babies and Toddlers**  
13

**Chapter 3 – Parents of Elementary and ‘Tweens**  
22

**Chapter 4 – Parents of Teens**  
29

**Chapter 5 – Empty Nesters**  
39

**Chapter 6 – Retirement**  
48

**Chapter 7 – The Elderly**  
55

**Conclusion**  
63
Preface

The first thing we need to acknowledge is that this work is a beginning; it is incomplete. This implementation of our vision is in its infancy and there is so much more that needs to be done. We expect implementation to be gradual. One home group at a time. Leaders meeting with sphere coaches. Working together to understand how individual groups fit directly within this plan. It will take time to do this right. We will have to set up new reporting mechanisms, build new tools and create new programs, in order to see it fully come to light. Please be prayerful and patient with us as we begin this journey together. There will surely be mistakes, oversights and organizational problems, but we believe this is the right direction for our ministry and are determined to see it through together.

Also we want to acknowledge that the direction we have chosen has certain inherent disadvantages. First, by explaining this through the lens of different stages of family life, we have not addressed specific demographics such as singles, divorcees, widow, or families with special needs. Please understand that we did not forget about you and that you are as important and vital to our church as anyone else. The challenges of putting this together in a short time period, along with the fact that those specific demographics tend to span a wide variety of life stages and ages, forced us to begin with the largest people groups to cast a wide net for our ministry. We hope everyone can benefit from the wisdom in these pages, even if they don’t exactly fit the life stages we have described.

Please also bear in mind that the definition of success in this document is not comprehensive or exclusive. The only true definition of spiritual success is faithfulness, saying yes to God.

Romans 12:1-2 — Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

We hope to demonstrate what faithfulness can look like for many, while realizing that God’s call on individuals is not limited to the picture we have tried to paint.
Introduction

From Oasis to Finishing Well

We believe Xenos is a very special church. It’s an act of God in our city to do something highly unusual in reaching and mobilizing the un-churched. That is not to say we think it’s perfect. No, as great as Xenos is, it is still a very human community. We have made a lot of mistakes along the way. It never ceases to amaze us that God has chosen to use us at all, let alone to bless us with something as special as Xenos Christian Fellowship.

The church has a clear call to reach the lost and make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20). We have great structures to facilitate that mission: home churches, CTs, classes, discipleship and many other useful expressions of biblical community and God’s provision. It’s clear that the Lord has led us into many fruitful ventures. We are uniquely blessed with an incredible workforce of committed believers across many generations who are prepared to go all out for God.

Xenos started as a student ministry. It has always done best in reaching young idealistic men and women, who are prepared to do more than just go to church on Sunday morning. Student ministry is clearly one of the great strengths of our church. These days we have excellent Bible teaching programs for elementary school children and an incredible elementary and junior-high school in Calumet. We have a junior-high ministry that is fun and outward focused. We have a high-school ministry almost entirely led by young adults who are amazingly equipped and willing to invest in young people. We have a college ministry that would be the envy of any church in the country. This is a movement so invested, so deep, that one can only stand back in awe of the power of God to work. We have learned how to do student ministry, and it is clear God has intended this as a central mission of our church.

What happens to these radical idealists as they move beyond student life? When career, family, home ownership and 401(k)s become a dawning reality in their still young spiritual lives? Do we have an equally engaging, equally compelling and biblical vision for them as they grow older? How does the vision adapt to include empty nesters, retirees and the elderly? Have we built out structures to see parents of teens and toddlers thrive in a radical lifestyle for God? Have we spent sufficient time to see radical youths become even more radical senior citizens? How do we encourage them to run the race and finish well, having spent their entire lives engaged in increasing faithfulness to the call of God?

We are blessed with many such people at every stage of life. They are rugged, spiritual warriors who are even more effective now than in their early ministry. But have we done enough? Have we finished building the vision and structures for all of God’s people, or is there yet significant work to be done?

We need to finish the work and set up our members with the opportunity to maximize their desire and ability to serve God to the very end. It’s not that we don’t have great people, or that we have been preaching, teaching and modeling the wrong values. The initial vision of church multiplication and discipleship remains alive and well. But have we done enough to think
through how these values are best expressed as we move through significant changes in our lives? Does faithfulness at 25 look the same as faithfulness at 55? Does success look the same?

Vision for the People

Why vision matters

Without vision, the people perish. If we don’t see how what we are doing fits with what God desires, profound discouragement will abound. Part of the great success for our church has been the ability to cast vision at different stages of life and lead members toward increasing faithfulness. Junior-high students can’t wait to join the high-school ministry and see what new depths with God can be reached. High-school seniors can hardly be contained as they chomp at the bit to move into ministry houses and start their new lives as independent young adults serving the Lord. Ministry house members long to be married, move out and start a family dedicated to serving the Lord together. But then what? Do young marrieds with kids yearn to become empty nesters (for spiritual reasons)? Have they lined up all the ways they will use their time and energy in new spiritual endeavors?

Think of it this way: Nearly everyone in our church would agree that as time goes on the Lord is continuing to hone their character. We know that he who began a good work in us will see it through to the day of redemption (Philippians 1:6). How about you, do you know that you are more sanctified today than you were five years ago? 10 years ago? If you are reading this, we are betting that you are. What about your ministry? Is your ministry more faithful to God’s purposes today that it was five years ago? 10 years ago? Are you filled with confidence that as you continue to grow and mature that your usefulness to God’s purposes will continue to increase? Or has reading this made you sad as you wonder, yet again, if your most exciting time of spiritual effectiveness lies in your past? Or are you currently thriving in the college ministry fearing that one day you will have to leave it and move on to a less fruitful stage of your Christian life?

Do you see how this is a problem with vision? There is something fundamentally wrong with our community when we don’t clearly see and look forward to the idea that as I grow in the Lord I will be an increasingly useful implement for his purposes. From the cradle to the grave, I will grow and learn and serve — and my most faithful day on Earth will be the day I draw my last breath. Why can’t this be? Why shouldn’t this be? Clearly this is what God wants! We need a vision consistent with God’s word which brazenly declares: “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of him in every place” (2 Corinthians 2:14).

Life After Student Ministry?

One of the mistakes we’ve made that needs to be acknowledged is that we have been viewing adult ministry as a single demographic. We’ve been building age-specific wineskins for many years. We have junior-high ministry (ages 11-13), high-school ministry (ages 14-18), college
ministry (ages 18-22) and adult ministry (23-death). When you put it that way, the problem becomes a little clearer, doesn’t it?

The point is adult ministry is not one demographic but many. We don’t think we need a distinct young adult ministry, middle-aged ministry and senior ministry. In fact, there are many advantages to adults in different life stages fellowshipping and serving the Lord alongside one another; however, there is much to be gained by considering the different needs of these stages. What is there to look forward to spiritually as you get older? What new opportunities present themselves as you move through life? What new challenges? What obstacles have others faced who wanted the same thing you do — to serve God with all their strength, all their heart and all their soul? How did they fare in overcoming those challenges? What vision might be gained by examining adult ministry from a more multifaceted perspective? We think this is an overdue exercise.

**Xenos Is About to Finish Its First Lap**

For the first time in its history, our church has many home groups that represent every stage of life with people who have been striving together in every life circumstance toward one noble goal: to be a faithful servant to the God they love. Not because they must, but because they are motivated by God’s great love. This resource is intended to bring their vast wisdom and experience to bear, so that new generations can benefit from the journey of those who have gone first.

**How to Use This Resource**

Today nearly every pregnant woman reads *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*, a fun little book that imparts helpful vision for pregnant couples. You can look up each stage of your pregnancy and gain some valuable insights. What is happening with your body? What is happening with your baby? What discomforts are normal? What problems may well be just around the corner, and what joys will be waiting down the road? How long will it be until you can hear your baby’s heartbeat for the first time? When will your baby kick? What are some stories from other couples that may help as you go through this amazing time?

The working title of this resource was “What to Expect When You’re a Xenoid.” It’s not that we have strong feelings about the pregnancy book, but we’re convinced that part of what our church needs is this kind of in-depth look at the faithful Christian life.

It’s our hope that you will finish reading this paragraph and turn to the chapter that pertains directly to your current life situation. Go find yourself! We recognize that every individual situation is different, but we hope to provide basic principles and a helpful vision to encourage you on your way. Read and then maybe look at what comes next! Think and pray about where God currently has you and what it would look like to pursue great faithfulness to him, not just where you are now, but in each future stage. We earnestly pray this will help you along the way.
Chapter 1 — Married Without Kids

Thoughts for New Christians

Get equipped!

**Ephesians 4:11-12** — And he gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ

Welcome to the kingdom! If you are married without kids, you are in a stage of life where you can make leaps and bounds in your new faith. If you plan to have kids down the road, use this time to delve deeply into the word of God, build a ministry and get your classes done. When kids come, your time and resources will be more limited. While it’s possible to get these done while having little ones, it is much easier to get them done now. You won’t regret it!

**Winning your spouse**

**1 Corinthians 7:16** — Don’t you wives realize that your husbands might be saved because of you? And don’t you husbands realize that your wives might be saved because of you?

If your spouse is not also a believer, two of the most important things you can do are sharing your faith at home and praying that God will open your partner’s eyes to his truth, especially if your marriage has been a little rough. Let the light of Christ in your life shine through to your partner. They have a front row seat for how Christ is going to change your life. It’s important you do all you can to bring them into your new spiritual life and community. If you’re not on the same page, it will be very difficult on your marriage and your ministry when it comes to living a radical Christian life!

Many new Christians with non-Christian spouses make the mistake of wanting their new faith to be private, and even separate it from their marriage. They want their new friends and new passion for God to be “their thing.” Or they think, “My spouse will never get into this.” This thinking can actually serve to harden your spouse’s heart and make it even more difficult for them to come to faith. Things will fare much better if they get in on the ground floor.

- Consider taking a class on evangelism or reaching your spouse
- Christian Growth is also a great place to start
- Get your home group praying for your spouse
Thoughts for Christians

Beware the us vs. them mentality!

You made it! You tricked someone into wanting to spend the rest of his or her life with you! Now is when you will find out that he or she tricked you as well. We’re kidding, of course, but there will be many unforeseen aspects to your new marital status.

There will be some great things, too. Whether you are coming from a ministry house, dorm room or living with friends, you now will likely enjoy the experience of putting pizza and beer in your refrigerator — and finding it still there waiting when you want it. Of course, there are the joys of spiritual and physical union with your spouse, not to mention having a little more peace and quiet!

Still, if you are coming from a ministry house, you are going to find that it takes a little more effort and initiation on your part to stay connected socially with your church. When you live in a ministry house or with friends, you are literally living at the social epicenter of your peer group. You always know what’s going on and what people are doing, so you have to work hard to miss out on something. Now, you are going to have to work to find out what’s going on. It’s not a bad thing, but you will begin to feel more isolated if you don’t make a personal effort to stay involved and in the know. Ask a friend who is still in the house to keep you in the loop with text messages when people are doing some impromptu activity. It helps to recruit an insider, because you may find you are now more of an outsider, especially if you are working with a single demographic.

It’s not your fault — all you did was get married! It’s not their fault — they don’t even know they are doing it. You have crossed an invisible border. As a married person, you are now more on the outside. This challenge is certainly not insurmountable; it just means you will have to be more intentional about staying in the loop.

Your marriage

Matthew 19:5-6 — And he said, ‘This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.’ Since they are no longer two but one, let no one split apart what God has joined together.”

We highly recommend setting up a date night. If you live the robust life of a radical Christian, you may be surprised how easy it is for you and your spouse to fall into a parallel existence. You make time for the Word, for discipleship and for your work/school. So make time for your spouse. Treasure it, hold firm and don’t let other responsibilities or even opportunities invade your date night. Hold date night sacrosanct. Eat a meal together, pray together, go for a walk, read a book together. Try to avoid movies and TV, until you’ve spent a few quality hours together. Here are a few other tips:

- Seek out some marriage mentors
- Make time for meals together when possible, even on meeting nights
• Spending 15 minutes a day with your spouse in addition to date night can make a big difference
• Think about ways God can use your marriage to create new ministry that you do together, not just serving alongside one another but serving together!

New Opportunities

There are many doors of ministry opportunity God will open to you as a couple, if you put living your lives for him at the center of your new marriage.

_Ecclesiastes 4:12_ — A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.

You are now much better suited for reaching out to other married couples. It’s very difficult for a single to do this because couples like doing things together. You’ll find there is a whole new world of doing things with other marrieds, that can lead to an awesome time of ministry for you and your spouse: double dates, hosting dinner parties, going on trips with other couples and being a good counselor for others who need help navigating the treacherous waters of marriage. As your non-believing friends get married, they are stepping into an institution they fundamentally don’t understand. Marriage was created by God, and he wants to play a central role in making marriage work. Your non-Christian married friends are on a journey into the unknown without a guide. You and your spouse can be those guides. Help them learn about biblical concepts of conflict resolution, sacrificial service and, of course, forgiveness. These are themes that will naturally arise in any marriage context. You, as a follower of Christ, have the tools they need to have an excellent marriage. Of course, they will need the Holy Spirit first, in order that any of the wisdom you have to offer will make real sense.

_1 Corinthians 2:14_ — But people who aren’t spiritual can’t receive these truths from God’s Spirit. It all sounds foolish to them and they can’t understand it, for only those who are spiritual can understand what the Spirit means.

Your marriage will flourish as you learn new ways to serve together. We’re not suggesting that you have to sit next to each other and hold hands at home church, or that you can’t serve apart. There will be many times where you still need to serve apart, but be diligent to find a few ways in which you are serving directly together.

If God does use you together with your spouse to lead another couple to Christ, consider discipling them together as well. Couples discipleship can be a very effective way of helping new couples grow together. This can be done by the four of you spending some time together, having dinner and relating. Talk about marriage and ministry opportunities together. Then you may want to study apart for an hour. Make a fun evening out of it! You may soon find that you have future co-leaders in the making. What would be more fun than leading a group together with a couple you and your spouse helped lead to Christ!
New Challenges

While there are many new and wonderful opportunities that go along with the newly married stage of life, there are definite barriers as well. The toughest issue you are likely to face is the need to help both parties in a marriage come to Christ. As a single person you only had one person to focus on (which is no small task). Answering someone’s questions, helping them see God’s presence, overcoming misconceptions and presuppositions — this can take a lot of time and work.

But when reaching out to a married person, it is essential you help them get their spouse in on the ground floor! Many secular marriages get disunited and develop bad habits quickly. Your married friend might be seeking a community opportunity that actually gets them away from their spouse. They may feel like they don’t want to share their friends from home group with their spouse because they see home group night as a reprieve from the problems at home. They might actually want to avoid sharing their faith with their spouse, because that becomes one more thing that they fight about, something else that causes disappointment and hurt. They may already be locked into unhealthy power struggles with their spouse. They could see sharing their faith at home as being too vulnerable, and they do not want to give their spouse something to use against them. But they must see the importance of making this a top priority early on!

The two have become one, and often what we see is one person coming to Christ, and the other not. This becomes an unsustainable situation, and as the believing spouse gets more committed to community, it puts incredible stress on the marriage. This is why doing things together with them as couples becomes so crucial, especially early on. So in summary:

- Consider taking classes together
- Take the Reaching Your Spouse class
- Try couples discipleship
- Make reaching the other spouse a priority from the very beginning

What Success Looks Like

Ministry success at this stage of life looks like an abundant life of service, evangelism, discipleship and church planting. People in this demographic should have tons of discretionary time! You can see many people coming to Christ through robust outreach and plant home churches rapidly (1-3 years) during this life phase. Make the most of this time, cherish it, enjoy it, build a firm foundation for your marriage on serving the Lord together in as many ways as possible. Get your classes done. Be generous givers. Set yourself up for many, many years of enjoyable fruitful ministry as you move on to the next phase, doing great ministry as parents of newborn kids!
New Tools

- Marriage mentors
- Pre-marital counseling

Resources

- Xenos Classes
- Larry Crabb, *Marriage Builder*
- Leslie Vernick, *How To Act Right When Your Spouse Acts Wrong*
- Paul David Tripp, *What Did You Expect?*
- Don Frank, *Unclaimed Baggage*
- Edith Schaeffer, *What Is a Family?*
- Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*
Testimony: Keenan and Rachael Meadows

We got married while in college ministry, and we (especially Keenan) were older than a lot of people in our group. It was already a challenge relating to the younger people and became even more so when we weren’t living in the house and around as much; we often felt excluded from the various social events that would come up. What this meant for us was that we had to be more proactive in seeking fellowship, but it was also something we wanted our non-married Christian friends to know we were struggling with. When we opened up to the group about feeling alienated, we learned how valuable it is to share how you’re feeling and not hold on to negativity.

At the same time, there was a realization that we couldn’t be at every social event and that we didn’t need to be, either. We needed time with just the two of us. We found that while it was great to be able to attend social activities, it was definitely necessary to take a respite from our busy and demanding lives and focus on our spouse and our marriage. We had to find a balance.

We felt fortunate to be able to model a godly marriage to younger believers. They could see what it looks like to serve alongside one another, and to still include others in our marriage (as opposed to isolating ourselves and becoming co-dependent on one another). One of my (Rachael) favorite things during this time was to stay out late on our cell group nights. It was great to be able to have that night to connect and have fun with the women in our group, especially the younger single people that I wouldn’t normally get time with. I think this time was very important for both the group and our marriage.

Something we had to learn was to include one another in each other’s ministry. It would be easy to be on our own tracks when it came to things like discipleship. We had to learn use one another as a resource and a support in our ministry to others. This was especially hard for me (Keenan), as I tended to be more of a lone ranger and didn’t involve others in my endeavors, ministry or otherwise.

A favorite verse that can be applied to marriage and the transition that goes with it is 1 Peter 4:8, “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.” Going through such a big life change, we sinned against each other a lot and felt pressure from various areas in our lives (ministry, jobs, marriage, etc.). Coming back to our love for each other and, most importantly, God’s love for us, sustained us through even the most challenging of times.
Chapter 2 — Parents of Babies and Toddlers

Thoughts for New Christians

What a great time in life to start following the Lord! Your hands are full with the whole new adventure of having babies and small children in the house. God has just opened up a whole new world of spiritual opportunity and vision in your life. You’re going to be busy, but you’re going to be busy with great things.

Make time to build your spiritual foundation

Now more than ever, time and energy are going to be at a premium. At times, it might feel like there just isn’t time to move forward in spiritual things. But, right now, God has a plan to do great things in your life and through you in the lives of others. Sure, it may be slower-going when it comes to getting spiritually equipped; you may have to get pretty creative, but this can be a fruitful time for growth and for being a light in a dark world. Set aside innovative slots of time for your spouse, for friends and for discipleship. Try taking a class on Saturday morning with childcare. Many things will clamor for your attention; make the Lord a priority.

Matthew 6:33 — “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

Rely on the Body of Christ

Following God through this stage in life is fraught with tough challenges and new lessons. But you’re not the first one to traverse these waters. Take full advantage of the community of Christ that God has put at your disposal. Share your joys, your questions, your struggles. Make time for life together with the Body of Christ. Ask for help and input from wise people in your home church who are a couple steps farther down the road.

Thoughts for Christians

Everything is changing

Children are an incredible blessing. They are a “gift from the Lord,” a “reward,” like “arrows in the hand of a warrior... how blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them” (Psalm 127). Children can change how you see the world, give you a whole new appreciation for your spouse, lead to new discoveries about yourself and deepen your understanding of the riches of God’s love.

They also ruin everything. Sleep schedule, carpet, most conversations, leaders meetings, discipleship time, home church, attendance, sex life... everything. Of course, we say this brimming with love for those little ones. Every new parent feels, or rather knows, that they ultimately have no idea what they are doing, despite having been entrusted with a precious little eternal being. Entering into marriage was scary, but this is a whole new level. Is my child a
normal and healthy child? Am I a normal and healthy parent? Am I a bad parent if I don’t buy the $200 thermometer? Lessons that we’ve learned already about eternal values, discernment, simple living and speaking the truth in love must be *re-learned* for our children.

Your marriage is changing. That familiar, stable equilibrium has now been invaded by this third or fourth person. Spouses must now cooperate functionally at a whole new level, while at the same time struggling more than ever to connect. And that poor, poor date night, once grand, has been reduced to running to the store for emergency diapers.

You are changing, too. Meanwhile God is busy at work in his gracious wisdom, faithfully using all these new opportunities and challenges to mature and shape your character, bringing out new aspects of your personality and gifting. What will all this change mean for my spiritual life?

**Don’t take the exit ramp**

Many Christians in this phase of life are surprised to find new and powerful forces working like a gravitational pull against their spirituality. Structures and schedules to keep us engaged in spiritual things are now all disrupted. The temptations of materialism, comfort and the world system take on a powerful new allure. Many Christians who have walked faithfully with God are disturbed now to notice that the idea of letting the Lord take a back seat has become the new path of least resistance. Perhaps you even begin to think, “Maybe being radical for Christ just isn’t compatible with having a young family.”

But don’t believe that for one second! That is a flat out lie from the pit of hell. You can be radical for Christ right now. You can have a tremendous impact on your peers in your neighborhoods, schools and work. What you model to your kids even at this young age will make a huge impact spiritually as they grow older. The Christian who walks faithfully with the Lord through this time can expect a season of personal growth, fruitful ministry and the joy of building a godly, others-focused family. Your kids will thank you if you put God first.

**New Opportunities**

**Peers**

So the addition of kids has turned your life upside down. But look around you: All of your peers are people with lives turned upside-down too! God has surrounded you with other young parents who feel like they have been dropped in the deep end of the pool just like you. The only difference is that they have a lot fewer lifelines! If you think you feel overwhelmed and lost in this phase of life, how much more the isolated young couple, with no spiritual foundation, no marriage help, no access to wise mentors, no fellowship? Young parents are often lonely. Young parents are often spiritually hungry, sometimes in a renewed way. They sense that they should be giving something spiritual to their children, and know acutely that they don’t have all the answers. They are thirsty for relationships, for meaning, for help and, like everyone else, for answers to their deepest spiritual needs. In other words, they thirst for Jesus Christ! And because they have families, the stakes are higher than ever.
There you are with them, sharing the playground and the library and birthday parties and preschool. One of the new benefits of this time in life is the unprecedented connectivity with others that comes along with children. And we have to be ready with the gospel, ready to demonstrate a way of life that is more fulfilling and stable than what most new parents experience. There is a real opportunity here to stand out for Christ, as a light in a dark place. Invite other young couples over for dinner. Host neighborhood parties, set up play dates, serve your neighbors in practical ways. Talk with them about the challenges we face together.

**A whole new ministry**

But, wait, which should I focus on — my family or my ministry? The answer is yes. Your family is part of your ministry! Your spouse and children are your most important disciples.

On the one hand, faithful Christian workers need to guard against letting the family dynamic completely displace their ministry outside of the house. On the other hand, you need to make sure you slow down and get your ministry right inside the house. After all, you are building a new family. There is a tremendous opportunity here: the deep satisfaction of creating a family rooted in Christ. There is also a new opportunity for the Lord to mature your marriage, as you develop a new respect and appreciation for your spouse. Young parents often get so busy looking out for the kids that they forget to look out for each other. Is your spouse getting devotional time with the Lord? Are they discouraged? Remember, they are probably experiencing the strain of this stage differently than you. Learn how your spouse’s needs are changing and how to meet them. How can you encourage them toward the Lord? In what new ways do you need to change to support your spouse? Above all, remember that you are on the same team.

Try finding another couple who will trade off babysitting once a week, so both couples get a date night. Make an individual date time with your children — each parent with each child. Dads, it’s never too early to take those babies out on a one-on-one regular time. Start the habit young and don’t stop; you will not regret it.

**New Challenges**

**Not enough of you to go around**

Children can have a huge displacing effect in our lives, soaking up all the extra time and emotional energy. How can you remain radically devoted to God and faithful in these different ministries, without sacrificing one for the other and feeling spread too thin? You’re not alone if you feel like you’re doing more than ever and not enough at the same time.

Take your devotional life, for example. At no other time in life is the Christian’s quiet time in study and prayer more in danger than at this stage. Even people who have had good devotional time for years suddenly find it evaporating. People who have traditionally struggled in this area often find it all too easy to let it slip completely.

But here we must remember: This is your lifeline! God wants to provide for you during this time in life. He wants you to draw near to him, so that you can rely on his strength, be invigorated by
his love and guided by his wisdom. He wants you to enjoy his blessings in their fullest. It’s now — when challenges are more insurmountable than ever, and the stakes are higher than ever — that we must abide in Christ. Don’t let your devotional life die. It might not look like it used to, but you must carve out time so that you can drink deeply and be a source of love to your family. Start a manageable study plan that you can accomplish in smaller chunks of time. Pray with your spouse and for your spouse. Pray with your kids and for your kids.

**Psalm 1:2-3** — But his delight is in the Law of the Lord, and in his law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers.

**Keep taking steps of faith**

Living a radical life for Christ with kids in tow presents relentless, everyday obstacles that can wither your motivation. Sometimes even just getting the family to the meeting takes an act of sheer heroism. You know the scenario: Everyone’s tired, and by the time you get the shoes on, the bag packed and the car loaded, you realize that you’re going to be the one walking in late again. Or take the young mother who wakes up an hour early to get some prayer time before the baby wakes up, only to have the baby wake up 50 minutes earlier than usual.

This is where the rubber hits the road. There are going to be days where you need to just keep taking steps of faith, even though you may not see what God is accomplishing through you. It may not look glorious, but that is the high call of this stage in life. And one more thing: Make sure to slice off for yourself an extra-large serving of grace. And one for your spouse, too. Just like with every other phase, you will make mistakes, you will fall short, and even sometimes your best efforts won’t bear as much fruit as you’re used to.

**Is there room for Christ in your neighbor’s life?**

While there are new limitations, you will likewise find new barriers between your peers and Christ. It isn’t that they are not genuinely curious about spiritual things; it’s that they are so busy and distracted! They are juggling families and careers, feeling overstretched and wishing they had a speck of free time for that hobby that’s been on the sideline since their child was born. It quickly becomes hard to see where Christ could ever fit in between the cracks of that busy life. It feels a little more audacious now to suggest that someone should come and spend the evening checking out the Bible. But while it might not look like there’s much room for Christ in there, we know that they were made for a relationship with him. Therefore, the question isn’t whether or not there’s room, but whether or not you can get them to see that what they really long for is to have Christ at the very center of their life! What you have to remember is the need is greater than ever, and many of those factors that seem like barriers have a flip-side that create open doors.

**Hebrews 10:23** — Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.
What success looks like

Success in this stage of life looks like reaching your peers for Christ, raising up disciples in the Lord and building stable, godly families. Success looks like adjusting how you do life and ministry to accomplish these goals. If you come into this stage determined to cling to the Lord, you will not merely survive but thrive.

The addition of kids will slow things down. This is a fact of life that we have to accept. We can expect a somewhat slower pace in outreach. You may have to limit the amount of people you can realistically meet with one-on-one. Meeting for discipleship groups of three might be a helpful strategy. Getting young parents into discipleship and through classes to be trained up as leaders takes longer. Groups with young kids often find more success planting their home church in a cooperative plant rather than a traditional plant. We might see a group in this demographic plant more along a three- to five-year timeline instead of a one- to three-year timeline. Still, winning our peers and planting churches is absolutely do-able. The terrain may look a little different, but it’s still game on!

Honing Wineskins

This can be a great time for both quantitative and qualitative growth in a home church, provided the structures make practical sense. For example, an earlier meeting time (for example, 7-9 p.m.) accommodates kids needing to get to bed and seems to work better during the young children years. A typical group might meet for home church once per week, for cell group every other week and on Sunday mornings for CT with childcare. It can help to have men’s and women’s cell groups on different nights, so spouses can take turns watching the kids without sitters. Some home churches also take turns with “guys’ night” and “women’s night” after the home church meeting.

Couples with kids drive separately, so one parent can take the child home for bed, and the other can stay out later into the night. Childcare at home church is crucial during this part of life. (Just try asking your friend to get a babysitter to come check out your Bible study!) There are a number of ways to set up on-site childcare; consider participating in the Home Church Oasis Program (HOP). No matter their spiritual condition, every young parent is dying for some uninterrupted grown-up conversation! Many home churches have success with outreach-minded teaching and discussion series on topics like “parenting” or “marriage.” These can be inviting ways to introduce neighbors to the group, especially when paired with fun activities like beer tastings or game nights. A few other tips:

- **Living near one another** really begins to pay dividends at this stage in life. When a group of Christians gets involved in a local community together, they enjoy closer fellowship and have a stronger impact on others. Living near others in fellowship is an important priority in home-buying. Many have found it more important than the length of their work commute.

- **Saturday morning classes with childcare** are offered every quarter. A great way for young parents to get equipped!
• **Intergenerational home churches and leadership teams** are a great way for young parents to benefit from the experience and wisdom of older Christians.

• **Xenos Parenting Group** (or C.A.R.E. Group) meets monthly for an ongoing parenting speaker series. Check out their web page ([http://www.xenos.org/care-group](http://www.xenos.org/care-group)) for a vast repository of information and insight. Attend a meeting, listen to a recording together as spouses, or study one together with a friend.

**Resources**

• Ernest W. Swihart Jr. and Patrick Cotter, *The Manipulative Child*

• Foster Cline and Jim Fay, *Parenting with Love & Logic*

• Ross Campbell, *How To Really Love Your Child*

• James Dobson, *Dare To Discipline*
Testimony: Jim and Lisa Long

Having a twin boy/girl plus a preschool girl allowed for some incredible opportunities. The biggest one was that we had never met so many people or had so many ministry opportunities in our neighborhood than during this time. Small kids are automatic friend-makers. We were fortunate that our co-leaders moved to the neighborhood, had kids, and we started a play group. Having other members of the Body in the neighborhood has really opened up opportunities to do more of life together, while including our neighbors; such as birthday parties, trick or treat, and potlucks. Parenting is tough and parents are struggling to figure it out so being available to meet and be open with other moms has opened up many doors for the gospel and witness of the blessing of relationships in the Body. Neighbors have noticed our relationships with members of the Body are different as we do so much together.

Along with the great opportunities came great challenges. Time. Managing. Priorities. Personal time with God. Time with spouse. Entering into toddlerhood we somewhat “graduated” from survival mode, however, there’s new challenges that arose. New sin issues came up such as anger and frustration (from both of us). Prior to kids we weren’t even aware of such issues in our lives, nor were our friends. I think some of the cause for it was the constant managing that came with toddlers (specifically for us as we had 3 really close in age). Conflict resolution, boundaries, and discipline are all really challenging to figure out for 3 different little people compounded with being on the same page as your spouse who is different from you too. Hard to feel like we had adult thoughts to contribute by the end of the day (especially Lisa being home with them all day).

Attending meetings came with its own challenges too. Carting 3 kids to HC and CT weekly was definitely a challenge and sacrifice. A worthwhile one for sure but we definitely felt the burn. The younger two we’d put to sleep at HC and then wake up and put back to sleep at home. We left the oldest child awake during HC and would be quite the “contributor” to the snack counter while often interrupting conversation, making fellowship a real challenge. We’d leave many nights thinking, “Why did we come?!?” We certainly benefited from the Body, the Word and prayer reminding us it was worth it. Another challenge was illness. My God…we’ve never been so sick so much in our lives. Little kids are disease magnets! Other important areas we found challenging were scheduling date nights, serving and good ol’ time with God.

Although we’ve made many mistakes there were some things we feel confident we did right, albeit imperfectly. Lisa was able to stay home with the kids as long before they were born we structured our lives to facilitate a single-income family. Without this our current ministry opportunities would most likely not exist.
When it came to our schedules we dictated when and how we did things, not allowing the kids to slow us down or keep us from going places (this too is a challenge). Transparency was monumental in getting support/prayer from the Body and power from the Lord. Showing need and receiving help is hard but being in over our heads worked to our advantage. Praying, as in anything, is how real important work gets done. We did/do this daily.

Another thing that was a life saver in this phase was the resources Xenos offered such as **C.A.R.E. groups**, parenting classes, books—we certainly used and currently use these resources as much as possible. A life saver for Lisa has been to share kid duty with two other moms 3 times/month to facilitate alone time for prayer, studying, functioning, regaining sanity, etc. The alone time along with date nights is extremely helpful in reading/discussing parenting material to implement. Lastly, having fun on dates is a must!
Testimony: John and Connie Rue

Connie came to Christ and John first started walking with Christ at Xenos after the death of their 3-year-old son, Jack. Prior to Jack's death we were chasing the "good life," two kids, two nice cars, a large Victorian house, and John was rapidly climbing the corporate ladder. Then tragedy ripped through our dreams, and life would never be the same. A work colleague invited us to Xenos and our dreams began to change as God's love, word, and people showed us a truer way. Since the friends who invited us to Xenos were not involved in a home church, our initial involvement was at CT. The word was a balm to our hurting souls so coming to CT was worth the effort, even though every week one of us was called to OASIS to retrieve our toddler son, Chuck, who would not be soothed. John was also choosing CT over the ever-calling voice of "fix-me-up" from our Victorian home.

After months of CT-only attendance, we got involved in a home church. It was not close to our home, we knew no one, we needed to get a babysitter - yet we went once and then again and again as God was showing us our profound need for community in our growth process. Sleep was a premium in those days, a condition synonymous with having young kids. Connie had two ectopic pregnancies and a miscarriage — so it seemed like she was always in the hospital or recovering...not to mention the grief. Being served by the Body of Christ during this time was a huge witness to our family. John's career was demanding and he was having to face the new tension between living for God and living for work. A struggle that created interest from some of his watching colleagues. Even amongst the struggles, there were many opportunities during those years.

Connie was a stay-at-home Mom so she got to hang-out with other mom's and kids and talk about real things- especially what she was learning about God. Even the circumstance of so much grief gave us opportunity to share what was enabling us to move to a "new normal" in our lives. These years, when the kids were young, there was coffee for Connie with her discipler Bev, reading and praying even as our kids tore our houses apart. There was time for Connie to study with another friend as kids napped, early morning walks and prayer with yet another friend before John went to work, serving with Bev with kids in tow, getting to know other families through swim lessons, rec classes, pre-school, and attending C.A.R.E. group which was transforming Connie's parenting.

For John, he began meeting one-on-one with guys most mornings before work. It was in this setting in which God transformed his character, taught him to give and receive God's love, and actually revealed a gifting and calling which would lead to discovering his current vocation and ministry building leaders and teams. We learned it's often the difficulties of life which leads to seeing our need for God's grace and power in our lives - no matter what phase of life we are in. When you have young kids some days are so long, you wonder if you will make it through the day. Yet in looking back now, it's clear not only do the years race by, but some of the unique opportunities of those precious years race by as well, so we encourage all the young couples in our lives to make the most of those years.
Chapter 3 — Parents of Elementary and ’Tweens

Thoughts for New Christians

Rest in the Lord

Matthew 11:28-29 — “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

For those coming to Christ at this stage in life, this rest is much appreciated. No doubt, you’ve survived the busiest years. It all seems like a blur now. Yet even with your new-found freedom, pressures rise in an unprecedented way. You’ve reclaimed a portion of your life; however, new trials are emerging. Parenting, career, marriage and financial worries mount. Many are crippled by the worry that they may prove to be bad parents.

Yet, amazingly, the Lord is pleased to have forgiven you, promised to hold on to you, has great plans for you and loves you like his child. Therefore, one of your most important tasks at this stage in life is to invest in your relationship with God. Despite the craziness of life, you’re too busy not to cling to God, the true source of life. The alternative, so woefully common, is to let the worries of the world choke out your relationship with God, the true provider for you and your family (Matthew 13:22).

Learn God’s Word, so that his truth and love can richly dwell in your heart. Carve out quiet time to read the Bible and pray, even if it starts with 15 minutes a day; you won’t regret getting into the habit. Get with another believer to study the Bible with you at a convenient time for parents — perhaps before work, during lunch break or after the kids go to bed. Consider reading the Bible with your spouse or together with another couple. These times prove to be both educational and a great source of joy for many. Also, make time to take a Xenos class that discusses the Bible in depth. If Wednesday nights are difficult, consider a Saturday morning class with childcare.

Draw near to God’s community. He has put you with others in your home church who can sympathize and encourage; many are going or have gone through similar situations. It’s through others that we are pointed to the loving light of God’s truth, when all we see around us is darkness. Carve out times in your schedule to attend Central Teaching, home church and cell group, where God’s Word is taught and discussed in community. Children can be brought to Central Teaching. Many home churches are also kid-friendly. Find time to grow deeper friendships in this context.
Thoughts for Older Christians

Living for God together as a family

Deuteronomy 11:18-19 — So commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these words of mine. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Teach them to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up.

One of the most important endeavors of your life is teaching your children about God and encouraging them to receive his forgiveness and follow him. There is no greater time to do so than now, as your children are capable and eager to learn from you. This eagerness to learn from you will eventually wane, so this task is both important and urgent.

Share your faith with your kids; let them know how you came to know the Lord and why. Tell them stories about what the Lord has done for you. Let them know that you want them to have the same. Explain to them how to pray to God to receive his forgiveness and become his child. Your children are looking to you for what, why and how to believe.

Most importantly, model for them how to follow God. Kids will notice if your life matches up to what you preach. Read the Bible in front of them and pray with them. Show them God’s love by forgiving and apologizing to them and your spouse. Model generosity and support local and worldwide relief organizations. Lug your kids to fellowship. Pray with them.

Exposure them to Bible teaching. Read the Bible to them or with them. For younger kids, read them a good children’s Bible. Many have liked The Jesus Storybook Bible by Sally Lloyd-Jones or The Action Bible by Doug Mauss. Good options abound.

Bring them to the Xenos student ministry groups to learn the Bible. For elementary age students, the Oasis and TNT classrooms provide excellent Bible curriculum during CT. Junior-high students have Blow Out and JAM meetings along with cell groups. These ministries are run by screened and godly volunteers. Initiate conversations with your child about what they’re studying. Consider volunteering to help lead in these settings. Allow your kids to receive spiritual investment from the leaders in these other ministries; your children will be blessed by their unique strengths. This does not replace your role as the main spiritual leader in your child’s life; it supplements it. The importance of outside spiritual influences will grow in the coming years, as your child moves toward adulthood and you lose influence in their lives.

New Opportunities

Despite the significant strain from all of the responsibilities of this phase of life, many unique opportunities are present for you to serve the Lord faithfully. While all witnessing ministry is difficult, young parents need the Lord, and many respond to his call through patient shepherds.
Having the kids in school full-time may allow parents who stayed at home to return to work at least part-time. This opens doors to financially support the work of God both home and abroad. It also opens new workplace witnessing opportunities.

Another opportunity to share your faith opens up through your children. As they develop relationally, they can begin to form relationships with other kids in the neighborhood, at school, at clubs or on sports teams. These relationships can put you in contact with families going through a similar life stage.

One of the most effective ways to capitalize on these opportunities is to make your house a center of hospitality. Invite the neighborhood kids over. Put some of your giving budget towards toys, potato chips, frozen pizzas and juice boxes. Expect things to get broken. Invite people over for dinner. Have wine nights and movie nights. Realize that no one cares if your house is a little messy. Teach your kids that your house and things are for God’s purposes, and encourage them to help you set up and clean up!

The difficulties of this life phase provide an opportunity. It’s those who are sick who need a doctor. It is the stress of marriage and parenting discussed at the beginning that can drive your friends to see they are sick. Wade in with concerned questions and respond with sympathy and God’s hope. Share about the hope and rest that God has offered you.

Now is also a good time to get involved in student ministries alongside your children. You can volunteer in your child’s Oasis classroom every other week or even once a month. Parents of junior-high children can volunteer in their cell groups. These opportunities allow you to guide your student and their peers in a structured setting and to observe their spiritual interest and peer relating.

**New Challenges**

One major parenting temptation in our culture is to over-schedule your kid (and you) with various means of accomplishment. The prototypical soccer mom invests hours a week at practices and games, on top of the major transportation and team costs. Similar extreme investments are typically made into school tutoring, music, martial arts and other hobbies.

What is the danger here? These activities all carry some value. Yet overscheduled children are deprived of healthy free leisure and relaxed family time. Most importantly, these commitments become dangerous when they trump times of fellowship for your family. At stake here is not only your vital involvement in fellowship, but communicating to your child that their success defines them, or that their sport or hobby is more important than walking with God in fellowship. Pray through these choices. Commit first to be a family that is vitally involved in fellowship. If you find yourself reluctant to discuss this with others, it’s a good sign you really should.

Unfortunately, without a Biblical foundation, many families in our culture buy wholesale into the overscheduled lifestyle. This can make time for a Bible study nearly impossible. In such cases, we need to patiently and creatively build in relationally and look for ways to bring the gospel to them.
Another great challenge at this stage in life is a familiar one — the strong pull of personal peace and affluence. As income increases and personal time is recovered, we are naturally pulled to invest into both sources of comfort. As your children work and play more independently, avoid the temptation to disengage as a parent. In our culture, becoming consumed with entertainment is prevalent, making it more difficult to get people out to evening meetings. Men seem especially prone to forsaking relational opportunities after work, dedicated to screen time. Much prayer and creative, persistent investment is often required to reach those who are entrenched.

Work demands can also become a serious barrier to living for God. As you advance in your career, responsibilities tend to increase in step with salary, encroaching on your time. Companies max out the workload of salaried employees, and some require many days of travel away from family and fellowship. If you find yourself in this difficult situation, pray diligently for insight. Larger salaries and company prestige can easily entice you to minimize the relational and spiritual toll on both you and your family. It is often necessary to set and communicate limits on how much you are willing to work. In some cases, finding a new job, even with a pay cut, is the only way to avoid compromising your walk with God. This is yet another barrier in reaching people at this stage in life: Many are overworked, out of town and exhausted when they are home.

And while having kids is a great blessing, they do create some difficulties with fellowship. Gatherings where kids are not welcome are difficult for parents. Childcare is often hard to find and expensive, even every other week. Typically, one spouse will stay home with the kids in this instance. This is an especially tough situation for single parents. It’s often very difficult for them to make meetings without assistance.

At gatherings where kids are invited, parents of school-aged children will be reluctant to stay late, wanting to get everyone to bed at a decent time. Most parents find it difficult to stay out past 9 p.m. With any large group of children comes the potential for chaos — loudness, fighting, crying, property damage, etc. Without good structured oversight, these threaten to disrupt the goal of the gathering, especially a Bible study. It also has the potential of discouraging parents from bringing their children back.

**What Success Looks Like**

While the stresses and busyness of this phase in life are daunting, a family dedicated to following the Lord together is a formidable force. A cord of three strands is not easy broken (Ecclesiastes 4:12). As each member of your family buys into a routine of studying the Word, heavy involvement in fellowship and reaching out to other families together, all are encouraged to press on uncompromised.

Winning families to know and follow the Lord is a great and possible task. It often takes great patience. Even those with spiritual interest are often entrenched in practical and sinful routines. But as these are sacrificed to God, parents can become heavily involved in family-friendly home church structures, discipleship and classes. Faithful home churches in this demographic can grow and raise up the leadership needed to split in two to five years.
New Tools

**Family-friendly home church structures**

Following God together as a family is a great goal that can be encouraged or hampered by our structures. This is most crucially seen in how we structure our home church meeting — the hub of our spiritual community Xenos.

Take the very simple and effective college home church structure, for instance. They meet weekly on a weeknight from around 8 p.m. until late, on or near campus, in a house where a group of male or female students live. Such a set up leaves parents in an obvious dilemma. Do we leave the kids home or bring them? If we leave them home, who is going to watch them? Can we afford the regular babysitting if needed? Do we want our kids missing from fellowship with us? Are we allowed to bring them? Is there a safe set up there? What if other people want to bring their kids? What about school the next morning? How would I ever get my friends with kids out to this?

While some make this work, others have felt called toward home church structures that are more family friendly, both for their kids and for their peer outreach. For those in the college group, this decision is a tough pill to swallow, because it involves a transition from the college group into adult ministry, sometimes viewed as a “trail of tears.” It is natural to fear the unknown or to hesitate to move from a ministry that the Lord has blessed mightily. Such a move deserves much prayer and leading from the Lord and counsel from others. The caricature that such a move requires *being put out to pasture* or *retiring from real ministry* is not only short-sighted, it ignores the power of God.

The impetus for such a change should be guided by a vision for what you want to move toward. It could be a burden for the thousands of young families in this city who need the Lord but would struggle to come to a home church that was not kid friendly. It could be a burden to lead your children by involving them directly in your Christian life. We believe that both of these burdens can be facilitated by several key structures in adult ministry home churches, including:

- Meeting in kid-friendly homes
- HOP or group-provided childcare
- Earlier HC meeting times
- Toys and great snacks

Imagine your kid excited about going to home church each week. Imagine driving home from home church praising God together with your kids because someone accepted Christ that night, someone you had all prayed for together for weeks. Imagine getting to tell your kid that the friendliness THEY showed helped someone come to Christ. Imagine coaching your kid on how to share the gospel with their friends. Such experiences are not only possible, but are occurring in family friendly home churches.
Another key tool for reaching parents is the CT meeting. Not only is it a great teaching and kid-friendly, it is also schedule friendly. Even in our overworked and overscheduled culture, Sunday remains relatively untouched for many, especially in the morning.

**Tools**

- **Parenting Group** (previously C.A.R.E. Group) meets monthly to discuss parenting issues. These are for Christians and seekers alike
- **Single Parents Group** meets monthly on a Saturday night with free childcare and dinner
- **Calumet Christian School** is a top-quality private elementary and middle school emphasizing both the academic and spiritual maturity of students
- **Saturday morning classes with childcare** present an easier way to take Xenos core courses
- **The GIFT Ministry** provides individual support to individuals and families with financial struggles
- **The counseling department** and **Marriage Mentoring Program** provide individual support for struggling marriages
- **Vacation Bible School** is a one-week, half-day program in the summer that’s excellent for inviting your children’s friends to come and hear the gospel

**Resources**

- George Barna, *Revolutionary Parenting*
- Christopher Willard, *The Relaxed Child*
- H. Stephen Glenn and Jane Nelsen, *Raising Self-Reliant Children In a Self-Indulgent World*
- Classes by Dennis McCallum and Joe Botti available at the Xenos Study Center
Testimony: Ken and Julie Barker

It’s strange being asked to give a testimony about our family life. It might be tempting to think that we have achieved a level of success in the area of parenting, yet, we know that we are always one or two decisions away from total disaster. We are at the dawning of the teenage years so you will have to check back in a few years to see how it all turned out.

Each family has to find their own way to spend time together and prioritize God during this busy stage of life.

We prioritized spending time together, serving together, and praying together. We prayed as a family for a ½-hour every day. Some days, we would read the updates from our missionaries around the world and pray for them. Other days, we would play a prayer game that let us practice difference types of prayers. We all groaned every time "confession" rolled around. However, it established a habit of confessing our struggles and sins before God and to each other.

In serving, Julie and the kids volunteered together, providing day-care at CARE group meetings. By hosting international students through IFI, we were exposed to people of many cultures and we were able to pray together for them. We even saw several of them come into a saving relationship with Jesus! So, we celebrated together, as well. Finally, we took our family on several short-term mission trips. Not only did we see unfamiliar places together, but we could also see how God was using us as a family.

As our children grew, it was tempting to continue keeping them under our wing just as we did when they were elementary aged. Knowing that they will make some mistakes and abuse some of their freedoms, we hope that they will be able to learn lessons through these moments. Through this process, God has revealed to us (the parents) where our heartstrings lie, too. Are they tied to our children’s behavior or to what the Lord is doing in their life at the moment? Often the answer is painful.

During this stage we stepped up into leading a home church. Because of this, we are gone more, but it also means that the children have an opportunity to exercise more freedom. Leading a Jr. High cell group involved Ken in the things about which our son is excited. Hours of time spent carting our children to various activities sounds like a nuisance, but it’s also good. Car-time is when they do their best talking!

What a blessing! Brooke has already been used by God to bring two people to Christ. Haven gets up on his own initiative every morning so he can have 15 minutes of God-time. Dane volunteers to serve and has a real heart for helping people. How did it happen? Maybe it was the loving limits we placed on certain worldly things. Maybe it had something to do with us initiating uncomfortable conversations so they heard stuff from us before they heard it from their peers. Or maybe it was the hundred thousand times we had to ask our children to forgive us for our failures as parents. I suspect it had more to do with God than our techniques, but we played an important role, too. In the end, we pray that they will have a clear understanding of why they need Jesus, and how merciful and loving He is. Having God as the central focus for our family rather than our children really helped prepare us all for this stage in our family’s life.
Thoughts for New Christians

You are in a prime position to begin to grow in Christ. Do not believe the lie that you are too set in your ways to grow or that your best years are coming to a close. You have decades to grow and be useful for God. The greatest tools available to you are the Bible and other followers of Christ. Make a priority to be involved in fellowship and to study the Bible with someone to learn about God’s character and the great love he has for you. Begin to learn how you can follow his example in loving others. Loving others effectively may include working through relationships that have been damaged by past actions. If you have damaged relationships, God will empower you to begin healing; he has a strong ethic of helping you to love the people in your life more fully.

If you have come to Christ independently from your children, consider sharing your faith decision with them, then talking through the new values you are adopting because of the love of Christ. If your children have played a role in you coming to Christ, talk about your excitement and growth together.

Ephesians 1:18-19 — I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.

Thoughts for Christians

You have worked hard raising your children. You’ve done what others think is impossible and actually chosen to have a life centered on God during some of the busiest and most challenging times of your life.

Now, your children have become more independent. They are beginning to pursue their own home groups, and they are being mentored by others. They are starting to think more spiritually, and they are hanging out more frequently with home church and school buddies, driving themselves or getting rides from others and spending more and more time on campus at ministry houses. You no longer have to get a sitter in order to go out, allowing you more flexibility and time.

This newfound time is great to consider how you want to engage in more ministry, both in home church and out; this is a perfect time to begin diversifying your ministry. It’s also a good time to rededicate yourself to getting equipped, or reequipped, through taking a class you have been waiting to take, or even retaking a class that you took a long time ago. It’s an excellent time to hone your Word knowledge or remind yourself about ministry principles. God wants to use you even more than in previous years.
A unique opportunity during this stage is interacting with the college workers who are investing in your children. Having college workers engaged with your kids is one of the best things about our fellowship, but it comes with challenges. You might find yourself questioning the way things are done; your child might tell you something that was said that doesn’t sit right with you; you might wish for more communication with the college workers. Where our children are concerned, we can be quick to defend, control and jump to conclusions about what we see and hear. Realize that you may not have the whole story. Slow down and pray through the concerns you have, starting with gratitude for the investment. Some things may not need to be addressed, once you think through them in prayer. Other things are important, or difficult, enough that they need to be talked about. When something does need to be discussed, work hard to graciously communicate concerns and listen to the student worker. Try to avoid hasty judgments about motives and immaturity. It may be a good idea to seek counsel from other mature believers who have been through similar circumstances. Hopefully you will enjoy the benefit of the doubt from college workers; we should do our best to extend the same. The goal is to work as a team for the good of your child, the fellowship and God’s work.

Ephesians 4:1-6 — Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

One unexpected challenge is that your children are more independent, but the job is not finished yet. Although they are more self-sufficient and can travel on their own, you may find that you need to check where they are going and what they are doing. Where you could leave your middle schooler at home with no worries, you may now need to be diligent to keep an eye on teens staying out late or having friends over when you’re not at home. Some parents may need to spend more time helping their kids work through difficult issues. Although there is great freedom, there is also need for continuing to be involved enough to guide them.

If your kids begin to hit a spiritual wall, know that the battle is far from over. Many children seem wayward at this age, but find their way back through the help of prayerful and patient parents working together with leaders in student ministry.

Opportunities

Peers

Pray and figure out the current needs in the home church — you may now have time to consider another person who would benefit from studying with you one-on-one. Don’t give into the wrong thinking that people who have been in fellowship for a few years or more do not need to have others spur them on to growth. Consider taking a class with someone from your home church so that you can spend more content-centered time together.
Colossians 1:28 — We proclaim him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.

Build into your relationship with your spouse. Throughout the time of raising children, marriages can suffer from growing apart and leading parallel lives. As children start to give you more freedom, it’s a good time to be proactive. Reemphasize date night and take advantage of extra time to talk and engage with each other; rekindle lost romance. Many couples struggle in their identity when the kids leave the house. Build a vision you can both look forward to as empty nesters. Consider how to minister together more fully now. Perhaps the last several years have been in divide-and-conquer mode, ministering separately because of one needing to watch the children. Perhaps you are used to discipleship time which is disjointed because the children are interrupting. This is a great time to begin to rekindle the types of couples’ ministry you did before you had children. This can be a good time to engage or reengage in couple’s discipleship because the house is quieter now, and you are no longer chauffeuring your children to all of their events.

Consider ways to increase your contact with peers. One way is host your child’s high school group. You can serve the college workers and high schools students by providing snacks, being welcoming and creating an environment that enables spiritual work to flourish. Through practicing hospitality, you get to model God’s love, and your house can become a safe environment for many high school students even on non-home church nights. You will get to know some parents through welcoming teens frequently to your house. Hosting requires holding loosely to your house and realizing that things will get broken and dirty, but any loss is well worth the eternal good. As a bonus, hosting the high school group enables you to participate in the annual parent night, a great opportunity to meet parents.

Also consider volunteering through some aspect of the high school. If your child is involved in an activity or sport, you can assist in a way that brings you into contact with other parents, and helps you get to know them through a natural connection. Be proactive and deliberate about introducing yourself to the parents at activities and try to consistently sit together. Additionally, this may be the time to consider “fishing from a new pond.” You may want to consider volunteering, taking on a part time job, joining a class or a league that would enable you to meet new friends. You can develop relationships with others during this stage because your friends are likely wondering what to do with their new freedoms as well. If you don’t see opportunities now, don’t give up; new ones may be around the corner.

2 Timothy 4:2 — Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season.

Strategic contacts

Perhaps there has been a ministry you’ve been hoping to be involved in or to support — International Friendships (IFI), Marriage Mentoring, Renegade, etc. You may now have time to pursue it. If you have never thought about other ministries, sit down with someone in your home group and discuss ideas, praying that God would give you insight about the best direction to
move forward. Your home church leader should have lots of ideas on how you can find new
tools to serve.

This is also an excellent time to support the students who are ministering to your kids. Consider
praying for them and thinking of ways to express gratitude for the work they are doing to help
your children grow in their relationship with Christ. College workers are exceptionally busy:
Encouragement letters, gas cards or even dinners are excellent ways to support these
hardworking leaders.

Global missions

Many during this stage are more established financially; this is an excellent time to start
supporting or increase support for a missionary. Short-term trips begin to become more of a
possibility, and you are able to pray for missionaries. Consider getting involved with the home
support prayer team, or simply initiate consistent prayer for missionaries with one or two people
from your home church.

Adorning the gospel

This could be a time to consider ways you can represent Christ to the community through service
and volunteering. Perhaps one of your friends from home church or work has expressed interest
in this. Consider what areas of need would enable you to express Christ’s love and also spend
time with someone else. It can be a great way for friends and those we serve to see the
authenticity of Christ. Even better: If your home group can come together in a combined effort,
you can begin to see the fruit of your entire church pulling together.

New Challenges

One of the greatest challenges during this period is that peer ministry begins to slow down. It
used to be so easy to meet parents of other children during the toddler and ’tween stages; now
teens show up at your house, and parents rarely are part of the scene. Your child has moved into
a high school where you know a small percentage of their friends and a smaller percentage of
their friends’ parents. Additionally, you may have the same neighbors and co-workers you have
had for many years. Perhaps you have already reached out to some who are now with you in
home church; others appear uninterested.

It can feel daunting and depressing to realize that your pond has gotten smaller just at the time
that you start to have a bit more time on your hands. Although peer ministry opportunities exist,
this is the perfect time to begin to diversify your ministry portfolio and an excellent time to begin
thinking and planning how to prepare for the next several years, when you will have increasing
ability to expand the ways you are ministering to others. It is imperative to renew the conviction
to be deliberate during this stage because of having fewer natural contacts. Think and pray
through the opportunities, and consider how to be intentional.

1 Peter 1:13 — Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your
hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.
Another huge challenge during this time is the pull of the world system. It is tugging at you and at your view of your children. Society is telling you what is best for you and for your kids. You will begin to have new worries. Should my child be taking all advanced classes? Should my child be involved in a multitude of activities? Do I need to encourage my children to get more things on their resumes? Do I need to work more to fill the hole of having my children gaining independence? Do I need to work more in order to pay for expensive college for my children? If you listen only to our culture, the answer to all these questions is yes. You will begin to feel like this is the time to focus on accomplishments that are going to lead to perceived success.

Do not let the world dictate how you will live your life. During this time, it’s important to share these fears, to talk these things over with believing friends, to look at what the Word says and to realign your thinking with God’s. It’s important to weigh out what is really important during this time and make sure that you are considering the true riches of building relationships and learning to love. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 that if we have everything else, but do not have love, we are nothing. Rewriting 1 Corinthians 13:2-3, we could say, “If I have 56 AP credits going into college, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I letter in my sport, but I don’t have love, it profits me nothing.” God is clear that learning to love others is the most important value for you and for your children. It is easy to carelessly follow the values that are prevalent in our world and decide the most important goal is worldly success. This perspective is powerful during the high school years.

Of course, it isn’t that your child can’t take AP classes, or shouldn’t be involved in a sport, but it is so important to think through God’s goals and contemplate what you want most, rather than being swept away with this thinking by default. It might make sense for your child to do dual enrollment; sports and activities can be a great way to meet people. The question is: What are you emphasizing most? Where are you placing your hope? Have you communicated to your children that the most important thing is following Christ — or the most important thing is being successful in high school? Where do you press your child most for success?

Watch out for pushing your kids to get scholarships because it relieves the pressure you feel to come through financially. They will read your priorities according to what you are most anxious about. We need to challenge our default thinking with God’s promises, then be diligent to look at our decisions through God’s grid, not only for your sake but for your children.

Proverbs 8:18-19 — Riches and honor are with me, enduring wealth and righteousness. My fruit is better than gold, even pure gold, and my yield better than choicest silver.

Psalm 1:2-3 — But his delight is in the Law of the Lord, and in his law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he provers.

Teaching our children to hope in the promises of sports scholarships and excessive credit for college yields a temporary rush but an empty result. These promises are definitely empty when compared with God’s great promise of a life of effectiveness and peace with him. This wisdom goes for work as well. The pull can be strong to work more hours to deal with the new freedom and the need for college money.
What success looks like

Success involves being faithful. It involves deepening your understanding of God’s plan for you to minister more as life goes on. We might be tempted during this stage to take our identity from our work and the success of our children, but God will be calling you to increase your understanding of your identity in him and reemphasizing with you that he has great plans for you as you move forward. Reflecting on how he wants to use you is important, because it will help you prepare for the next stage of life as well.

Ephesians 2:10 — For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

Success here will include standing against the world system and rethinking the goals that God has for you and for your family.

Romans 12:2 — And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Success will include being faithful to seek out new opportunities to share your faith. Deepening your conviction that although your pond is smaller, there are people who still need to hear, and God wants to use you to find those people. In your search to find new ways to meet people, diversifying your ministry will provide increased opportunities to share your faith and represent Christ to others. Success also could include being faithful with long-term relationships, praying that God will show you when old friends have new needs because of difficult life circumstances.

Success includes faithfully building in to discipleship and helping contribute to church growth, even though it may be slower. Although the number of new people through the door may decrease, success includes playing your role in sharing the gospel with others and helping others become complete in Christ. Many home churches will work hard toward duplicating and multiplying, but the timeline may be more like four to six years.

Matthew 5:14-16 — “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Success during this time period includes taking care of your marriage and using found time to strengthen it. Couples should be ready to minister to those who are struggling in their marriages and to newlyweds, while setting up for the next stage of life.

Galatians 6:9 — Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.
New tools

- Xenos Core classes to re-equip or equip for long-term ministry goals
- Ministry contacts: IFI, Bhutanese, Renegade, Supporting student workers
- GIFT Ministry for understanding how to increase financial stewardship

Resources

- Kevin Huggin and Larry Crabb, *Parenting Adolescents*
- “Parenting the Prodigal” (Bev’s class)
- George Barna, *Revolutionary Parenting*
- Ross Campbell, *How To Really Love Your Teenager*
- Jim Fay and Foster Cline, *Parenting Teens with Love & Logic*
- Classes by Dennis McCallum and Joe Botti available at the Xenos Study Center
Testimony: Jay and Patty Young

The years that we have had two teenagers have provided us with many unique opportunities for ministry. We hosted two JH cell groups and currently host a high school HC. Hosting the high school group has provided countless opportunities to serve. We work hard to open our home to be a place that their friends want to be. This involved ministering to them with food, sleepovers, getting to know their friends, encouraging and praying for them. We want to have an “open table” at meal time to include their friends in our family dinners, trying to model a family following Jesus, together.

We have been given opportunities to meet their friend’s parents and build relationships with them. We have opportunities to include our children in our home group and the work we are trying to do there-to serve together. We ask them to build into relationships with other children in the group. We have loved being able to go to HC together without needing to get a babysitter, and in fact, both of our children have babysat other children in the group so that those couples could come to HC together, as well. We are also freed up to go on double dates and different opportunities to build into our community together during this unique time in our lives as a family.

This time has definitely brought some unique challenges, as well. To have so many teens in our home, we have to keep a loose hold on our possessions, house, and time. Opening our home has meant times of interruption, smells, noise, re-planning dinner on the fly because six guys showed up instead of one. Having an open home means that crazy things will happen to your stuff, time, emotions. Keeping time with our two teens is challenging as their lives are busy and full. In general, maintaining a schedule where we are around when our kids are around is challenging as we collaborate between the ministry in our HC and the importance of maintaining our time as a family. This was especially tough when we had a JH student and a HS student whose schedules were so different. We had to get creative and not give up!

We fail as much as we succeed during this stretch. Fighting to keep a loose hold on all we’ve been given us has been crucial. A broken window is nothing compared to the joy in having dozens of teens in your home, learning about Jesus in a relatively safe and fun environment. Jay chose to do cell group with our son which was a priceless investment. He felt over his head, inept, clueless most of the time, but the time with our son, loving his friends and teaching them about Christ was worth it on all fronts. Both of our children served alongside Patty in Renegade for years. Ministering together provided times of prayer, learning, serving, confusion, faithfulness and the list goes on and on. We have grown to love the heck out of our kid’s friends, they are a part of our family and we wouldn’t have it any other way. We have also learned to keep a stash of tater tots, chips and pop around for those drop ins you just aren’t expecting!
Finally, responding to God’s prompting to also wade in and build relationships with their friend’s parents has been mind-blowing! God has brought a mom and dad from one family to Christ through their son at parent night. Now, years later, they are both in our HC and God is transforming their family. It’s just been a wild, amazing, humbling ride where God is always up to so much in the big and little decisions we make each day.
Testimony: Mike and Patrice McCormac

The teenage years provide many differing opportunities to serve the Lord. There is more flexibility with your schedule to serve the Lord in different ways with kids being older and engaged with peers. One key way we used this flexibility was to get involved in our kid's high school. We got involved in different volunteer parenting organizations. We often would take an active role doing jobs that no one wanted to do. Not only did we have an opportunity to adorn the gospel, but we were able to make a positive impact in the school and get to know the kid's friends. Additionally, being involved in the school, gave us opportunities to get to build friendships with and talk with other parents and teachers about Christ.

Opening our home to their friends from school was one of the best things we did during these years. Patrice was able to be at home when they got home from school and could feed anyone who came through the door. Also, a few of their friends lived with us. Not only we were able to love their friends but it was a tangible way we could live out the gospel in front of our kids. And because we had loved their friends, the kids were more open to input if we needed to criticize or challenge their choice of friends. Plus, it was wonderful to do ministry with the kids as we supported their efforts to share the love of God with their friends.

One of the biggest challenges during this time is learning to entrust the kids to the Lord. As we gave them more freedom, there was no guarantee they would always use that freedom for good. So instead of nagging the kids or hovering over them, we needed to trust that the Lord would expose what we needed to know. Additionally, it was painful at times to see God working in their character through difficult circumstances and knowing we needed to stay out of God's way as he went after issues in their lives. Plus we needed to continually go before the Lord and be strengthened to continue to focus upon and emphasize his values and not the world's values.

All during those years, we continued to have bi-weekly dates with our kids, family dinners and family vacations. We remained available/involved with the kids and tried not to let our selfishness be the reasons we would not serve them or their friends. For example, we would be willing to pick them late at night from wherever they were. We tried to be strategic over the issues that we would fight over. We did not emphasize grades, cleanliness etc. but tried to take a harder line on moral issues like honesty.

During this time, we pursued our relationship with the Lord and remained vitally involved in our Home Group. There was tension at times as we tried to figure out where time should be spent and did not automatically assume the kids would win out.
Chapter 5 — Empty Nesters

Thoughts for New Christians

God has reached out to you at an awesome time. You are in a stage of life where you have much more availability, since you no longer have children at home. You realized your need for him, and he delivered with salvation and a chance to establish a new understanding of his love, new relationships with people who want to follow him and an abundant life. You come to him with a wealth of past experience that will contribute to you being grateful for the new life he has for you. Some who come to Christ during this time realize that their lives have a lot of hurt and need in them. Do not fear: God understands all you have experienced. He wants to heal areas and transform you into someone able to share his love. He wants to teach you the difference between the false riches you’ve based your thinking on prior to knowing him and the new riches he wants to share with you. You have a great future ahead being able to grow and follow him.

John 10:10 — I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Thoughts for Christians

You have worked hard to raise your children, and they have left the house. That alone is difficult. Things haven’t gone perfectly, but you have tried to sacrifice for your family. Now you have extra time that used to be devoted to picking up children and attending their events.

Although you might feel loss from your children leaving, and might be tempted to feel as if the best years of your life are past, now is the time to push forward in your devotion to God. You might feel the pull to look for unfruitful ways to fill the void in your life. You may want to sink yourself into work or catch up on all the TV you have missed or snuggle down in your home, saying it’s time to take care of me. All of these things can be attractive but will be ultimately unsatisfying. The best resource you have to deal with the hole left by children leaving is the idea that God has exciting work for you to do, and he wants to give you peace knowing that he has great plans for this found time. You are poised to be more useful to God than ever. You have gained knowledge about him and about sacrifice, and you have become more effective at using your time. He wants to harness all your experience and turn your focus outward to give in diverse ways. It is important to realize that your new time is valuable to him.

Opportunities

Peer

This might be a fantastic time to reach out to other parents who are also becoming empty nesters. Although some peers may be uninterested, some who are feeling the loss of what they viewed as the most important job of their lives will be ready to see their need for lasting significance. Be
bold during this time, especially with people you’ve known for years. It’s a great opportunity to strike while the nerve is raw.

Also, you have unprecedented time during this period. You haven’t had this much freedom in your schedule since before you had children, and you have gotten so much better at your schedule than you used to be, because having children has taught you how to use your time more effectively. Look at the needs within your home church to see who would benefit from you studying with them. Consider committing to study with someone else who wants to grow. It’s also a good time to take classes with friends. Few things can be as stimulating as hearing, discussing and applying good content together. Taking a class can be beneficial to newer people in your group and also to people who need reminded of the great truths of God.

Just like in the Parents of Teens stage, your contacts continue to shrink; in fact, your contact pool may be feeling even smaller because of fewer contacts with parents of your children’s classmates. This is a good time to think through warm relationships. Are there people who would benefit from spending time with you? Some of the contacts you have made through your kid’s activities or sports might be feeling their need now that their schedules are clearer. You could also reconnect with old friends from high school or college; you will all suddenly be near similar stages, and the freedom will enable you to stay in touch. Keep your eye on friends’ marriages. Traditionally this is a difficult time for marriages, and if you have friends who are suffering, you can share the love God has for them.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 — Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

Pay attention to your neighborhood. Although you may have many of the same neighbors, this is the time that houses start to turn over, and young families tend to move in. What a great opportunity to welcome them. Additionally, if you have been at your job for many years, you may see new co-workers.

Consider figuring out ways to increase your contacts. Explore volunteering or joining a class, league or social club. You might also consider hosting a neighborhood wine night, book club or Buckeye game, in order to broaden your acquaintances.

Continue to invest in your relationship with your spouse. If you have neglected this in any way, it will be vitally important to make dates a priority. This is a good time to get a fresh start on increasing the spiritual side of your relationship. With the new free time you have, you may be able to study together or carve out time to pray, even if you were unsuccessful in the past. Consider ministering together in a new field, or with a couple within home group. Now is a great time to pray about the idea of couples discipleship or simply inviting others from home church for dinner. Take pains with these things, so that you, your spouse and the kingdom can benefit from this freedom.
Galatians 5:13 — For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love.

Strategic contacts

What are you burdened about? Are there ministries that you have a heart for? Being an empty nester provides a wide-open door to invest in new ministry. So many ministries can benefit from your wisdom and time. Consider becoming a tutor for Harambee Christian School; students need people with wisdom and experience. Now that you don't have any children at home, it might be a great time to become an IFI conversation partner. People from other countries rarely get asked into the homes of Americans, and they have many needs — rides from the airport, conversation partners, etc. Sometimes they need a place to stay for a night when they arrive, and you now happen to have a spare room. Marriage Mentoring is a worthwhile use of time; young people need investment from those who learned to have successful relationships. You now have a valuable commodity of time; prayerfully consider how to make the most of it.

Psalm 90:12 — Teach us to realize the brevity of life, so that we may grow in wisdom.

Ephesians 5:15-16 — So be careful how you live. Don’t live like fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days.

Global missions

You might be in a position to increase your commitment to global missions. Perhaps you could support a missionary or even go see firsthand the needs of people in Cambodia or Haiti. This is the time to begin contemplating the goals you have for increasing giving to missionaries. This is often a good time to reorient your investments. It is definitely the time to plan for the global impact you want to have on eternity. Missionaries and the people they serve are always in need; it’s an incredible blessing to help meet those needs, knowing that we’ll see the result in eternity. You join home support prayer teams or gather with a couple of friends. What a great stewardship to know that your time and money here can now translate into people hearing the good news of Christ!

Luke 16:9 — “And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings.”

Adorning the gospel

With your freedom, you can now choose to meet just about any need in the community. Prayerfully consider if there is a special way for you to represent Christ during this time. Your home group may want to engage in a specific area of service where you can have a vital impact on other ministries. Consider student-ministry support, volunteering at a free clinic or one of the many options in the ministry catalog.
New Challenges

The amount of freedom you have during this time is fantastic, but it comes with some challenges. The world system will be urging you to be selfish. Your free time will be shocking and liberating at first, but you will quickly get used to the freedom and feel the pull to hoard time and use much of your time for yourself. Of course, there is nothing wrong with relaxing. God has given us all good things to enjoy, but the reality is that we are built to experience true satisfaction through following Christ’s example of giving our lives away. Joy comes when we make serving a priority.

**John 13:12-17** — So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined at the table again, He said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

Another challenge during this time is that your contacts are shrinking. This can feel depressing because it coincides with your free time expanding. Intentionally combat lies about your effectiveness. You may become in your ways, and you may experience the pull to retreat. Face this challenge by leaning against this pull. Figure out ways to move forward in ministry.

Other challenges include emotions of insecurity, loneliness, self-pity and regret. You might be insecure because your main role as parent is diminished and getting involved in new ministry is scary. You feel the loneliness of an emptier house. When we focus on our difficulties, it’s not unusual to have self-pity invade our hearts. Felt loss becomes the emphasis and our increased self-focus can lead to isolation.

Challenge your worries and sadness with the great hope we have in God. You may also struggle with regret. Not many parents look back at the time of raising children and think, “I did everything right.” Because we reflect on what we might have done differently, it is a challenge to combat the regret. Nothing is wrong with contemplating what could have been changed, but God doesn’t want us to wallow in negative emotions. He wants to give us peace and victory over these things, as we turn to him and honestly share our emotions while still acknowledging that we want to press on to the great plans that he has for us.

**Philippians 3:12-14** — Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.
What success looks like

Success looks like faithfully using your resources for God. Pray about where he most wants you to be a good steward of this new found wealth of time. Where is God calling on you to take a step of faith? Discuss this with others who are following him.

Success includes being honest with God and others about the negative emotions you feel and the void in your life, but also acknowledging to God that you know he has true riches and wants to redeem your time and your life. Grab hold of the truth that God still has plans for you.

Success looks like a renewed excitement about your marriage. You can go back to being newlyweds in terms of devoting more of your time and freedom for intimacy. Cherish your spouse the way you did at first. Use this time to study together the way you did when you were dating. This is the picture God has of victorious marriage throughout life. The people in your life need you to model hope, both in your ministry and your marriage.

Be faithful to seek out people who need Jesus, both peer and strategic contacts. During this time, you can contribute to other ministries and to home church growth. It means devoting yourself to initiating spiritual conversations with others, studying with those who want to grow, and inviting guests to home church. Many churches will still duplicate and plant during this time, but the growth may take 4-6 years.

Resources

- Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, “Weary In Well-doing”
- John Ortberg, *If You Want To Walk On Water You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat*
- Bob Buford and Jim Collins, *Halftime*
Testimony: Scott and Liz Sweet

We were not looking forward to the empty nester stage. We loved having our house full of our children and their friends. The thought of not seeing them was scary. It was hard to imagine what that would be like. We had watched the sadness that some of our friends had experienced, and worried about how we would feel about an empty house.

We also had fears of how much we would see our children, and whether they would want to hang out with us. Our children moved out in stages, and we began to realize that some of our worst fears were not realized. Having adult children is really fun, and once we realized we were still going to see our children and that they still liked us, God began to show us some of the great aspects to being empty nesters.

The amazing realization as an empty nester is the incredible amount of freedom we gained. We were amazed that we were no longer rushing to a child’s activity or taking care of an issue with a child. We were amazed at the amount of uninterrupted time to be together as a couple. We can spend time together almost whenever we want, and it has enabled us to talk more, study together, and enjoy each other, which was more complicated when we had children at home. We were surprised that our house looked the same when we left in the morning and when we returned, which was another time saver in our lives. What makes this stage of life specifically incredible is realizing that God has many plans for using this time to accomplish His goals.

The newfound time created new opportunities — we were able to meet with people on a much more flexible basis — after school, on Saturday mornings, before CT. So we were able to get more one on one time with people in our home church or friends we had planted away from. We were also able to explore new ministry opportunities; we got involved in IFI and worked with a Chinese Bible study. We had wanted to be marriage mentors for several years, but did not have enough time to commit to it, and we began to mentor an engaged couple. Additionally, we began to work with younger couples with children, since our home church was becoming intergenerational. It is easier for us to get time with them because we only have to contend with care for their children, not care for our children as well.

Some of the challenges include the flip side of all the advantages…. having free time is fantastic, but there is a strong pull to want to protect our time and block out time that is just for us. As a couple, we have had to be deliberate about our schedules, discussing the importance of using time wisely. The momentum can switch the other way, and we can easily feel like we want to hoard time. Also, although it is awesome to have time together as a couple, it emphasizes the importance of continuing to work on our marriage. Many marriages suffer during this time because the focus on the kids is gone, and it was clear to us that we needed to make sure we were getting dates and continuing to strengthen our relationship.
Other challenges include regret and sadness. There is a hole that is felt. It is challenging at times to know that that stage of raising children is over and there is some legitimate missing of having more family time together. Also, I think it is common to think through what things you might have done differently in both ministry and family; it’s challenging to look at your life and see ways you wish you would have emphasized ministry more in one area, reached out more effectively to kids’ friends’ parents, been more deliberate in certain areas with our children. These things…. the hole, the realization of mistakes are best answered by God’s grace and His vision for our future growth.

We think about Philippians 3—pressing on and forgetting what lies behind. We think a lot about Paul’s example of fighting the good fight. At this stage, it would be tempting to feel that the best years are past, but looking at God, it is not that way. These reflections are used by God to draw us close to Him and continue to take our identity from our standing in Him, knowing that it is a reason to press on toward greater sanctification.

We can say with confidence that God is at work more than ever to deepen the growth that has already occurred, to provide powerful opportunities to be more effective than in previous years, and to fulfill His promise that He came to give abundant life (John 10:10).
Testimony: Dave and Anne Durell

Anne and I have been married 28 years and we have been attending Xenos for over fifteen and co-leading home churches for about twelve. We both were privileged to participate in a challenge group led by the late Martha McCallum. While her ministry was life long, it did accelerate noticeably after her four boys left home. Her example has inspired both of us to finish well, as she did, meeting with disciples regularly into her nineties.

While we have officially been empty nesters since 2010, since all three of our children chose to attend Ohio State University and live in ministry houses we have rarely gone more than a few weeks without seeing them. We were blessed to watch their college groups grow and plant many times from a close vantage point. We offered to feed their home churches a home cooked meal once a month in our home. This dinner ministry has lasted now for almost eight years. In Anne's and my own college experiences on the east coast far from our homes in Columbus and Memphis, our parents did not have these awesome opportunities to interact with our college friends. What a blessing this was for us! The kids enjoyed it too because they got to invite their outreach and head off from our house to their central teaching where many heard God's Word taught for the first time. We'll learn in heaven how many of these kids came to Christ, in part because of Anne's amazing cooking!

Many of the opportunities we have in our new phase of life, with tuitions all behind us, result from more disposable income and more disposable time. Our kids were involved in sports throughout their high-school years as well as fellowship and other activities, which demanded a good amount of our time. As empty nesters, we also have experience and wisdom that comes with age and years of studying God's Word. When Ryan put out a call for empty nesters to work with young marrieds, we were able to respond. We hope that our shared experiences of marriage and being new parents has been helpful to the young people in our new home church.

We have stepped up our investment in personal discipleship both inside our home church and in various activities around town. Anne has resumed a role she played years ago as a Bible Study Fellowship small group leader and I led a discipleship group of three friends in New Albany. This week the Stearns’ asked us in collaboration with IFI to host six young Muslims for Thanksgiving dinner in our home. We had the capacity to say yes. Anne and I, on occasion, offer marriage mentoring as well, a ministry we were trained to do by several older Xenos leaders who shared this burden. Additionally, Anne and I are involved in a city reaching ministry called
MissionColumbus that is underwriting para-church capacity building, prayer, and disciple-making movements across Columbus.

There are challenges that come with middle age and empty nest that impact our peers in age whose hearts have often grown increasingly hard with age. We see friends whose marriages are failing as well as several that have sadly imploded. They look across the dinner table, now empty of children, and wonder, "who is this person that I married twenty-five years ago? I hardly know him/her. I am not sure I still even like this person."

Others are waking up to the sad realization that the idol of materialism and careerism has been cruel; that the ladder they spent so many years scaling was, in fact, leaning against the wrong building. It is often devastating helping these people come to grips with the carnage. God is up to the challenge, but this phenomenon is more common among our peers since it is called "mid-life crisis" for a reason. Anne and I are burdened not only for our contemporaries, but also for the young people in our fellowship; that they do not make the poor decisions now that can set their lives on this tragic course.

Two things we think we are doing right are living out our faith in the context of a high commitment home church and working on teams. Our home church meets weekly, but we see each other at central teachings, cell groups, prayer meetings, ongoing Christian education, and various social outings several times per week. The joy and accountability of this lifestyle is quite gratifying as we routinely see people taking great strides maturing in their faith. Obviously, we are growing too as a function of this greater frequency of meeting together.

A second theme we embrace is working on teams. Anne and I serve on many teams of people who share a passion for a given ministry. We love Mercy Medical Center in Cambodia and serve alongside a few dozen others, most of whom have visited Cambodia, and who pray regularly for the harvest in that faraway land. These friendships allow us to leverage the passion we have for these ministries, enrich our lives, and renew our faith as we witness up close the victories He is winning in our city and across the globe.
Chapter 6 — Retirement

Thoughts for new Christians

There is no bad time to meet Jesus Christ, but you might be surprised to know that this stage of life offers many opportunities to the “mature” baby Christian! God’s enemy now sees you as a big threat. You are wise and resourceful — and in a position to make a big impact for God. Satan knows this! He is going to tell you lies, such as, *You are too old to make big changes! You’ve missed the best opportunities to serve God! You are too old to take classes, be graded and memorize scripture!* Remember that these lies are evil.

*John 8:43-44* — He was a murderer from the beginning. He has always hated the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, it is consistent with his character; for he is a liar and the father of lies.

You have more discretionary time and, in many ways, less responsibility than any other demographic. The average retirement age in the United States is 62! The average American lives to be 78! No wonder the world system is trying to take you out by telling you to take all your time and use it selfishly! You’ve been watching those financial advisor commercials for years! Maybe you’ve had your eye on that condo in Florida. You could spend your winters on the golf course, traveling or buy a Winnebago to see the Grand Canyon.

You could — but there is a better alternative. Draw near to the Lord. The most impactful years of any Christian could very well be the retirement years. As healthcare and standards of living have improved, you still have a lot of gas left in your tank to impact other people for eternity. While your choices are certainly your own, what could God do with your retirement years? What does it look like to say yes to God in a radical way? Many people have been in your shoes and shunned the self-life. They have decided instead to engage in a full life of worship, earnestly trusting God to do big things through them.

*Proverbs 20:29* — The glory of the young is their strength; the gray hair of experience is the splendor of the old.

*Romans 12:1* — And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice — the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.

So you joined the race late. This doesn’t mean you’re not in your spiritual prime. The Bible is *filled* with examples of seniors doing great things for God. Moses didn’t accomplish a thing until he turned 80 (Exodus 7:7)! Abraham was 100 when Isaac was born (Genesis 21:5)! This was just the beginning of some of his best ministry!

Just think of what God can and will do if you put your retirement up on the altar as a sacrifice and ask him what he would have you do for these incredible years filled with potential!
Thoughts for Christians

You’ve been fighting the good fight. You’ve been avoiding the traps of the world system. You’ve raised your family, loved your spouse and done your best through many trials to stay on the straight and narrow path. It might not have been perfect. You have taken your lumps, but you have made it this far. You might now be thinking, “It’s time to settle in!” You’re not going to give up on serving the Lord, but you’ve earned a reprieve from all the tension that comes from being in the fight.

2 Timothy 2:3-7 — Endure suffering along with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. Soldiers don’t get tied up in the affairs of civilian life, for then they cannot please the officer who enlisted them. And athletes cannot win the prize unless they follow the rules. And hardworking farmers should be the first to enjoy the fruit of their labor. Think about what I am saying. The Lord will help you understand all these things.

Not so fast! There is so much more that needs to be done! Your peers, co-workers and neighbors are rounding the corner for the straightaway too, and they don’t know the Lord. Yes, you’ve fought hard, but the race isn’t finished. The kingdom needs you to finish the race, not lay off the pace in the last lap. You are the most mature, the wisest and the most available for service of any point in your life. You have the resources to make a global impact for the kingdom. Now is not the time to hang up your armor and your sword and enjoy the fruits of your labor. It’s time to buckle down, strap in and fight a little while longer. You don’t have to work harder, because you can work smarter! You’ve been honed your whole life to make it to this point, and the enemies of God desperately want you to quit, because you are a real threat to Satan’s kingdom.

Opportunities

Peers

Your non-Christian peers are about to enter a period of identity crisis. For decades, they defined themselves by what they do. They were lawyers, bankers, teachers or mechanics. They were moms and dads and were needed by their ailing parents. They are asking themselves what’s next. In record numbers, they are taking drugs, experiencing depression and turning to suicide during retirement years. They don’t know what to do with themselves! Consider this quote from a 2011 article in Forbes:

“Suicide rates are highest among people over the age of 65, according to the American Association of Suicidology (AAS). That age group makes up 12.5 percent of the population yet accounts for 15.9 percent of all suicides. White men older than age 65 take their own life at almost triple the overall rate, and are eight times more likely to kill themselves than women in the same age group.”

They are dying because they are reaching retirement and still haven’t found meaning!

John 10:10 — “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”
There is a new frontier of peer ministry opening up in front of you. People you have known for years are now more in touch with their need for God. No wonder Satan wants you on the golf course as much as possible.

**Strategic contacts**

There is a wealth of ways you can impact people from all walks of life for the Lord. Urban Concern needs after-school tutors to help inner-city youth. Renegade needs life coaches to help young teens learn how to function, apply for jobs and get driver’s licenses. IFI needs conversation partners for international students who have never heard the gospel. There are hospice ministries, ways to support student ministry, as well as Never Alone, Hope and other ministries for addicts. So many ministries need one thing: someone who is wise, committed, godly and available! Seize this time! Ask God to lead you into fruitful new ventures! You are better positioned to do this than anyone else.

**Global missions**

You can support missionaries all over the world with money and prayer. Go on short-term mission trips to Haiti, Ecuador or Cambodia. Get involved with Global Partnerships, or join a home support team for a missionary. Why not consider going on the mission field?

**Adorning the gospel**

There are great ministries that make the sharing of the gospel possible, such as Xenos clinics, hosting high-school or junior-high Bible studies, volunteering at a soup kitchen, starting a community garden or working in a food pantry. You can volunteer at the Study Center, help with parking at CT or work the welcome booth. You are needed! How you run the race matters.

1 Corinthians 9:24 — Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.

Sprint to the finish. The Lord is waiting with a wreath and crown to tell you, “Well done!”

**Challenges**

You are in a great phase of life with so many opportunities, but obstacles exist as well. As people get older they become more aversive to change. If your retired peers haven’t received Christ yet, it probably isn’t because they haven’t heard. They are the holdouts, the truly stubborn who have resisted the call of God in their lives for many years. While there are certainly peer opportunities, it can be tough sledding. Don’t let that discourage you.

Romans 10:14 — How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?

When you do reach your peers, they will have more entanglements at this age. They may already be snowbirds with a condo in Florida. It’s not going to be easy to disciple them when they are
gone six months a year. It also won’t be easy for them to reconsider their retirement plans. Health issues are probably starting to become problematic as well.

They have been told their whole lives that when they retire they have earned the right to focus on themselves. It’s going to be a hard case to make. Thankfully, you aren’t the one who has to make it.

Matthew 19:26 — And looking at them Jesus said to them, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

John 12:32 — “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.”

We’re going to have to get savvy and figure out new ways to overcome these barriers. A big part of the answer is to model what radical Christian living looks like as we retire. Our work is not done. We enter the fray to show God’s enemies that we will fight to the glorious end, because we have a sweet Lord and a rich inheritance awaiting us in eternity.

What success looks like

Success at this life phase looks like a rich and diverse ministry portfolio. Success is being part of a team committed to reaching out to peers, while also using time and money to have as much impact as possible. It may be difficult to raise up leaders and plant new groups of retirees, but so much need can be met by people in your life stage.

There is a compelling case for winning new recruits into God’s vast enterprise. Groups that are predominantly retirement age should have the most diverse and, in many ways, the most impactful ministry of any other kind of group. You are savvy veterans whose skills, sanctification and resources have converged and peaked for incredible Christian service. It might not all be about multiplication and duplication, but make no mistake your group can be involved in more ministries, reach more people and see more salutations than a group of younger people who don’t have as much maturity or discretionary time.

Resources

- Sanders, Enjoying Your Best Years
- Philip Decourcey, “Finishing Strong” (Parts 1 & 2)
Testimony: Don and Kip Dixon

The months preceding retirement were filled with many thoughts and emotions — fulfillment from reaching the goal of practicing dentistry for 40 years and relief from the demands of the job, but there was also apprehension about what to do with all this new found time and what it would be like for both of us to be at home – together - the whole day! The weekend before retirement, we attended a week-end seminar at the Cove, the Billy Graham Training Center in Asheville, NC, where Howard Hendricks was speaking on retirement and finishing well. He said some very impactful things that weekend.

“Retirement is a chance do to everything that leads to nothing. Retirement, too frequently, is an assignment to no-man’s land, producing a suddenly unemployed person without a mission!! Studies consistently show that the average person dies within 7 years after retirement, and it is not uncommon for people to die within the first 2 years.” But then he also said, “The danger is very real that we will die before we are buried!”

He exhorted us with these closing words, “The God centered life leads to glory. The self-centered life leads to gloom. The God centered life provides optimism and meaning. The self-centered life provides pessimism and misery.

These truths became the catalyst to begin the retirement years with purpose. The retirement years are full of unique positive opportunities. Perhaps the best is the opportunity to spend more quality time deepening our relationships — with God Himself, with our family, with the people in our home church and with others that God brings into our lives. We both have also really enjoyed the new opportunity to serve at Harambee Christian School as an after school tutor and a reading buddy. The Finishing Well ministry began as a result of retirement. It has also provided more time to continue serving our existing ministries of leading and hosting our Home Church and Challenge Group. In reaching this season of life, we have had a lot of life experiences which have resulted in both joy and pain and because of these experiences we have been able to provide more of God’s wisdom and compassion in serving others.

The challenges are many as well. The energy level wanes, Advil becomes our friend, and there is more resistance to change. The ruts of comfort grow quickly and go deep. Even though we have more time, we still have to fight the temptation to over-guard our time. There is always the continual challenge of balancing ministry and family, especially when you have thirteen grandkids!

By this time in our lives, we have a huge backlog of experience with the faithfulness of God to cling to in the challenges of today and in the coming years. We have looked at our relationship with Him the same way we have looked at our marriage — no plan B.
Leaving a legacy of faithful service to our children and grandchildren is something we desire. Knowing our identity is in God’s total love and acceptance has helped so much to not give up when we’ve failed or life got really tough. And we have found it to be so true that no matter what our weaknesses and limitations are (physical or otherwise), they are but opportunities to experience God’s unlimited strength and His unconditional love.”
Testimony: Rosy and Wayne Talarzyk

We had been married for 30 years with a house and a life overflowing with love for the activities and people God had given us. We had completed the empty nest phase with three adult children walking with the Lord, educated and independent. Our first grandchild had arrived. Our 20 years of home church leadership at Xenos had produced wide and strong connections in our community at Xenos and around the world. We happily faced retirement.

Then, my very healthy husband of 30 years died, exactly two months after a cancer diagnosis. The plans we had made for our retirement together vaporized. The foundation God had laid under my feet held strong. Doors and windows opened to the most extraordinary opportunities and relationships in my 60s.

In addition to my now six grandchildren and their parents here in Columbus, I am blessed by and follow up with all the spiritual children and grandchildren God continues to plant in my life. My husband always accused me laughingly of running a "flophouse for kids" and I continue the tradition. Xenos Summer Institute visitors and missionaries visiting on home assignment enlarge my world. For one wild month of summer a few years ago I hosted an entire women's ministry house during their transition to a new house.

Whereas my husband and I had led our HC by ourselves for many years, I am now part of a team of four leading a HC. This team has given my life and my HC stability and vision - both missing after my husband's death.

It is my very real joy to serve with an ever-expanding circle of brothers and sisters of all ages at Xenos through my HC, our Sphere, and ministries such as Griefshare, God feeds me as I work alongside mature believers. I learn more about what God is doing all around me. I continue to grow up as a believer as I face my own sin nature and personal challenges in these relationships.

It has been a privilege to continue financial and prayer support for growing ministries like Youth For Christ and Harambee Christian School that my husband and I enjoyed together. This summer I attended the college graduation of my first Urban Concern mentee and had lunch with her daughter, a Harambee graduate preparing for college herself.

I had not even met Xenos missionaries Tim and Marjie Benadum before joining Jeff Gordon's Break Your Heart Tour 2006 to Cambodia. Now I serve on the Mercy Medical Cambodia board, share monthly prayer time with the MMC Prayer Team, and plan support with Friends of MMC. On my last visit to MMC I flew with a full-sized medical mannequin (a feat in itself!) and taught a women's retreat. On that trip I added a visit to Kampong Cham and the Friendship School where a Xenos team is making educational and spiritual inroads. Astounding to be part of all of this!!

God has enlarged my world in my retirement. He has enlarged my heart and my spiritual footprint. He has grown my dependence on him and my vision for what he can do. I am thankful.
Chapter 7 — The Elderly

Thoughts for New Christians

Who is elderly?

Who exactly are “the elderly”? How are they different from “the retired”? When most people retire from their careers, they switch to a life of luxury, hobbies and seasonal travel. Often, though, they decide to “retire from their retirement.” Many move home and live in assisted living facilities to be closer to family as they deal with health issues. In other words, they move from being a retiree to an elderly phase of life.

If you have just come to Christ and are reading this, we are so glad that you have joined God’s family! You may be wondering what you can do, and how you can participate in helping others find and own the same truth. Our answer to that is, “Hallelujah!” You might be interested to know that there are quite a few people who find Jesus in their later years. There is a rich opportunity for you to help many your own age (and many more across our city and around the world) — and not just by writing checks!

An elderly hero

Let me share with you a story about one of my all-time spiritual heroes, who came to Christ at the age of 87. His name was Gerald Johnston, and he is my grandfather, the same grandfather I mentioned above who retired to Florida for 20 years. I called him Pappy, and he was a fascinating man. Pappy grew up during the depression in Columbus, he went to Columbus Public Schools, went to church with his mom and dad, but never developed any strong personal spiritual convictions. He married my grandmother Kathleen at a very young age and went off to fight in WWII. He was spared combat experience, was a part of the occupying force of Japan after we dropped the bomb. Pappy came back from the war and got his college degree, became a drum major at The Ohio State University, a semi-pro Jazz musician, and provided for his family as a car parts sales representative.

He and Grandma didn’t often see eye to eye, but they stayed together, built a life in Upper Arlington, had two daughters, and retired at 65. Pappy began taking some interest in spiritual things. He attended Buddhist meditations, took a great liking to the idea of reincarnation, and even began talking about Karma. My mom, sister and I spent a lot of time sharing from the Bible and talking with him about Jesus.

When Pappy moved back to Columbus and started coming to my C.T. at our North Café 9:30, he was 87 years old, and seemed far from Christ. But he began listening, engaging and asking questions. To our surprise and the answer to many prayers, Pappy asked Jesus into his heart and was saved. He developed a voracious appetite for the Word of God and prayer. He began showing up on Wednesday nights for Christian Growth classes, studying the Bible with mom, and even sharing his faith with Grandma! Pappy changed, his marriage changed, his heart changed! He helped begin a Bible study in his retirement home. I’ll never forget the day he came...
to me and said, “Laddy Buck,” (we’re Scottish) “I can get the old ladies out, but these old fart
men don’t want to come to my Bible study! What should I do?” I couldn’t believe I was working
with my grandfather on how to start a Bible study for the elderly. I learned a LOT spending time
with him, and visiting his home.

People in this community died almost every week. There was a piano in the dining room, when
someone passed away their photo was placed on the piano to inform the residents that their
neighbor had died. I asked Pappy one day how he was doing, and he said, “It’s really simple
when you are my age, Laddy Buck, you just go one more day without getting your picture up on
the piano.”

Pappy witnessed to everyone he met: his nurses, his daughter, his old friends, and his wife. He
was on FIRE for the Lord. I think he shed tears every time I saw him pray, and they were tears of
joy. He walked with God for 3 years and died as an inspiration to me and many others.

THAT’S what you can do as an elderly person who comes to Christ late in life!

No second-class citizens in the Kingdom

God has no fewer blessings for you than anyone else and has no fewer plans to use you as long
as you are willing.

Matthew 20:1-16 — “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out
early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. When he had agreed with the
laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about
the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; and to those he said, ‘You
also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ And so they went. Again
he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. And about the
eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why
have you been standing here idle all day long?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one hired
us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ When evening came, the owner of
the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning
with the last group to the first.’ When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one
received a denarius. When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive
more; but each of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they grumbled at
the landowner, saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made
them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.’ But he
answered and said to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree
with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the
same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your
eye envious because I am generous?’ So the last shall be first, and the first last.”

This is what God is like. He is generous, merciful and kind, and he won’t spend one moment
thinking about what might have been if you had come to Christ sooner. Neither should you.

Philippians 3:13 — Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one
thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,
Thoughts for Christians

We all are daily drawing nearer to our home. As a Xenoid, you are well aware that this is not your home. We are sojourners just passing through on our way to our eternal place with him. How we envy the nearness of the end of your journey! When Christ prayed, “Your kingdom come,” he was praying for the swift peace of God’s sovereign rule — an end to evil, pain, suffering and death itself. We understand that to some degree your capacities may be diminishing, but that doesn’t mean we value your work any less. We need wise, seasoned, broken men and women of Christ to bravely show us the way. So few believers seem to make it to the end. Martha McCallum, Ann Blackwell, Bob Graham and others serve as stalwart reminders of what God can do with anyone at any age. Know that we need you to finish strong, so we can have hope to do the same.

Opportunities

Peer

As people begin to see more clearly their own mortality, the veil of Satan’s deceit is slowly pulled back. They begin to see the folly of the world system like never before. Sadly, they have lived for the wrong things. It wasn’t about money. It wasn’t about fame or power or even comfort. Life is about relationships. Love! Love is what matters; many of us spend our whole lives looking for how to receive it, and never understand that we were built to give love.

There is a tremendous peer opportunity at this phase of life for elderly believers to give hope and courage to ailing friends and family members. Hospice ministries regularly lead hundreds to Christ each year. Volunteers are needed to sit and pray with the dying, then bring comfort to their families as they watch loved ones pass. There are many places the physically strong can come alongside and show God’s love and mercy: visiting people in retirement homes and helping people with transportation, health issues and basic living skills.

Become a home church leader! Be a part of what keeps your community together. Don’t let the entire job of leading and teaching fall on one couple. Continue together to keep your group intact, serving one another in Christ.

Galatians 6:2 — Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

Strategic contacts

There may be a reduction of your ability to get out to a lot of meetings and find robust ways to serve. That hasn’t stopped dozens of elderly Xenos members who lead home churches, serve in all kinds of ministries and play critical roles in our church. Don’t let yourself be limited by fear, but make wise decisions about how much you can do. Finishing Well and Never Alone are great ministries that need workers.
Global missions

It gets more difficult to travel as you get older. Changing time zones, sleep schedules and ongoing medical issues can be limiting. But your prayers reach around the world.

*James 5:16* — The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

Become prayer warriors for God’s workers around the world. Join a prayer team for missionaries or help someone else financially to go on a short term trip. Join [Global Partnerships](http://www.globalpartnerships.org) and help fund the spread of the gospel.

Adorning the gospel

There are still many ways you can serve — through prayer, giving and comforting others. Pray for people while they wait in line at a free clinic; help serve soup to the poor; write get well cards for sick friends and family members; comfort people with the comfort of Christ.

Challenges

Health issues will abound. This will create low meeting attendance at times and many hospital visits. Some people will have a hard time driving at night. You may need to move meeting times and locations. If the majority of your group is retired, you could even have multiple meetings a week during lunch. Create new wineskins that suit your demographic and that make it easier for the unchurched to be a part of your community.

What success looks like

Church planting and duplication may not be realistic at this point. The focus of your group should be persevering together and fighting the good fight.

*2 Timothy 4:7-8* — I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

Have a diverse ministry portfolio, investing broadly in prayer, service and giving. Leave a rich legacy of God’s love that inspires others to follow in your path. Encourage one another and don’t lose hope.

*Isaiah 46:4* — Even to your old age I will be the same, and even to your graying years I will bear you! I have done it, and I will carry you; and I will bear you and I will deliver you.

Resources

- Billy Graham, *Nearing Home*
- J. Oswald Sanders, *Enjoying Your Best Years: Staying Young While Growing Older*
Testimony: Lee Mascarello

Most of my adult life was spent wanting to succeed in my endeavors. This attitude didn't provide me with any lasting substance; instead it separated me from my family and led me into a life of 'Live for today'; 'Eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die'. The next 35 or 40 years I disrespected my God, my family, and myself to the point that I lost the capacity to love anyone. To boil it all down and simplify it, I'd like to quote Ecclesiastes 2:11 “Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after the wind and there was no profit under the sun.”

In 2006, while living in Georgia, I started to act strangely and after exhaustive medical attention I was presented with a diagnosis of dementia, and it was suggested that I be placed in an assisted living facility to help me with this permanent problem. I took up residence and was under the supervision of professionals for about a year when one October afternoon I got a call from my son, Lee. He had called to see how I was doing since his best friend's father had been killed in a farming accident the day before. Isn't it funny how God works? He started to build a relationship that had been non-existent for many years. We started to have weekly conversations about OSU football and he was bringing me up to speed on our family in Columbus.

After a few weeks of this newfound relationship, he asked me to visit for the Christmas holidays. After working the situation out with my doctors, I did come to visit. On Christmas Eve we attended a musical program at Xenos and listened to a senior pastor give a teaching. It was during that teaching I heard him say, 'If you ask Jesus to come into your heart and ask Him to forgive your sins, all your sins will be forgiven past, present and future'.

Past, Present and Future! I'd never heard that before. I'd never heard that before in all my 12 years of parochial schooling or in my church! That evening I was thinking about that simple process and decided to accept Jesus that night while in bed. I did accept Him, and my life changed right then and there. The next day I decided to tell my children that I had accepted God’s forgiveness in my life, and asked for their forgiveness for how I had treated them for their whole lives. They did forgive me and we hugged and wept together for the first time as a real family. We had further discussions that holiday time and I asked if they would mind if I moved back to Columbus to be close to them. They agreed and a few months later I moved back to Columbus and took up residence in Claremont Retirement Village.

I still have the diagnosis of dementia, but it seems that it has slowed down so that today I'm pretty normal. I don’t know if the Lord slowed down the progression, but also I don't know that He didn't. All of my efforts to comply with the rules had gotten me nowhere, but by faith I was forgiven and that changed my life forever.
Spotlight: Ann Blackwell

Ann Blackwell, having walked with the Lord for more than 50 years, has now become one of the elderly among us. As her Alzheimer's disease progresses her world has become quite small. She cannot walk and can barely speak. Some might mistakenly think her role as a Christian in this world is over. Do not rush to that conclusion.

Recently, in her one room home in Special Care, full of distinctly "Ann" Judeo-Christian artwork and modern decor, I introduced Ann to her new caregiver. Eager for this new person to understand the wide scope of Ann's productive life I began to expound on Ann's impact on so many lives: in her family as a praying mother with a steady hand and a persevering love; on her Christian brothers and sisters as a Home Church leader in love with the Lord and his Word; on Xenos Bible students as she patiently taught Old Testament I, II, III, IV; on world missions through faithful prayer and financial support; and on her friends with her incredible loyalty, hospitality, and sacrificial service.

At the end of this discourse I took a breath and explained that Ann had given me my whole adult life: as a broken teen Ann showed me a life of freedom in Christ I had never expected, later she introduced and highly-recommended my husband-to-be with the words "his heart belongs to God" which led to my children and my ministry. Then I took another breath.

Ann sitting in her wheelchair lifted one finger and said quietly and haltingly, "That was all God." The new caregiver said, "what a testimony." And it is.

When Ann first moved to Independent Living at the retirement center, she opened her apartment just as she had always opened her home for Bible Study. She encouraged other residents to know the Lord. After Ann's move to Assisted Living our cell group met at her apartment studying Tozer's PURSUIT OF GOD. During our prayer at the end of the chapter THE BLESSEDNESS OF POSSESSING NOTHING Ann haltingly prayed that God would not let her Alzheimer's come between her and Him. Last Easter she even corrected a point of theology in a sermon she heard. She continues to honestly face and confess her fears and sins which popped up as she lives in close quarters with her own failing health and with others in the same condition. She wisely made difficult choices and plans, modeling for so many to follow a truly gracious walk.

Ann can no longer read but she still chooses passages from her favorite Deuteronomy when someone volunteers to read to her. Recently when told her son was teaching in 2 Samuel, she asked to hear from that book. Her choice of music has been narrowed down to one CD of old hymns which bring her comfort and can be heard down the halls in Special Care. There is no doubt among her caregivers that this is a woman after God’s own heart. What a testimony!

Malachi 3:16-17 Then those who feared the Lord talked often with one to another; and the Lord listened and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him of those who reverenced and worshipfully feared the Lord and who thought on His name. And they shall be Mine, says the Lord of hosts, in that day when I publicly recognize and openly declare them to be My jewels (My special possession, My peculiar treasure). And I will spare them, as a man spares his own son who serves him.
Testimony: Bob Graham

I would like to share my experience with those others who are older than dirt! Many of us wait until the last minute to get ready to give our all to God. I was a “procrastinator” when it came to work for the Lord. I wanted to run around and have lots of fun before I died and went to heaven to get my harp and cloud assignment.

I received Jesus at an altar call in a Southern Baptist Church at age 12, and then spent the next 35 years or so as a carnal Christian on a prodigal son sabbatical, living out the life the Apostle Paul warns us about in Romans 1 & 2. Finally, in March 1987, God orchestrated consequences that brought me to my knees, in total surrender of my will to Him. Like Peter cried out in John 6, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,” I rededicated my life to Christ that day. I mention this so that if any of you are being held back from ministry because you think that past deeds (or lack of past deeds) restrict you from being zealous for Christ today, I can attest that just the opposite is true. We just need to surrender our control over to God. He does the rest.

At age 55, my daughter pointed me toward Xenos Christian Fellowship, and I heard biblical truth being taught. The classes on God’s Word hooked me. I took every class available; couldn’t get enough.

Those who are forgiven more are more grateful. Never too old to learn!

Soon I joined a small Xenos substance abuse recovery group, which consisted of about 5-7 members. Before long, the ministry had grown, and I found myself leading the Xenos Never Alone Recovery Ministry. We hold weekly dinner meetings, helping people struggling with drug/alcohol abuse or addiction, and their friends and families. A few years ago we got together with other Evangelical churches in the area, and formed the Central Ohio Recovery Group, with 20 churches and about 40 meetings a week.

Not long afterward, our home church leader died, and I was asked to step up. The truth is, I didn’t want to be a co-leader, but I was willing to try for Christ. God continues to use that step of faith, the group has planted and grown and today meets at our home.

How did I get here? I gave God the reins. I had nothing to do with the results. Whatever fruit has come through these events is from God, not from me or others. He turns the lemons into lemonade. He gets all the Glory! Praise God!

When I was working, my goal was to retire by age 60, play golf every day, and have my ashes scattered on the 18th green. My prayer every day now is for God to give me the passion and strength to finish strong for His glory.
The Rewards for surrendering to God’s will and serving are amazing! I have found purpose in life…of eternal value! God can use us. With prayer and the Holy Spirit’s help, my chief focus is on pleasing the one who rescued us (rescued twice, in my case!)

Serving IS better than receiving! For the first time in my life I’ve found true peace and happiness when I’m helping others…a quiet fulfillment. Just watching God work miracles in the lives of those we’re serving is itself “intoxicating”!…We “get high” on Joy!

In Ministry I’ve seen marriages saved, souls come to Christ, families and friendships restored, and more. To me - these are all miracles! God can and does use our past experiences to give others help and comfort, just as God comforts us in our trials (2 Co 1:3-5).

In my twilight years, I have had leaps of spiritual faith. Often this comes when things go haywire, because troubles send me back to my knees for help. Trials test and strengthen my faith. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, I’ve got a long way to go…far from perfect. But I press on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of me on March 6, 1987.

God doesn’t talk much about retirement in the Bible… I guess he’ll let us know when it’s time to be with him. I like what Skip Heitzig said in his book, God Print, Making Your Mark For Christ: “A Christian without a ministry is a contradiction!”

AMEN, Skip.
Conclusion

Well if you’ve made it this far hopefully you’ve found something helpful. We would like to fill out the resource and tool section more, and will release new versions through email as word docs as things move forward.

We pray that this is only the beginning of an expanded effort to look at our adult ministry through this lens. We know that there are and will be many more stories to tell, examples of faithfulness, and resources to make use of. Please pray for our staff as they continue to work on setting up the infrastructure to make this approach as user friendly and helpful as possible.

2 Corinthians 2:14–16 (NASB95)  But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things?