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Sharing faith, building community



“Sharing our spiritual family trees is one of the best things we’ve ever done,” says a member of my Sunday School class. “I understand a lot more now, about who I’m with and why we each have the ideas we have,” says another.

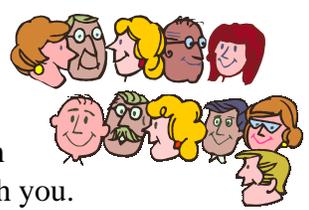
In other settings the kind of family tree we used is called a genogram. It’s a diagram that shows where certain characteristics appear in several generations of a family. Genetic counselors use genograms to see where a genetically transmitted disease or deformity has occurred, so they can try to keep it from happening again. Some therapists use genograms too, to show harmful behavior patterns that need changing.



It brought us closer to each other

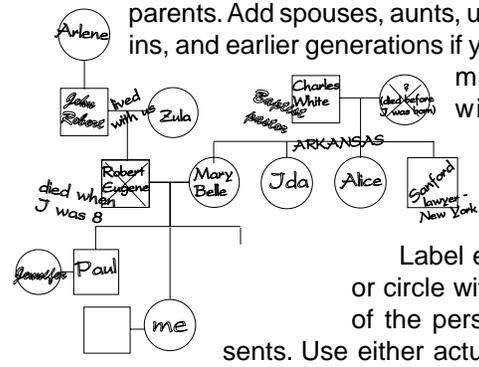
My Sunday School class used genograms as spiritual family trees. We looked at how family members and certain other people had influenced our spiritual growth and church involvement. Doing this helped us know ourselves and each other better. We became aware of some of our reasons for believing what we believe. We recognized some of our reasons for participating in the church as we do, and for feeling as we do about the church. We saw helpful reminders of the truths of Christianity.

Sharing spiritual family trees brought us closer together, too. It made us more of a group instead of just separate people who meet on occasional Sunday mornings. For this reason, with the class members’ encouragement I’m sharing our experience with you.



Sharing your spiritual family tree

To share your spiritual family tree with a group as my class did, use a board or large paper that all can see. Use squares to represent males in your tree and circles for females. Start by drawing a square and a circle side by side, with a short line connecting them, to represent your parents. Below them, draw circles and squares beside each other to represent you and your brothers and sisters. Connect them to each other and to your parents. In a similar way add your grandparents. Add spouses, aunts, uncles, cousins, and earlier generations if you wish, but



mainly those with whom you’ve had a good bit of contact.

Label each square or circle with the name of the person it represents. Use either actual names—like “Joe Cook”—or the names you call the people—like “Daddy.” For anyone whose name you don’t know, leave the square or circle blank. For anyone who has died, put an X on the square or circle.

Beside people’s names jot down their church involvement or their influence on yours—“Lutheran minister,” maybe, or “active Methodists,” or “read the Bible to me.” Around the family diagram, name other people who strongly influenced your religious beliefs or practices—a teacher, maybe, or a pastor, or a special friend or mentor. If certain experiences were especially important, jot them down too—church camp, maybe, or Vietnam or the civil rights movement.



As you make your diagram, tell about the main people in it and how they influenced your beliefs, your spiritual growth, or your religious habits. Encourage questions from your hearers, to help you recall important events and people and recognize their influence. I think you’ll be pleased and surprised, not only by what this process tells you about yourself but also by how it brings you closer to those you share it with.

My class is small, and most of us have been in it for several years. We've often talked about personal feelings and experiences in class, especially when one of us was facing a crisis or a happy experience. Some of us see other often in other settings. A few are close friends. So before we shared spiritual family trees in class, we thought we knew each other fairly well. We found that we didn't. Sharing family trees let us know each other much better.



We got to know him in a new way

One class member, Larry*, is a clergyman who for several years has been a chaplain and teacher at a local hospital and medical school. He has used genograms with students he supervises, for group building and for showing what influences spiritual growth. He suggested this use as something our class might find interesting for two or three Sundays. The first Sunday, he introduced the process by presenting his own spiritual family tree.



Larry told us about having grown up in a rural part of the U.S. His grandparents were active in pentecostal churches. One grandmother's church considered her their official pray-er. After she and her family and church members had considered that as her main spiritual gift and calling for years, however, a new pastor came. He told her that women weren't supposed to hold leadership roles in the church. He forbade her to pray publicly any more. She was crushed. It's no wonder, we realized, that Larry feels strongly about the importance of letting women be church leaders and of avoiding all-masculine language.

In college, Larry told us, he had majored in forestry, preparing to be a forest ranger. The Vietnam war and civil rights demonstrations were constantly in the news, however, and his family and friends talked a lot about what those events meant. The conversations soon led Larry to think that a forest ranger wasn't what he really wanted to be. He joined the Peace Corps. After a year in it he came home, went to a seminary, and became an ordained minister.



Larry also told about a serious illness that his father had during Larry's childhood. A greatly admired pastor ministered to his father regularly during a long hospital stay. Other members of Larry's family also found pastors' ministry valuable during serious illnesses. Hearing this, we realized some of what had made Larry want to be a hospital chaplain.

Hearing about Larry's spiritual family tree made the rest of us start thinking about our own. The next Sunday I presented mine, and again we saw that we didn't know each other as well as we had thought. Most class members knew of my church-related concerns of recent years, and of the writing and speaking that I've been doing. Many hadn't known, however, how different those efforts are from the unquestioning, keep-quiet-and-stay-in-the-background conformity of the first forty years of my life. They hadn't known, either, what people and events had influenced the conformity or the change.



Everybody wanted to do it



The Sunday after my presentation, another member did hers. Several others were looking forward to doing theirs soon. By then, Fran had joined our class. She found these presentations a great way to get to know the other class members. She did hers the Sunday after she joined, which let the rest of us get to know her quickly. She became an instant insider instead of the fringe member that newcomers to a long-established class often seem to be.

The few Sundays that we had thought our spiritual family tree project would fill kept growing. By the end of each session another member was counting on being the next presenter. Soon Steve, who had been saying he wouldn't want to be one, was saying, "Maybe I will. I'm thinking about it." Then that changed to "I'll do mine next Sunday." Every class member took a turn. Some presentations took only a few minutes, but most filled a class session.

Several common features

We ended with a wrap-up session for looking at what the experience had meant to us. We saw that

* Names of all class members except Larry (whose permission I have) have been changed to protect their privacy.

despite the surface differences, our spiritual family trees had several features in common.

■ **Religious habits and attitudes started early**



To no one's surprise, we saw that during childhood we had copied our families' religious habits, good or bad. If our parents or whatever other adults looked after us were regular churchgoers, we were too. If they read the Bible openly at home, had daily devotions, or said grace at meals, we took part and assumed that was what everyone was supposed to do. If we saw parents praying, we learned to pray that way. If the Bible was only in a bookcase, we learned that it wasn't for reading.

For some of us a grandparent or other family member to whom we were especially close had more influence than parents. That person may have read to us, prayed with us, and talked with us about beliefs and values, or he or she may have merely had character traits that we admired.

■ **Later we reevaluated**



Later, each of us had started giving deliberate thought to the religious habits we had unthinkingly copied from family members earlier. Some of us decided those habits weren't necessary, and discarded them. If we came to feel that regular churchgoing was pointless, we stopped. If we felt that our family's church wasn't the best kind, we changed to a different one. Some who had grown up as non-churchgoers became churchgoers. Some who had been only occasional attenders became active.

Some who had been active but hadn't given it much thought took a fresh look and became active in new ways. Gary said, "Church didn't really get

a grip on me when I was growing up. It was never really a big deal. I sort of liked the Jesus story and some other Bible stories, but that was about it." As



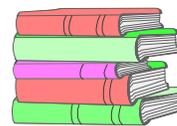
a young adult he stayed active in the church, especially in its social service projects, but only in recent years did he start studying the Bible and thinking seriously about it.

Others had questioned a lot. Some started questioning as teenagers. Others didn't start until midlife. Many dropped out of the church for a while—during college, especially—but then continued in the former pattern with only minor changes.



Whenever and however it happened, at some point most of us had arrived at a faith that we saw as "my faith." For some this meant claiming our parents' faith—saying, in effect, "this faith is my faith." For others, however, finding "my faith" meant changing. It meant saying, "That faith was not really my faith. This other faith is mine."

Some class members had merely continued their childhood religious patterns. These members saw faith mainly as what their church presented. For them, "my faith" was essentially "my church."



For most of us, recognizing and claiming our own faith hasn't been a one-time event. It has been a continuing process of growth and change, and it's still going on. We keep becoming aware of questions or issues or angles that we haven't thought about before. We examine them and sometimes revise or expand our previous beliefs as a result. We all tend to feel that reevaluating our beliefs, seeking more information, and

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expanding our understanding of God should never stop, because we can never see all of God or know God's will perfectly. Maybe that's why our class is named the Searchers Class.

■ **Other people and events influenced us**

Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.



For many of us, events in the church or in society have triggered questioning and change, and people outside our families have played key roles in our spiritual growth. These people and events

became our spiritual ancestors or our spiritual family. Many of them had even more influence on our faith than than our biological family had.

In next month's *Connections* I'll tell about some of these life-changing people and events. I'll also report some of what our class members began thinking about what mature faith is and what kinds of things motivate Christians to develop it.

I suggest that before you read next month's *Connections* you draw your spiritual family tree and share it with someone. I expect you'll be surprised and glad if you do.

Barbara

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.



—2 Timothy 1:5

[God] is good; [God's] steadfast love endures forever, and [God's] faithfulness to all generations.

—Psalm 100:5

Watching over one another in love

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, recognized the great value of sharing our faith stories with each other. It was part of the "class meetings" that played a big role in the effectiveness of the early Methodist movement.



Members met each week for what Wesley called "watching over one another in love." It included sharing what had been happening in their lives during the past week, and holding each other accountable for Christian living in the world.



To a great extent today's church has lost this important feature. Sharing spiritual family trees could help us restore it.