

SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES PROMOTING FAMILY LIFE**By Fr Arthur Pereira¹ and Wendy Louis²****(FABC Office of Laity, Asian Resource Team for AsIPA Desk)****CONTENTS****I. Introduction****II. Family Life in Context****III. The Family and Small Christian Community (SCC)****IV. Conclusion****V. Supplementary Material**

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I. Introduction

This paper intends to look at families in relation to Basic Ecclesial Communities / Small Christian Communities within the structure of parish life. The demands made on families and SCCs by parishes, organizations and ministry groupings are varied, vague and often pulling the same people in different directions. In these few pages we would like to look first at some aspects of marriage and family in a society that is industrialized and complex. Secondly we would like to explore the advantages for families who belong to SCCs as they become more open to the network of neighbours in both Christian communities and human communities.

Family life has been discussed on many occasions and named often as a pastoral priority. The same high priority has also been given in FABC gatherings to the development of Small Christian Communities in our local churches. We would like to look at how these two significant pastoral priorities can operate together. Are they contradictory in the practice of parish life or complementary? They can be both. It depends a great deal on the pastoral strategy adopted and the interpretation given to the vision of the "Communion of Communities".

For the purpose of this paper the two questions we would like to explore are:

Firstly, what are some of the urgent issues for family life in our urban society today and what are the consequences for families?

Secondly, are families belonging to SCCs enabled to nurture a 'culture of life'? How does this happen, or how can we help it to take place?

II. Family life in context

The context of family life in Asia has been described in the FABC8 working paper. The paper points to the dangers and risks to family life from globalization, increasing poverty and the persisting patriarchal mind-set in many Asian societies, among other things. However to paint a picture of the family in a state of dysfunction and decay is

³ Quah, Stella 'Home and Kin - families in Asia' Eastern Universities Press, 2003, Singapore indicates that in spite of many negative factors causing breakdown in marriages and postponement of marriages, marriage and children are still seen as having a very high value for the vast majority of young people in urban societies.

not entirely accurate. According to sociological studies conducted in many countries of Asia, the value placed on marriage and family by both old and young remains very high.³ There are numerous problems but the doom and gloom picture of family life is not true in fact. Three reasons for the popular impression that all is not well with the family is that the media only highlights the disasters that occur in family life. Secondly, the legislation being tabled in the USA and Europe giving equal rights to persons wanting to form the family on the basis of two men or two women. This trend that seems to be gathering momentum causes alarm in many countries where the institution of marriage is strictly a man and a woman who intend to have their own children. Thirdly, the families who approach priests in parishes and the people coming to our crisis centres are from families already in trouble.

The vast majority of people out there are still managing a form of family life that gives value to children, to elders and to marriage as an institution in spite of many difficulties, shortcomings and struggles. A few points are worth mentioning, on the dangers present and growing:

Traditional vs. contemporary family

Firstly, the tension that exists between the expectations of family life coming from traditional cultural values and what is desirable, possible or affordable for the young family today. In the concept of a traditional family, elders are part of the household; the wife minds the home and children while the husband is the income earner. In industrial urban areas, women are actively encouraged to join the labour force by the government. Many women do paid work to support their families since the wages of one partner is insufficient for the family. Women also pursue a career because they enjoy using their gifts and talents and are contributing significantly to develop society and the economy.

This is not only an urban phenomenon, in fact this situation exists in traditional, rural areas where women do a great deal of the agricultural work and are also expected to care for the children and home entirely as well. The agricultural work of these women is unpaid and unrecognized.

The day-to-day situation of the family is often far from the traditional 'ideal' model proposed. The woman in particular continues to feel the pressure to perform according to traditional demands. Meanwhile, the actual family situation gradually becomes more

'normal' and acceptable without any examination of the benefits or disadvantages to family members. The woman continues to remain the main caregiver while pursuing her career or paid work. Expectations that the man provide and the woman take care of home and children comes from the mixed messages communicated by church, society and relatives especially in-laws who represent the traditional values. The further from the traditional model that families find themselves in, the greater the tension felt by the members. Women today are feeling the need for a 'partnership' where the caring for children and running the household is shared by both spouses in the same way as financing the family is shared. Studies have shown that while the health of men improves with marriage the health of women generally deteriorates. It does not take a sociological survey to notice this phenomenon.

State & church policies and practices need to communicate a message that strengthens the family and the spousal relationship in ways that helps to reduce tensions.

Mixed Marriages

A second aspect of family life that needs urgent attention is the difference in values between the partners in a marriage of different religious affiliation or cultural backgrounds. 'Mixed' marriages are more and more the norm among our young people today and it is cited as one main reason for divorce. They do not realize the strain that the differences will put on their marriage.

"By the end of the 1980s, studies had confirmed that among the main factors conducive to divorce were differences in religion or values; infidelity; destructive habits including drug abuse, drinking and violent behavior; personality differences and young age of marriage." ⁴ In that order "Describing the main reason for their divorce, 24 percent of the 55 divorced people in a study of family life in Singapore pointed to differences in values, ideals, goals or outlook in life..." ⁵

If difference in values can put a strain on young married couples especially as the children arrive, what formative or support structures are needed to help them through their early years of marriage? Does the Small Christian Community have a role to play here? A pastoral

⁴ Quah 152

⁵ Quah 152

⁶ Social Capital has many definitions given by different sociologists. A simple way of understanding it is to see it as the relationship network that provides stability, trust and encourages growth of persons in families, informal groups of neighbours etc.

strategy to support couples in mixed marriages is very urgently needed as the numbers of mixed marriages passes the 50% mark.

Grandparents

A third area of consideration is the place of grand parents in societies that value economic productivity over social capital⁶. Quah points to two major benefits of a positive grandparent – grandchild relationship. First, “that grand-parenting builds a bridge for the senior generation to become actively engaged in the present and to project themselves into the future... The other benefit of this bond across generations is the enhancement of value transmission.”⁷ One study based in Singapore indicates that grandparents rank second in childcare provision with parents being the first. The work of grand parenting needs to be supported and acknowledged as valuable in the case of societies where parents are more often absent and socialization of children is left to grandparents. In many nuclear families there is ambiguity and confusion in their relations with elderly parents. This arises in part from the emphasis in our societies on a person’s usefulness to the economy, youthfulness and physical fitness. The trend to isolate the elderly and neglect them is further aggravated by housing and health care policies. It is a sad day when laws have to be enacted to ‘force’ children to take care of their elderly parents. What does the church have to say about this trend in our urban societies? What is the attitude of the church to the elderly?

Suffer the little children

The situation of children in Asia requires an urgent response, as children cannot wait for us to have more committees set up. We have enough statistics to know that children are dying from preventable diseases due to lack of drinking water and food. There are children without education, children in refugee camps for most of their young lives and children caught in the horrors of child exploitation for cheap labour and sex. Child soldiers are trained for war.

Children in a society like Singapore or Japan, or any industrialized country in Asia, will face a very different set of difficulties. In the Far Eastern Economic Review dated August 9, 2001 an article entitled ‘suffer the children’, claimed that in Singapore, like many other countries, stress starts early. Statistics from the ministry of health revealed that

⁷ Quah 104

the number of young people visiting psychiatrists at government-run outpatient clinics doubled from 1,126 in 1990 to 2,491 in 2000. Half were under twelve years of age. Also quoted in the FEER is the result of a survey of 1,742 children aged 10-12. They said that they were more afraid of exams than of their parents dying. One in three said they sometimes thought life wasn't worth living... the problem, according to some experts is the pressure and high expectations coming from parents and the education system.

Migrant workers and divided families

Finally, it is important to mention a reality that affects a vast number of families all over Asia. This is the increasing poverty and unemployment that 'pushes' women and men to leave their countries and families to look for work. Migrants are forced to travel as individuals, which means that families are separated for prolonged periods. The countries that 'pull' these workers have a set of problems that affect the family of a different nature. The cheap labour concept in current economic practice that perpetuates the phenomenon of exploited migrant labour needs a careful critique.

To summarize, tensions arise from:

- Glorification of marriage versus the actual practice of marriage.
- Traditional gender roles versus contemporary women's roles.
- Work and family conflict.
- Mixed marriages where couples do not share common faith or values.
- Old people who are considered a burden instead of a resource.
- Children under pressure and in tragic circumstances.
- Families split up by the need to find work overseas.

The results of these tensions are increasingly:

- Delaying marriage.
- Lower fertility rates
- Increased divorce rates
- Increase in the proportion of couples choosing to remain childless or individuals deciding to remain single.⁸

⁸ Straughan, Pauline Tay, "The social contradictions of the normal family: challenges to the ideology". NUS Dept of Sociology, Working Paper 135, Singapore 1999.

III. The Family and Small Christian Community (SCC)

While we still have a situation where the extended family and family life in Asian societies are strongly valued, we need to proactively provide proper formation, support and a network of families for family life to flourish. These communities of families will in turn reach out to their neighbours to care for them and strengthen their families. As church we need to ask ourselves - Do we contribute to the tension or do we help the family to grow while nurturing values that benefit all?

"A healthy family is a fountain of renewal for the community. But only a conscious community of healthy families is capable of upholding the many weak spirits and breaking... the great public power of the Zeitgeist. Ten young families, united in the 'Circle of Young Families' and backed up by groups of older people of a like mind, could be a great force in a community or parish...The call is for social action; for the formation of groups feeling and acting in a spirit of solidarity."⁹ All those years ago Bernard Haring made this rallying cry for families to come together to become a force to be reckoned with. Since that time in 1959 we have seen the rise of numerous movements that have given families a way forward especially the Catholic Action groups who kept the social action component in their agenda. Today, the call is to 'Communio' and a different way for families to come together. The way we understand ourselves as Church is impacting the family and the development of Small Christian Communities.

At the service of the family

In the church today, the Small Christian Community can be seen as the 'Intermediate Group' that helps families feel they have a role to play and belong to the larger community of the parish.

In every human society that has even minimum organization we find families or individuals forming groups. These groups can be social clubs, labour unions, women's leagues, environmental lobbyists or whatever. The basic human need and human right is to form these intermediate groups to become more self-determining and to provide for social and psychological needs.

In our Christian tradition, our Lord Jesus who knew well the human person decided to form his Church starting with a small group

⁹ Haring, Bernard, CSSR, "The Sociology of the Family", Mercier Press, Ireland, 1959.

and encouraging them to continue to form communities of disciples. In a way then we could say that the Small Christian Community or Neighbourhood group functions as an essential intermediate group between families and the larger parish community.

The most obvious role of such a group is to provide a social network. In the case of SCCs this social network is doubly meaningful because it is a group of believers who gather in the name of Jesus and whose bond provides meaning and identity to those who belong. It is also a safety net for single-parent or nuclear families with few opportunities for social life or who have difficult mixed marriage circumstances. It is a place where the elderly can feel they are wanted and loved.

In SCCs that are worthy of the name, every member of the family will find a place and be appreciated. Children, teens and adults can exercise their prophetic and priestly functions to share faith and correct wrongs. The SCC is the place par excellence where peer ministry is exercised with families evangelizing each other and sharing life.

Families need a group, the adults need other adults, and the children need other children and so on. In these Small Christian Communities, centered on the Word of God adults share their lives and support each other to live the Gospel more authentically and sincerely. In these communities faith is handed on to the children both formally and informally. However it is important to say here that the Small Christian Community while it provides great support to families is not primarily a support group where people help and serve each other. The SCC that wants to develop into a fully-fledged Christian Community in time strives to reflect the Church. It is the Church in microcosm. This means that the community in the neighbourhood is primarily missionary – outreaching, serving (Apostolic), Christ-centered (Holy), in communion with the parish and the whole Church (one) and excludes no one from its membership (catholic).

Many would say that we need to strengthen our families and ourselves first before we can become missionary but it is true to say that 'losing oneself' in the service of others means that we can 'find God and ourselves' in those we serve. This is the paradox of the Gospels.

In the act of serving others and reaching out, pouring themselves out for others, families also learn to share and serve each other and communicate better among themselves. They come closer to the image of God imprinted in them, the image of the Trinity in continuous

out-pouring of life and love. There is no reason why children should be left out of social action projects. They are badly in need of good example and witness enabling them to grow in an understanding of discipleship.

SCCs the basic ecclesial reality

Whether we are talking about Family Life ministry, the development of Small Christian Communities, or the promotion of adult faith formation and youth ministry in parishes, it is important that we see those participating in ministry as coming from families. The whole approach to ministry needs to take on a more family friendly structure so that parents do not have to attend different meetings on different nights or at different times on Sunday making family life even more difficult. When the SCC is the basic unit of parish life, then the mission service expected of parishioners will emerge eventually from the SCCs. Hence, we need to work towards nurturing the SCCs as the place where families meet to pray and, being inspired by the Word of God, take on different aspects of the Mission of the church. Parents working with children, grandparents with grandchildren and groups of parents with groups of children, the youth among themselves or as mentors to the younger members. They will care for the sick in the neighbourhood, hand on the faith to the young and the catechumens, assist in the Sunday liturgy and be a force for evangelization among themselves and for others.

SCCs can lead our families towards the road of perfection

The family in Catholic tradition is held in high esteem and parents have a crucial role. No one doubts this. We see too much evidence of children who are malformed by the separation and divorce of parents or by the abuse of alcoholic or drug addicted parents. We know the negative effects of bad example and of a lack of faith on children when parents do not play their proper role. However, families who are turned inwards on themselves and who care primarily for their own members nurture selfish individuals and unhealthy family life. The Gospel challenges our families to perfection in a number of ways:

Transcending blood ties

Catholic tradition while upholding family values also maintains that family blood ties are not ultimately the most important, rather,

belonging to the Body of Christ; the bond of baptism; the common mission, these are 'family-making' elements as we are told in many places in the Gospels. The Small Christian Community can help Catholic families find their true identity within the community of believers. Unless they transcend blood ties in their outreach and charity they can never find their meaning as a Catholic family reflecting the Trinitarian life that was received at Baptism. The action of moving outwards as a family has the effect of strengthening family bonds and identity.

No group of people can become fully human unless they transcend tribe, clan, language and race to accept all peoples as sisters and brothers. More so the Christian family should witness by transcending blood ties to bring about the unity and 'communio' that Christ so urgently demanded of his apostles. Coming together as neighbours is not natural to many in our city environments. We have every amenity within the comfort of our homes. Our doors are well locked even though the real intruders are reaching us through our televisions and computers. God our Father is inviting us to acknowledge the relationship we have in him with our neighbours and to overcome our natural resistance to sharing our lives beyond the bounds of family.

Reaching out to neighbouring families

Closely linked to the paradox of the Gospel, unless our families 'lose' their lives within Small Christian Communities they will not be able to 'find' themselves. (Cf. Matthew 16:24-25). And what about the injunction to serve, to visit, to give a drink of water to the Lord who is thirsty and hungry? Families in trouble should find a haven among neighbours who are trying to live out the Gospel of compassion and mercy. Catholic families can also be enabled in SCCs to reach out and find the treasure of Christ in the poor, lonely and aged. (Cf. Matthew 10:42) Our blessed Mother Mary knew that she would be truly one with her Son if she was also his 'follower' and she is our example: the first believer, the first disciple and always there for others.

The Catholic family today is a very small and fragile unit. The norm is two children and often only one. The stresses and strains on family life come from within and without as outlined in chapter one. A small Christian community serves as an 'extended' family for this fragile entity to enable it to take a stand against great odds; to make life-style choices with support from friends and neighbours and to

find a meaning in life that is not offered in the secular world. In the practice of community life families can experience the love of God and the presence of the Risen Lord in their lives. Families in SCCs can be educated to reach out and with the Gospel at the centre of the life of every Small Christian Community the work of these communities is and can be the ongoing work of Christ and his mission in the world.

Handing on the faith to our children

In our preparation of teenagers for the Sacrament of Confirmation SCCs can play an important role in witnessing to them the meaning of service in the Christian community. In church and school today teens are required to produce evidence of their desire for full initiation into the Church through active service to the poor or to the community in some way. There is a real difficulty in finding them something worthwhile to do which is an indication that our Christian communities are not in touch with the needs of people around us or that our teens are not connected with the community. How can we help our children and youth connect with the poor and learn the central command of the Gospel to love and 'bring Good News to the poor'? How can we as church give witness to the call of St Paul to be clothed with "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Col 3:5-12)"?

Twenty years or more ago, the World Biblical Federation proposed that the Christian family take on the "Passover Family Model" which takes its inspiration from Deuteronomy 6:20f. The central role of the family in handing on the faith is the hallmark of Jewish religious education. The small family size and situation of mixed marriages makes this model almost impossible for many families today unless they belong to a bigger family grouping which in this case can be the Catholic neighbourhood community or Small Christian Community. Home-based catechesis of pre-school children also needs a few families with the combined strength of parents and children to make it work. The family on its own cannot sustain such a programme. Parents are definitely the first and foremost educators of their children in the faith but they need a little help in this from the community.

¹⁰ Redemptoris Missio of Pope John Paul II para 51.

IV. Conclusion

The Christian family on its own today will have a much harder time responding to the call of the Gospel and the signs of the time. We are living in an era of individualism but also in a time when more than ever we have realized the need for community as a means to become more fully human. The Church offers the Small Christian Community, as 'the starting point of a new civilization of love'¹⁰ for families. These families evangelized in the SCCs, will in turn be the evangelizers in the neighborhood and be leaven in society contributing to a culture of life.

V. Supplementary Material

A. The influence of SCCs on family life in the Diocese of Mangalore, South India.

Some SCC members were asked:

What have SCCs done for me, for my family and for the families in my neighbourhood?

Here are some of their responses:

1. Mr. Peter Fernandes: 58 years old, retired bank officer with 8 years of SCC experience. - "I have now a greater love for the word of God. I meditate and try to live accordingly. As a result I have greater love for service now. My Christian life has become more meaningful. - In my neighbourhood there is greater unity now. Somehow we feel that we belong to a bigger family. The love and concern the other families show towards our family, has strengthened the unity of our own family. All the members of our family now actively participate in the liturgy."

2. Mr. Edward Coelho: 48 years. Working in an export company. 13 years of SCC experience. - "I have the habit now of reading the bible daily... Because of the relationship with the others I have realized the value of our existence here in this world. The consciousness that Jesus lives in me has increased. I have learnt to feel for others and be of service during their need. In my family now we are regular for our daily family prayer, reading and meditating on the word of God. All the members of our family now have greater bond of love. We spend a lot of time talking to each other and are particular to eat as a family. Whatever problems and plans of our family, we have learnt to tackle as a family. We have come to realize that Jesus is present in our family"

3. Miss Reena Viegas: 25 years. Instructor for BSc Nursing. 7 years of SCC experience. "Personally I have taken a liking to reading and meditating

on the Word of God. I have begun to feel for the needs of others and learnt to serve others. The talents that God has showered on me are being utilized for the benefit of others. Due to the SCC I have grown as a leader. I have also learnt to work with others. I have learnt to pray better. - As a result of SCC in our neighbourhood there is greater love and unity in our families. We have learnt to work together in our needs. We render service to our needy neighbours now and feel happy to do so. The spirit of prayer in our families has increased. In our neighbourhood even the children meet separately occasionally and feel happy about it. The SCC has become a good forum for us to develop our talents.”

4. *Fr. Alphonse D’Lima: 58 years. Once professor in the Major Seminary and presently a parish priest, he has worked for many years as a team member for SCC training programmes.* “It has made my priestly ministry more meaningful. Internal or interior motivation, to be more authentic and genuine in my Christian life, has become deepened. I have come to know more people personally, thanks to the SCC work. I have also learnt to work in a team. As a result have grown in some virtues. There is a better relationship with the neighbours. The atmosphere in the homes is more relaxed and peaceful. A sense of mission has gone into the minds of the people. The relationship within the members of the family has also improved. The growth in Christian life within the family is perceptible.”

5. *Miss Helen Frank: 50 years. A primary school teacher and trainer of SCC leaders with experience of SCC work for 8 years.* - “Now I have begun to share the problems of my family with those neighbours whom I trust. Earlier I was brooding on them on my own. Earlier I used to get angry with those who used to hate or speak ill of me. Today I have learnt to pray for them and forgive them. I also try to do good to them in whatever way I can. The feeling that I should not offend others or irritate them has increased. For all this the word of God has been the source of inspiration and the training that I got on SCC.

6. *Director for SCCs, Fr Arthur Pereira tells us* - “The important words that we find in the Second Vatican Council in Dei Verbum No. 21 “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of Christ”, these words have become a reality in our SCCs in the Diocese of Mangalore to a large extent. We have been very faithful, in all our SCCs numbering around 1250, right from the start, to follow the Seven Step Gospel sharing method. This method

involves all the participants to meet the risen Lord through the sign of the Word. It helps all to be active participants and receive the Good news personally. The sharing of this personal faith or inspiration within the group bonds them together like the early Christians. Moreover this method has within it the step of service. It may not reach the stage like the early Christian's namely "there was not a needy person among them" But it certainly is a step in the right direction, especially when the world is becoming more and more individualistic and materialistic.

We have also seen another salutary aspect. Though the SCCs are meant only for Christian families, they have not remained as an inward looking Church members. In so many of our SCCs the relationship with the non-Christian neighbours has improved. There is better communal harmony. Besides we also see that people of all religions come together to solve their common problems. This indeed is the need of the hour."

B. Formation for Family Life : Three Sample Sessions for SCCs

Session 1 : HOMEMAKING IS A PARTNERSHIP

1. Would someone please invite Jesus in a prayer.

A. OUR LIFE

Look at each of the situations depicted below and briefly discuss the questions that follow. (20 minutes)

Story 1

As Joe leaves work he parts with his colleagues who are trying to persuade him to join them in their usual couple of pints at the coffee shop. Joe declines and heads off home. His two male colleagues shake their heads with pity at Joe.

Joe's wife Mabel works in the neighbourhood branch library. After work, she fetches their two pre-school children from the child-care centre. When Joe gets home, he plays with the children and then gives them a bath while Mabel prepares the evening meal. Joe's friends in the coffee shop meanwhile are discussing Joe's 'plight'. They agree that Mabel does not really need Joe to bathe the children, that she is using it as an excuse to get Joe away from them and the 'happy hour' session.

Questions for reflection

1. Do you agree with Joe's friends?
2. Give your reasons.
3. What do you think is Joe's attitude towards his children and wife?
Do you find similar situations among your colleagues, friends and family?

Story 2

Janice has the chance of a big promotion, a chance to make a real contribution to society and her company. It would boost her career, and she will get a bigger pay packet. But this will mean even less time for her family. Her husband Meng, whose job keeps him out from early in the morning till late at night, says the decision of whether to accept the promotion or not is hers. His only observation is, that with their daughter behaving rebelliously recently and their son doing his big exams next year, he hopes that Janice would be able to take care of them and keep them in check.

Questions for reflection

1. What is happening in this story?
2. What are the responsibilities of Janice and Meng?
3. What could Meng do? What would you do if you were Meng?
4. What can Janice do?

B. OUR FAITH

In the two situations that we have just looked at, the spouses involved have either accepted a change in their life or are contemplating change.

- Let us read the word of God for light.
- *Would someone please read **Philippians 2:1-11.***
- *Let us pick out any words or phrases. Repeat them prayerfully three times.*
- *Take a moment of silence*
- *Would anyone like to share what he or she heard in his or her heart?*
- *Reflect and discuss*

How does the word help us respond to the situations of Joe, Janice & Meng?

Let us read the following texts in small groups of 3 or 4 and answer the question that follows:

1. For as God of old made Himself present to His people through a covenant of love and fidelity, so now the Saviour of all and Spouse of the Church (Jesus) comes into the lives of married Christians through the sacrament of matrimony. He abides with them thereafter so that... the spouses may love each other with perpetual fidelity through mutual self-giving.

Authentic married love is caught up into divine love...

For this reason, Christian spouses have a special sacrament by which they are strengthened and receive a kind of consecration in the duties and dignity of their married life... Thus they increasingly advance their own perfection, as well as bringing the other to holiness, and hence contribute jointly to the glory of God."

(Gaudium et Spes 48)

2. Much of the tension and disagreement that married couples face arise from the different ways they see each one's role and responsibility as husband and wife. The Church's stand on this matter was clearly expressed by the Synod of Bishops in 1980 :

"In speaking of God's plan, the Church has many things to say to men and women; about the essential equality and complementarity of the sexes, as well as about the different charisms and duties of spouses within marriage. Husband and wife are certainly different but they are also equal. The difference should be respected but never used to justify the domination of one by the other. In collaboration with society, the Church must effectively affirm and defend the dignity and rights of women." (Synod of Bishops, A Message to Christian Families in the Modern World, 19)

Read either 1 or 2 text again silently and pick out two points that reveal for you the deeper meaning of marriage. Which ones will be most helpful to you? Share this with the group if you wish.

What do you think you could change especially with regard to partnership in all responsibilities in the home and in married life?

C. LIVING OUR FAITH

Make a resolution or plan to change one thing that needs to be changed and is not too difficult to bring about quite soon.

You may want to share your plan or resolution?

What help will you need from the group?

Conclusion

Join together in prayer to ask for the grace to see where change is really needed and to have the courage to bring it about in our homes and families.

Sing a hymn that all know, to end the session.

Session 2: PREPARING FOR A LIFELONG PARTNERSHIP (Theme 3 of 17)

By Joe Ensing, Published by Lumko Institute

FOR THE LEADER COUPLE ONLY

When so many marriages fail or run into serious difficulty, we have to ask what is happening about **preparation** for such an important step in life in our present times of change.

In this theme we are concerned about the difficulties experienced by young people who want to be married but are not ready for the full commitment and consent required by the sacrament of matrimony.

In this theme we ask questions about the process by which couples can negotiate and reach the kind of consent that is necessary for a lifelong partnership.

PART A

1. A LOOK AT LIFE

Why don't we start now? - A role-play

Bafana: I love you, Mbali.

Mbali: I love you too, Bafana.

Bafana: Do you remember how we first met?

- Mbali:** How could I forget? It was this very day last year and I remember every detail.
- Bafana:** Yes, it was surely fate and love at first sight. Listen, Mbali, we both have jobs now and we are both living away from home. We are always looking for every possible opportunity to spend time together. Why don't we think about starting to live together?
- Mbali:** I'm very fond of you, Bafana, and we have learnt a lot of good thing we like about each other, but I think we should wait till we are properly married before we go that far.
- Bafana:** But our families already know about us and are in the process of negotiating whatever needs to be done. As I see it, we are practically married already.
- Mbali:** No, Bafana. When we marry, and I'm sure we will, we will be more than good friends. We will be so close that we might get in each other's way. We still have a lot to talk about to make sure we will understand and respect each other when things are difficult between us.
- Bafana:** How could we get to know each other better than by actually living together? It will be the quickest and surest way to find out if we are really suited. It will be like going for a swim. You put one foot in the water first to feel what the water is like and if it feels good you jump right in.
- Mbali:** You mean you want to try me out first? You want a trial marriage just to make sure I measure up to your expectations? That's terrible, Bafana.
- Bafana:** Sorry, I didn't quite mean it like that, darling. I'm just as serious about our relationship and our future together as you are. If we start to live together now, it will be like starting our marriage slowly and building it up in stages. Then, when we are good and ready to make our marriage vows they will be more meaningful.
- Mbali:** Do you want to ask me to marry you now? It will still take some time to organise a wedding, you know. We will need to attend instructions from Church.
- Bafana:** You're being difficult, Mbali.
- Mbali:** No I'm not. When we have made our vows and have the full support of our families and community, our togetherness will have a special quality. We will be freer and more at ease with each other because then we will really belong to each other.

Bafana: We are still young and it seems to me you are talking a long time into the future. I know now that I want us to be together and I sincerely hope it will be for a lifetime. However, I don't know that I'm old and mature enough right now to make a lifetime decision. It frightens me.

Mbali: That is why it is so important to take time to have everything in place first. Sleeping together is the sign that we already belong to each other completely.

Bafana: Many of my friends seem to be living quite happily with their girlfriends in a stable relationship without the benefit of a wedding. Anyway, I'm running late and have to go. Think about it. Life goes on, you know, and we should grab hold of it while we can.

Mbali: Bye, love! See you tomorrow.

Sigh! I wonder if that was an ultimatum? Is the principle really worth the risk of losing him?

Allow time to discover the purpose and message of your code.

These questions may help guide the discussion:

- 1. Do you think that what Bafana is proposing is simply a 'trial marriage' and no more? Explain your answer.**
- 2. What does Mbali want to prepare for marriage?**
 - a. Time and space to get to know Bafana better without the pressure of living at close quarters.
 - b. Time and opportunity for their families to be involved in the preparations.
 - c. The involvement of the Church community.
- 3. How do you think each of them is feeling right now?**
- 4. What is your own reaction to the story? Can you explain why you react this way?**

2. ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT OUR OWN SITUATION



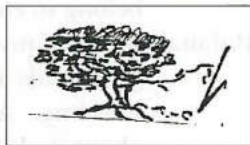
Use these questions if necessary:

- 1. Who took responsibility for marriage preparation traditionally? Who takes responsibility for it now?**
- 2. What is the involvement of our Church in marriage preparation?**

3. *What usually happens when there is little preparation for a marriage? What have we seen?*
4. *Are 'trial' marriages a common feature in our communities?*
5. *What are the consequences?*
 - a. People can drift in and out of marriages unwilling to make a commitment.
 - b. There is rejection, with the sense of being used or second hand.

3. SEARCH FOR ROOT CAUSES

Suggestions in italic print could be used to stimulate further discussion, but only if needed.



If today young people drift into marriage without much preparation or opt for trial marriages, where does this problem come from?

- Could it come from a perception that marriage need not be permanent?
- Could it be that parents exercise less control today, for whatever reason?
- Perhaps people are so busy that they have no time for preparation.
- Perhaps there is confusion about whose role it is to prepare young people for marriage these days.

Why is more preparation for marriage necessary today?

- Could it be that our culture has become more complicated?
- People today have a longer life expectancy. When the children go, parents may remain together for many more years.
- Our Christian belief requires greater faithfulness.

Why do so many people today begin their 'married' life on a trial basis?

- Perhaps there is little opportunity to get to know each other well before starting married life.
- Perhaps the high rate of divorce causes people to approach marriage vows with greater caution.
- Perhaps there is less respect for the teaching that sexual intercourse belongs properly to marriage only.

PART B

1. SILENT REFLECTION

What could be some of my personal gifts and qualities that God expects me to contribute to my marriage?



2. BIBLE SHARING

Read (twice): Tobit 8: 4-8. *(The marriage of Tobias and Sarah)*

Participants may pick out words or short phrases from the reading and repeat them clearly three times. Some may like to share how these words touched them.

Search

Which words in these readings show that Tobias and Sarah are well prepared for their marriage?

- They pray for God's blessing.
- They have thought about God's plan for marriage.
- They are concerned about the right motive.
- They want to grow old together.
- They have the blessing and support of their parents.

3. CHURCH TEACHING

Read and discuss:

So that the "I do" of the spouses may be a free and responsible act, and so that the marriage covenant may have solid and lasting human and Christian foundations, **preparation for marriage** is of prime importance.

The example and teaching given by parents and families remain the special form of this preparation.

The role of pastors and of the Christian community as the "family of God" is indispensable for the transmission of the human and Christian values of marriage and family, and much more so in our era when many young people experience broken homes which no longer sufficiently assure this initiation.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1632

- **Who helps the couple to prepare for their marriage?**

Read and discuss:

A first example of an irregular situation is provided by what are called "trial marriages", which many people today would like to justify by attributing a certain value to them. But human reason leads one to see that they are unacceptable, by showing the unconvincing nature of carrying out an "experiment" with human beings...

The Church... cannot admit such a kind of union...

In the first place, the gift of the body in the sexual relationship is a real

symbol of the giving of the whole person...

In the second place, marriage between two baptized persons is a real symbol of the union of Christ and the Church, which is not a temporary or "trial" union but one that is eternally faith-ful. Therefore between two baptized persons there can exist only an indissoluble marriage...

The Christian Family in the Modern World, #80

- In your own words, what are the three arguments used here to persuade people to avoid trial marriage?



4. FURTHER REFLECTIONS

Imagine that marriage is like a house. It is possible to enter this house through different doorways.

Our first entrance represents the situation common in many societies where most of the initiative for bringing a young man and woman together in marriage comes from parents, elders, or community expectations. The important thing in this situation is the **Public Act** (the exchanges, rites and ceremonies) by which the arrangement is sealed and by which the community recognizes the marriage. Love, intimacy and personal commitment may come later.

A second entrance represents the situation where young man and young woman fall in love. Very soon they begin to **live together**. They are mainly concerned with their own personal relationship. Perhaps their families, community and Church will become involved later on by way of the wedding ceremonies and other rites.

The couple that are waiting 'outside the door' represents the third entrance. While they wait, they **prepare**, and they ask themselves and each other:

- Are we right for each other?
- What will keep us together when the good feeling wears off, and things become hard?

- Do we have the support and good will of our families?
- Do I know my companion well enough to be sure he / she is a 'true' friend?

Each one understands that he / she is still free to walk away from the relationship if the other person does not match his / her expectation or image. This should normally happen before marriage. The decision to marry implies that they are ready to take that extra step whereby they put their trust in each other and commit themselves to each other. This does not rule out the presence of nagging feelings of doubt.

When they are happy to be tied by their inner belief in each other, then they are ready to make their marriage PUBLIC, and to seal their union with full sexual intimacy. This is the ideal towards which we aim. At the same time let us have sympathy for those who cannot live up to the ideal.

What is our attitude towards those who are caught in difficult situations where they see the only way is to live together before formal marriage?

PART C

1. AN EXERCISE

- Men make one or more groups to list qualities they expect in a wife.
- Women make one or more groups to list qualities they expect in a husband.
- Share the lists in the large group and discuss the following:
 1. *After listening to the expectations of the men and women of our community what could be some points of practical advice for those preparing for married life?*
 2. *Some marriages remain 'on trial' for too long. What can be done in our community to encourage quicker and firmer commitment?*

2. PLAN ONE ACTION

Discuss the suggestions and try to decide what practical action we can take now,

- As individuals,
- As families,
- As a Church community.

It should be something that is not too difficult to do.



Decide who will do what, when, where, and how.

Session 3 : THAT THEY MAY BE ONE - Marriage a Sacrament of Unity

A. Opening Prayer

Sing “We are One in the Spirit” or “Bind Us Together Lord” or something with the theme of unity and being together in the Lord.

B. Our Lives

Read the story given below and then discuss the questions in the whole group

The Fong Family has been in Singapore for a few generations. They came from Malaysia many years ago. Val and Larry Fong still have relatives in Malaysia whom they visit from time to time. One holiday, their daughter Sue, decided to take a bus to visit an old aunt who was very ill. The bus was involved in an accident and Sue was badly injured and in a hospital in a small town in Malaysia. When Val got the news, she immediately informed her husband and two sons and they hired a car and drove to that town. All of them were praying quietly all the way there hoping that Sue was not too badly hurt and could come home with them. They were able to get her transferred to a hospital in Singapore and all of them took turns to be with her and take care of her every need. Sue felt so blessed by her family. Val took long leave from her job to take care of Sue until she was fully recovered.

Questions for discussion in the whole group

What are some of the qualities of the Fong family? What is important for them as family?

What bound them together? What is the same and what is different about our Church family?

Supplement

There may be points below which were not mentioned which you may find helpful to add to your discussion. Read them quietly or aloud.

- The Fong family treasured family members – visiting relatives in Malaysia to keep in touch. Taking care of them when necessary.

- They showed tremendous concern for each other in time of difficulty.
- They were very close to each other, very united and self-sacrificing.
- Family members and family ties were important to them.
- The well being of the members of the family was also very important.
- Blood ties, belonging to the same family, having the same surname.
- Their love for each other since they had grown up together.
- The same: We do show concern for each other, we have different small groups where members are cared for and we keep in touch.
- We are very close to some of the members and have been through thick and thin together.
- Not the Same: In this family, God is our Father, Jesus is our brother and the Holy Spirit is the glue that binds us all together – the ‘love’ of the Father and the Son.
- We are not bound by family blood ties but by Baptism into Christ and by breaking and sharing the one bread and one cup at Eucharist.
- Our ‘family’ is very large and includes everyone who is baptized.
- We gave to learn to accept people who are very different from ourselves in this large family.
- In this family, we have a gracious mother who is the Mother of God and our mother too. She can be depended on to keep us united with her son.

C. God's Word

Let us read	<i>John 17:22-23</i>	That they may be one ...
	<i>Isaiah 2:2-5</i>	A Vision of unity

Questions for reflection on the texts

What is the plan of God for us all?

What are the top priorities of God that we find in the texts?

Supplement

- God's plan and desire is for unity – among his followers, with all peoples and with God. This is because of who God is – a community of persons, in perfect union and exchange.
- Unity, forgiveness of sins, justice among all peoples. These are God's top priorities.

D. God's Word in the life of the Church

Read the following paragraph slowly and without discussion at first. After you have read it twice, reflect on the two questions below. Discuss your answers in the group until you think you have understood the main ideas.

Questions for reflection

'Sacraments are the visible sign of an invisible grace' we are taught.

What does it mean when we say that a married couple is the sacrament of God's love?

A parent – a father and mother – make the love of God real and visible for each other and for their children. By their loving unity and by living out their self-giving love, they witness to the love and mercy of God for everyone around them. In these spouses, the Holy Spirit of love can be seen and experienced by those they are in contact with. Because of this we can say that a Christian couple are the 'Sacrament' of God's love. They represent God's love to their children and to each other. Their love gives hope to the world and is life-giving for all they meet.

Note: Unity never means everyone thinking and acting in the same way. That is uniformity, which is not a virtue. The kind of unity promoted by the Spirit of God is a unity in diversity, many gifts but the same Spirit.

Conclusion

Reflect and act

What can we do to witness to God's love as sharers in the work of building unity and 'communion' especially in our families?

What can we improve or change?

Pray the 'Our Father' to conclude. Remember the people with whom you wish to be on better terms.

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