

despite our grief". Sometimes parents will need solitude, to be left alone to express their grief, and others should not think they are being shut out or cut off permanently, but allow the space and

privacy for this to happen. The hardest lesson for any of us to learn to live with is, "the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job. 1:21).

Sister, wife, woman, mother

Balancing the roles of a keeper of the home

Sandra McStravick (Victoria, British Columbia, Canada) discusses the many responsibilities that fall upon mothers in Christ—responsibilities to God, to children, to husband and to self. Finding a balance isn't easy, and it's very important to pray and to keep spiritual priorities in mind.

DID YOU and your husband sit and discuss and pray together to ask the Lord to guide you in the planning of your family? Did you ask Him for wisdom in knowing how large a family to have? Or did you quickly decide for yourselves you were going to have a boy and girl and be done? I have to admit that we did not pray over these things sufficiently as a couple. We did pray for a healthy child (although even that may not have been the Lord's will for our family). We knew we wanted three children and that we wanted them close together.

It wasn't until I was amongst a community of home-schoolers who were talking about what the Lord wants for our family that I thought to myself, I didn't pray over these important decisions as I should have done. I just went full steam ahead. It was when my third son was four that I asked my husband what he thought about having more children. For three months we prayed and called upon the Lord to make sure this was what was right for the family and for serving Him and our ecclesia. It was a much better way.

Having children and bringing them up is such an enormous task and a most special job to be given. In practical terms, the Lord has blessed mothers with the responsibility of most of the day-to-day care-giving, so it is important to spend some time reflecting on the particular responsibilities of motherhood, and how these integrate with other aspects of being a female servant of the Lord.

Why do we have children? For me the desire had always been there; I had always loved children and had always wanted to be a mother. But why does our Creator want us to have children? That is a question which is extremely important to consider. One of the things we can do to serve our Lord is to raise people who can choose

to give glory unto His Name. If we share that goal it will take careful and prayerful planning, since the world also wants to raise our children and the world oftentimes wins out. Our flesh is so weak, and it is often easier to let the world get on with it. Yet if it is our responsibility and honour to raise our children to be a heritage unto the Lord, we must give them a godly upbringing. Who better to do that than someone who desires to serve Him? But it will certainly need prayer at every stage of the way.

"Keepers at home"

Paul says in Titus 2:4,5 that "young women" should be "keepers at home". What does he mean by that? The Greek word for "keepers" is *oikouros*, and it means 'domestically inclined' or 'a stayer at home'. It means to work at home. We all know that there is a lot to do in a home. At times (a lot of the time!) it can be such a huge task that it can feel overwhelming, tiresome and lonely, especially with little children in tow.

The best way I have learned to balance my life in order to have time for everything is by planning. At the weekend I will look at my calendar and see what things are planned for me during the week ahead (Bible class, lecture, birthday parties, appointments, etc.). Then I see where my days are not busy. I like to have two full days at home. These are the days I use to get all the major jobs done around the house.

Because my children are at home with me, we all have chores which we try to get done right

after breakfast. My week goes much smoother when I plan out the dinner and often lunch too. If I know I am going to have a busy day I make meals ahead of time: casseroles, stews, etc. In the afternoon when my toddler is napping I get a cup of tea and sit and read for about half an hour to an hour, and the other hour I do things that are hard to do with a toddler around. If I am tired I take a short nap when my toddler is sleeping so that I have energy for the rest of my day. We also have a lot of animals, so I usually take care of them during this time. I am learning to have 'quiet time' things for my toddler to do at the kitchen table before dinner so that he can play and I can make supper. It doesn't always run smoothly.

I can oftentimes not follow through with planning, and things don't seem to go as well when I don't! If you plan out the chores for the week your house will run more smoothly. This is part of our job that our Creator Who made us gave us to do. We can honour Him by the attitude we have towards the role He has placed us in.

Working mothers

There are circumstances that require a mother to go out to work when the children are small, and there are, of course, sisters who make that choice. Economic necessity can lead there (though the term 'necessity' needs to be examined honestly and objectively), and there may be other reasons for this outcome. The Scriptural injunctions upon mothers towards their children and as home-makers must not be forgotten, however. If after prayerful consideration a mother decides to pursue paid employment, there is now that added juggling of commitments to contend with. It is important to consider very carefully the care and keeping of the children, both physically and spiritually, if both parents are at work.

One sister I recently spoke with works two days out of her home, and both family and friends in the Truth help with the care-giving. This option is obviously the ideal situation if the mother has to go out to work. It can be a great experience for the child, as they spend time with grandparents or aunts, and it can actually help build special times with extended family.

When the wife takes a job (whether full time or part time) the husband and wife now have the task of splitting the household chores more evenly. Now both parents are committed extensively out of the home and now both have to be

committed to the important chores in the home. It takes a lot of planning, team work, understanding and compromise. If you know a couple in the Truth who both work, and you see them managing, ask them what they do to make this system work for them.

Sometimes 'comparison language' can enter into the marriage, and it's important to try to avoid this. Comparing who has done most of the work, who is most tired, and so forth, is simply not productive. Remember that there are families in the Truth (and without) that have chosen a less expensive lifestyle and that have therefore cut back on spending and rearranged their life so that the wife could stay at home. The key point I want to emphasise is that with all the choices that we make we need to look closely at what God might want for us and our family, and to ask whether what we are contemplating is merely what *we* want to do. This is something we will have to work on during our whole lives.

Coping with very young children

I was a person who loved company, and when I had three little ones at home I felt very isolated. My very close friend and sister in Christ had her children at the same time, yet she didn't feel that same loneliness as I did because she was very content to be on her own. As I matured as a mother I learned to balance out these times, and actually began to appreciate time at home and with my family a lot more. It is important to know yourself, and to know how to arrange and build things into your routine that will work for you, as well as how to adjust to the new demands that each stage of parenting will bring.

When you have a toddler you can often fill your days with busyness that will to some extent satisfy your need for adult companionship. Meeting up with other sisters with young families, or with friends, for instance at parks or beaches, is valuable so that you can have some adult company and the children can play. However, it's important not to do so much of this that you don't have quality time with the children yourself. A lot of the time you can come home from such activities exhausted, and the children still demand more time from you! I know that my children would often come home from outings such as these and ask to play with me. I would feel tired from the time out, and know that now I needed to get things done around the home. I would feel resentment and frustration, as I felt that my children weren't appreciative for going

out to these fun places. But I really wasn't being with them. They need our quality time.

For that reason I find it helpful to limit outing days to two, maybe three, half-days out per week. One of these outing days could be with your friend and child to meet at a park, etc., so that you have some adult time. Other times it has been good for just the children and I to go on an outing together. What can be a blessing is a sisters' group that meets in the daytime, and focusing conversations on the Word of God. This can be a wonderful support for you as a mother. You could also get together with a sister in the afternoon while the children are sleeping, and read together.

Spiritual input and the ecclesia

When we have small children we can miss out on so much in terms of spiritual input if we are not careful. We can miss out on the morning meeting as we may be in the back with all the other families, not really hearing the exhortation. We could miss out on Bible class or other ecclesial functions because we need to be at home. There is a time for all things, and doing too much with the kids at meetings can be exhausting, but doing too little can isolate you from your ecclesia and from your fellowship with your Lord. It is important, therefore, to try to strike a balance, and to share the load with your husband. Again, this is something to commit to prayer.

When three of our children were little I found my husband took on just as much in the meeting as when we didn't have children. We were exhausted, and I sometimes felt resentment. There are so many ways to serve our Lord, and when we have children it's not time to give up serving but a time to *refocus* how we serve. My husband and I now prayerfully decide what we should both take on in the meeting, and we consider the ages of the children to see what is good for everyone. We teach youth group and Sunday School because our children are at that age.

As wives we look to our husbands to lead our homes spiritually. When we are tired we can easily slip out of things like reading the Word together. Yet when we read the Word and talk about it together, it helps us understand our Creator's purpose with us as husband and wife, how we can serve our family, and how the family can serve the Lord. We need our husbands to lead us in doing the readings, no matter how tired we are. We can do the readings in any way that works; the important point is that we are

getting the Word into us. In our family, when we haven't read the Word together we find we lose touch and balance, and it becomes noticeable. This is such an important thing to do together as husband and wife; not only to read the Word, but to share what we learn and to understand what we need to work on as servants of God and as husband and wife.

Being a wife

We are mothers and keepers of the home, and we are also wives. Here is another role in our life that needs a lot of nurturing. With taking care of your home and your children and trying to squeeze in time for you, how do you then look after your husband's needs, both physically and mentally? When we have children we can oftentimes lose our intimacy, or we can have less of it because we are so tired. In fact, I've found the word 'tired' seems to be one often coming out of my mouth. This usually is when I am not managing my life.

Our husband can come home mentally tired, and we can very quickly pass the kids onto him to watch, or start talking to him about the day's events too soon after his coming home. Because we have been with little ones all day we can be eager to talk to our husband, as we have been waiting all day to share the stories, burdens and concerns that have come our way in the day. But giving our husband some mental time is good before we jump on him with ideas, questions and sometimes tears. Some husbands can handle the bombardment when first getting home. A lot find it too much.

How we personally have nurtured our marriage through four children has been by learning from others. We need to make time for intimacy. If the wife goes to bed before her husband all the time they are never going to have that time to be together. If we can balance this with times where we go to bed together, and pray and talk and share the things that we find a blessing in our marriage as well as a challenge, we will feel more connected.

We also need time to enjoy each other in ways that God has designed us to do as husband and wife. We can deny our husband this intimacy because we don't feel comfortable with our bodies after having children, or because we just don't feel like being with him. In 1 Corinthians 7:5 it says not to deprive each other unless you both consent; and the reasons are for fasting and praying, not because we aren't feeling attracted to each other

or because we just don't want this intimacy with each other. God in His wisdom knows what the struggles are that marriages have when this part of the relationship is not being nurtured. My sister in Christ asked me once if I knew what the phrase "to love their husbands" in Titus 2:4 means. It actually means to be physically close with each other; the Greek is *philandros*, which means 'affectionate'. Husbands taking time to listen and respond to our needs as a wife and mother can really help us with our sexual intimacy with our husbands. It is very important to keep this part of our marriage alive.

Times together without the children can help build our relationship. When the children were little we went to study days a lot without the children. We had my husband's parents watch them so that we could be together and study the Word without distraction. At night when the children were little we would put them to bed early and make a nice meal with candles, and play board games or cards, etc. We sometimes

would sit outside with a hot drink and look at the stars and talk. We made time just for us. Both people need to partnership to make these times possible. This also takes planning. Sometimes all it takes is candles beside your bed and talking.

Conclusion

The Lord has blessed sisters with the opportunity to serve Him in a way that men normally cannot. He has given us a job that is a most awesome task, to bring people into the household of faith. There is a saying that it takes a village to raise a child. That isn't how I see it. God gave you this child, so it is your child to raise, though your ecclesia can help support you. The world will not support you in this endeavour; it will distract you and it will challenge all that you are trying to accomplish. We need to work daily at finding ways to balance our lives so that we have the energy and the desire to serve our home, and by doing this we will serve our Lord.