
Linking to the Lost



Core Values Series

DONNA VANDER GRIEND

I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie-down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search-for the lost and bring back the strays. I will-bind up-the injured and strengthen the weak (Ezek. 34:15-16).

Core Values Series

Linking to the Lost

BY DONNA VANDER GRIEND

The CORE VALUES SERIES reinforces the principles and practices necessary for leaders of Coffee Break, Men's Life, and other evangelistic Bible studies to experience the fruit of the Spirit and the joy of the harvest.

We thank Donna Vander Griend of Lynden, Washington, for writing this booklet.

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A Letter to the Reader

Has your passion for reaching the lost cooled off? Has a white hot desire to witness turned into a tepid “if-time-allows” apathy? Have you become lukewarm toward the gospel?

Or are you clinging to your evangelistic priority of linking to the lost?

The apostle John’s words from Revelation echo down through the ages to all believers:

I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first (2:19).

I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut; .-. you have kept my word and have not denied my name (3:8).

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me (3:19-20).

May this booklet be the kind of spiritual nutrition Jesus would offer you for your encouragement and patient endurance. But be forewarned. It works at the gut level, asks for personal change, and attempts to bring you back to your first love: Jesus Christ and his gospel.

As you feast on Christ’s presence, taking in all that he has for you and absorbing the contents of this booklet, may you be filled with the wonder that he uses believers just like you to bring people from darkness into his marvelous light!

Donna Vander Griend

LINKING TO THE LOST

Lost. Why do we label non-Christians with the word *lost*? Why not *damned*, *doubter*, or perhaps *directionless*? Why *lost*?

Perhaps *damned* sounds too final and hopeless, like a life sentence in the state penitentiary. And both believers and nonbelievers struggle with *doubt*. *Directionless* sounds blah, ordinary, a phase everyone goes through that time and motivation may resolve.

But *lost*. It's not such a bad choice. The word merges panic with the hope of being found. Recall a time when your child was missing. Your heart pounded with fear. Visions of danger and death propelled you into intense, immediate action. You prayed. You rejoiced when you found that precious little one.

Or remember a time when you were lost and had reached the end of your "what-do-I-do-next" list. You stood alone, helpless and panicky. With no familiar landmarks to guide

you, you were unable to retrace your footsteps. You prayed and waited for someone to rescue you.

How easily we forget the anguish and fear of being lost. But sometimes, like small children, we don't even realize that we are lost. Yet those who care about us look for us anyway.

Rescues make exciting stories. The Bible is a book of stories about how God rescues people for himself. Accounts of God's rescue work fill the four gospels and the Book of Acts. The apostle Paul, for instance, relates his own dramatic spiritual rescue story in Acts 22:6-11. In turn, he participated in the search-and-rescue dramas of many early believers, including Lydia, Timothy, John Mark, the Philippian jailer, Silas, Aquila, Priscilla, his own nephew (Acts 23:16), Trophimus, and those listed in Romans 16.

Each of us knows people who have not yet come to faith in Christ. We cannot predict how God will engineer each conversion, but we know he is the author of everyone's coming-to-faith. How delightful when he includes us in another person's spiritual rescue!

When you think of linking to the lost, what method comes to your mind? Witnessing techniques? Gospel presentations? Memorized Bible verses? Doctrinal arguments? Feelings of inadequacy? You may have attended evangelism workshops, read books on reaching out, taken witnessing training, and written your testimony. Those are valuable exercises, but the first step to effectively linking to the lost starts with the heart, not the head. Involve yourself as a friend rather than as an evangelism expert.

Lost is not a theological abstraction; it's a person. *Lost* is not a doctrinal concept; it's your neighbor. *Lost* is the first word in the drama God writes about one who seeks Christ and finds him.

Linking to the lost must begin in the heart. In her book *Creative Writing for People Who Can't Not Write*, Kathryn

Lindskoog reflects on our tendency to relegate all evangelism to the preacher, at least until we reach a certain level of preachiness.

In my own tradition, the three-points-and-a-poem variety [of sermon] is often delivered in the sort of heavy Latinate language that seldom fails to invite a yawn: “The Prodigal Son: Three points, beloved, under the general heading, ‘Election of Guilty Sinners.’ First, election’s predestinate origin in the eternal decree. Second, its forensic accentuation in the justification of sinners. Third, its vindication in eschatological glorification.”

Whatever happened to the story? Where is that heartbreaking word *lost* (“My son was lost and is found again”)? Why can’t we envision the picture of grace—a father bounding toward his son, arms splayed, robe flapping, beard crushed against that familiar rebel?

The Christian who is serious about linking to the lost must, by God’s grace, step into that picture. Any non-Christian you know is lost. We cannot continually be “getting ready” to find, to witness, to share the gospel. If the Father has found you, you are qualified, being his child, to help find others.

Marcé Brennan, a Coffee Break Bible study leader, shares her own lost-and-found story:

Once I was lost. Amazingly, I had no clue as to my condition. My life consisted of a man who was a good husband and provider, a little boy whose freckles and red hair symbolized the energy of a toddler, and a tidy rambler home in the suburbs. What did I need God for? Life was mainly straight-forward—maybe an unpleasant episode here or

there, but nothing I couldn't handle on my own. Until .-. my husband did the unthinkable and, through a miraculous set of "circumstances," gave his life to the Lord. I remember feeling betrayed, confused, and left with my "mouth hanging open."

Then I began to notice the change in my husband. It was unsettling; he carried a quiet joy that radiated throughout all areas of his life. After trying to share his new faith with me, he finally launched a silent witness instead. Several months later, the Spirit moved me to read *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis and the "illogical" happened through the logical words of Lewis. I recognized the truth of my existence. I was a *sinner*, not the "good" person I'd always imagined. The most vivid illustration of this was the first time I read the newspaper with my new glasses of faith. I couldn't believe what I saw—the world was in its dismal state because of sin. Why hadn't I noticed this before? The world desperately needed God to make sense out of what man had wrought. Miraculously God wanted to use me, in all my sin, to help change the world!

I was *found*. My life had a new purpose. My world was no longer simply that nice husband and freckle-faced boy in a suburban home. Rather, it was a place where hurting, confused people desperately needed a God to care about them and their problems. Being found offered me a great responsibility: to find others. I have never doubted what God did for me (although I've doubted my faithfulness to serve him at times), nor have I ever doubted that life is much richer because of knowing him.

The last few years of my life have taken me through teenage tribulations. At times I've asked God why, but always I have believed he's here and that his purpose prevails. What good news in a world that daily feeds us bad news! John 10:10 vibrates with a message that changes life even in the midst of tears and heartaches. Christ says, "I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full." Don't you know people who need to hear that message today, people who are waiting to be found and who maybe don't even realize they're lost? Don't hesitate—their eternity could begin today with you! I know; someone did it for me.

In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus highlights the immeasurable value of one lost person. He warns us not to be satisfied with those who are already found. Listen to him: "Don't stay here by the sheep pen. Go out and find the one who is lost." Later he reinforces that command with his famous command:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matt. 28:19-20).

Lost. What a fitting description of those who are waiting for a Savior. A soul waits in fearful emptiness, but hope circles on the edges of that emptiness. A lost person longs for love. Your friendship may be the first love to penetrate the darkness. As you bring Christ with you into a relationship, you bring hope. The lost can be found!

CHALLENGE

Write down your reasons for not being ready to bring a lost friend to Christ. Then decide how many of them are valid reasons and how many are flimsy excuses. What will you do about the excuses? Take this matter to Jesus in a prayer of repentance.

FACING OUR LOSTNESS

In order to link with lost people, we must feel the depth of our own lostness apart from Christ. Because sin is so powerful and pervasive, we are totally helpless to come to Christ by ourselves. Yet how often we whitewash the reality of the lost condition. We must first recognize that the tire is flat before we take it to the garage to be fixed. Or we must admit that the blouse is stained before using an effective spot remover. When you find a helpful garage owner or an effective stain remover, you naturally want to tell others. You share your discovery with all your friends and neighbors. But you start by throwing away those rose-colored glasses that distort our view of our spiritual state apart from Christ.

The Bible tells us that we are born in sin (Ps. 51:5) and our natural inability to change is painfully obvious. Like the apostle Paul, we are “wretched” (Rom. 7:24). In our sinful nature “nothing good lives in me.-.-.-. For what I do is not the

good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing” (Rom. 7:18-19). It’s true: we are totally depraved and totally unable to do anything about it.

Do you believe that? Do you accept that you would be completely lost in sin apart from the Lord’s intervention? Can you recall your wretchedness before Christ crept or crashed into your life? Have you keenly felt your own lostness?

Perhaps you have been so ill that you lay on your bed, powerless to move from the sweat-drenched sheets. You did not care about yourself, your family, or even your caregiver. Certainly you were not thinking about your lost neighbor. Overcome with self-pity, you even wanted to die. Your illness swallowed up your identity.

But God used this time to say to you, “Your deeds are nothing without me. Your body is mortal. Your flesh is frail. As you feel your own wretchedness, try to identify (though ever so feebly) with the awfulness of the cross.” Because he loved you, Jesus became wretched, exposed, forsaken. He “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7-8).

How has God reminded you of your complete and absolute lostness without Christ? Through what circumstances has God intervened in your life? Perhaps the following list will spark some memories:

- a temptation
- a long struggle with selfishness, pride, or envy
- the death of a loved one
- a crisis
- an illness
- release from a bad habit
- failure in attaining spiritual disciplines

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- out-of-control parenting
 - being a victim
 - broken or fragmented relationships
 - dying dreams
 - depression
 - weariness in well-doing

Recall the details and emotions of your experience.

You may want to write your thoughts in a journal. Write your experience also on your heart, so that you can speak authentically to your children, neighbor, or coworker. This is your story of redemption from the dirt and disease of sin, an authentic story that will intrigue lost people. When you identify with your lostness, you will be able to share yourself with another and say, “I was exactly like you. I was lost in sin and needed a Savior. Then he found me and saved me.”

But we also need to examine our own fear of sharing our story. Despite the best intentions, we can be frozen by fear. We, like the prophet Jonah, foolishly try to hide from God’s call and remain uninvolved in spreading the good news. What walls do we hide behind? What disappearing act do we stage?

Many of us fail to link to the lost because we are in bondage to .-..

- safety—hiding under a bed piled high with security blankets.
- control—hiding in the closet to avoid other imperfect people.
- guilt—hiding behind the barn door to nurse a bad habit.
- cowardice—hiding behind the coattails of someone else’s faith.
- fakery—hiding behind a well-developed image of the person we think we are.

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- doubt—hiding in the midst of a confusing theological fog.
 - schedule—hiding in the whirling blur of busyness.
 - quarrels—hiding behind a barrage of words, debate, and intellectualism.
 - blindness—hiding behind the beam in our own eyes.
 - gossip—hiding behind a smoke screen of slander.
 - avoidance—hiding our heads in the sand to avoid truth and confrontation.
 - piety—hiding in the robes of religious pretense.
 - fear—hiding in the crowd for dread of being distinctive.

Painful and difficult as self-evaluation is, it's merely diagnostic. Next comes the surgery itself: change. Allow close Christian friends to influence your life through confession, counsel, care, and prayer as the Holy Spirit spurs you to necessary change.

Our inner fears that hide us behind towering walls of dread and distrust are not the only obstacles we will face. Other fear walls will appear if you think that the lost person you are trying to befriend will .-. .

- be offended because you have invaded her privacy.
- reject you because you are a boring goody-goody who leads a rather dull life.
- challenge your Christian convictions so that you will have to deal again with your own doubts.
- drain you emotionally.
- ask you to do things you don't want to do.
- bring tension to your relationship because you will always worry about what to say.
- take up too much of your time.
- reject your invitation to a Bible study.
- consider you conservative, narrow-minded, and politically incorrect.
- not fit into any small group.

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- flaunt bad habits to prove how little you influence his lifestyle.
 - never change no matter how hard you try.

Determine which fear walls have become your security. Ask God to knock them down one by one. He can wipe away all fears; Christian friends can help too. They will encourage and cheer you on as you trust more fully in God's power in your life and relationships. They will extend grace to you as together you determine to uphold and uplift one another.

God wants his lost children found. We can't search for them if we are hiding. It's something like the childhood game of hide-and-seek. In his book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum illustrates the dynamics of hiding and seeking (see page 53). Read the excerpt and ponder .-.-.

- your boldness in witnessing.
- the tensions of hiding and seeking.
- giving up.
- vulnerability.
- the place of Christian joy in witnessing.
- "seeking the Lord while he may be found."
- Christian freedom.
- beginning again.

CHALLENGE

Think about your own experience of lostness. Share with others or write in a journal some of the insights God gives you about the lost and about yourself. Ask close Christian friends to pray about the burdens of your own memories or your lack of urgency for others. Identify the fears that keep you from linking to the lost and seek the Lord's power to overcome them.

FACING OUR MISUNDERSTANDINGS

False notions of what lost people are like fuel much of the fear that hinders us from linking to the lost. Perhaps he is living on welfare, dependent on hand-outs, and scarred psychologically from poor choices he's made. Maybe she is obese, smokes and swears a lot, and has a bunch of little kids. Or he's a desperate loner with no money and no motivation to pull his life together. Perhaps she is a successful businesswoman who maintains a cool, professional distance from others. Or an intense corporate officer whose ambition is to succeed in his career. Possibly he is a single dad living with his toddler in a cockroach-infested housing development.

Praise God for all kinds of people! He delights in diversity. How exciting when God offers us the opportunity to befriend one of these people. Imagine the stories they can tell, the dead-end streets they've traveled, the spiritual journeys

they've started, the people they influence, the emotions they feel, and the hopes they carry. Imagine them in a Bible study group led by a caring leader who points them to God. Imagine the adventure and the drama as God draws them to himself using life circumstances, the Holy Spirit, your words, his Word, and a network of other believers.

Much of the abundance of life in Christ springs from the stream of people he introduces to us. To prejudge or stereotype unsaved people is to question God's wisdom. Offering them love, time, and space is Christlike. We become more accepting Christians when we turn on the spotlight of love, "chameleon" with care, and rejoice with humor.

The Spotlight of Love

How do we avoid the "target mentality" that unfairly emphasizes numbers, technique, and results?

One Inspirit leader views lost people as the recipients of her love and attention. She radiates the light of Christ's love, as though turning on a spotlight and shining a direct beam at the star performer, the person God has led into her life. This servant attitude keeps the focus on her friend. It's as though she says, "You are in the limelight now. You are center stage. When we are together, you are Number One." As the friend feels Christ's love, a drama unfolds.

Caring Chameleons

Chameleons change their skin color to blend with their environment. We humans adopt a similar phenomenon in our relationships. Often we blend in with those around us. But to what degree should we do so? When should we insist on being our own person? Standing one's ground is a sign of strength; changeability signals weakness. But the apostle Paul says otherwise:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

Talk to other Christians about how Paul's message applies to specific friendships. Help each other define the risks and boundaries of acting as caring chameleons for the Lord. If we live in the Lord's strength, we are free to accommodate others. He never changes. Our convictions about him and the gospel remain intact. But we become for others what they need us to be in order for them to experience the strength of the Lord.

Rejoicing with Humor

When we resolve to become all things to all people, we will find ourselves in humorous situations. A West Coast Coffee Break leader had befriended a successful real estate agent. During a restaurant discussion over gourmet cookies, the topic of real estate in heaven arose. The two talked of the architectural possibilities of those celestial mansions. It seemed a natural next step to talk about the Bible, how to interpret it, and the availability of a study group on Wednesday mornings.

The businesswoman was a negotiator. She agreed to attend the study for one month if the leader would come weekly with her to Steve's Body Firm, a body-building establishment. The chameleon Bible study leader gulped and agreed.

The leader kept her promise. She pushed through a three-ton door into a room smelling of wet leather, where a three-hundred-pound body builder strained over barbells. Intimidated though she was, she persisted and learned how to operate the weight machines. Her next three days were ones of excruciating pain.

Did the experience expand her horizons? Did her friend notice a sacrificial attitude in her? Did her friend keep her part of the bargain and come to the Bible study? Was the experience worth the pain? Do the memories bring joy? Yes!

Note how this leader took on the colors of her friend's world. She eagerly entered new environments: gourmet cookie restaurants, real estate talk, and body building activities. And she obviously enjoyed it all.

In the portrait of Jesus entitled *Laughing Christ*, our Brother's head is thrown back, his eyes and mouth radiating joy and hilarity. We should cultivate such Christlike joy in our lives. Linking to lost people becomes a lighthearted task when we remember that the heavy responsibility of saving belongs to the Holy Spirit alone.

In his short novel *Walking Across Egypt*, Clyde Edgerton illustrates how God, in wise and witty ways, uses ordinary people in his salvation plan. Mattie is a spunky seventy-eight-year-old whose moist pound cake helps her connect with a delinquent teen. One Saturday night, Mattie trades him a warm bath for going to church with her the next morning. Mattie asks,

“Have you ever been to church?”

“I been by them, seen them on TV, slept in one one time, but ain’t never been in one when they were doing the thing.”

Before her, Mattie saw a dry, dying plant that needed water through the roots—a pale boy with rotten teeth who needed the cool nourishing refreshment of hymns sung to God; of kind people speaking to him, asking him how things were going; the cool water of clean people, clean children; of old people held by the arm and helped up a flight of stairs, old people who looked thankfully into their helpers’ eyes; of young and old people sitting together for one purpose: to worship their Maker, to worship Jesus, to care for each other and to read and sing and talk together about God and Jesus and the Bible. The young man needed that to bring color to his cheeks, a robustness to his bearing. That could give him life and spirit. He was lost; this first experience with church could be his first step on the road to salvation.

CHALLENGE

Think of some honest misunderstandings you have had about lost people. Share them with close Christian friends. Ask God to bring more unsaved people into your circle of influence. To increase your joy, read Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of Philippians in *The Message*.

FACING OUR FAITHLESSNESS

One common pitfall in evangelism is our reliance on self-effort—a misplaced confidence. Trusting in ourselves alone and our supposed ability to save the lost will accomplish nothing. We must remember that sharing the gospel is partnering with the supernatural God. He is divine, sovereign, and omnipotent. We aren't. He designed salvation to take away sin, became human to prove his perfect love, and freely gives the gift of faith to each believer. He writes, directs, and produces each prodigal play. He even chooses who will ultimately be found.

In a sense, that leaves very little for us to do. In fact, all the evangelistic commands in the Bible can be reduced to three simple words:

Pray

Tell

Love

PTL! Then praise the Lord!

Here's how one Coffee Break leader illustrates this concept of partnering with God:

I prayed for a Jewish woman this morning. It's not the first time I have prayed for her soul since I met her years ago, but there is a sense of count-down today. She is having a liver biopsy to detect whether her cancer is spreading. By all earthly accounts, she is too young to die. According to biblical assessment, she is dead already—dead in her sins, dead to the possibility of eternity with God.

She is my friend and I long for her to be friends with Jesus. She would make downright good company in heaven, delightful and gifted individual that she is. She's a female version of the apostle Paul: highly intelligent, off-the-chart ambition, a world traveler, politically astute, an activist for causes, a presence not to be dealt with lightly. I am intimidated when I pray for her, because my mind wanders off to what I must say to her about salvation. When I concoct the lines of our next conversation, they do not seem to pack the power I believe it will take to break through all the baggage of Judaism and the smells of success that she carries with her. I am so very small and squeaky.

As I prayed, I found myself giving up my inadequate role in my friend's life and dying. I prayed for a custom-made Damascus Road experience for her, that God would break in, light and all, while she's on that operating table or when she's going down a road some day bicycling or jogging or driving or even late at night when she's simply in bed.

And I don't even have to be there. (But, Lord, I would certainly like to hear about it afterwards.)

There it is, the great Christian cop-out: just make someone's soul God's responsibility. I remember studying about Lydia's conversion in Acts 16:14—"The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message." Even if my friend came to know the Lord through some words I said, it would still be all God's doing. He would have given me the words, made her receptive to them, and then given her the faith to believe.

Scripturally sound theology. I am comforted by it. Pray, then stand on the sidelines and watch as God's sovereignty works. I am the audience and the applauder.

We can pray for the unsaved in several ways. "Praying for the Lost" (see pp. 57-59) will serve as a good reminder of how to pray scripturally. Such praying reminds us that God's ways are often incomprehensible and that our job is to be faithful and genuine.

A high school drama teacher directing the musical *The Chronicles of Narnia* remarked on the character development of the young actor playing Aslan, the allegorical Christ. "He is so stiff yet. I hope he can learn to relax before the show dates." We play Christ to people all around us. He is in us. Whether we are stiff in our Christlikeness or relaxed and natural depends on our level of dependence on him.

The Holy Spirit's Nudges

The Holy Spirit is another antidote to our lack of faith. He knows every lost person from the inside out. He knows what is required to penetrate to the core of that person's soul. The Spirit then gives us words or thoughts that fit precisely the need of the moment. He nudges us to be bold in our

interaction with that lost person. In partnership with the Holy Spirit, we depend on total evangelistic effectiveness, if only we learn to listen and move compassionately. In her book *God Guides*, Mary Geegh, a missionary to India, relays her experiences with the Holy Spirit. Her simple formula calls for a personal quiet time of Bible reading, praying, listening for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, writing down what she hears, and acting. She shared this method with groups of people engaged in a particular ministry:

There was first a time of discipline of our minds by the standards of Christ. Each of us asked ourselves: Am I absolutely honest? pure? unselfish? loving? Thoughts of correction and direction came. Pen and notebook in hand, we wrote them down. Then we shared and surrendered ourselves to God's control. We waited for guidance for our tasks for the day. Guided thoughts brought courage, unity, new vision, and right relationships.

Her book tells story after story of lives that changed only because she acted on the ideas the Spirit gave her. She learned well what it means to be still and then confidently take action.

Networking

Acts 10 includes a wonderful account of how the Holy Spirit creatively brings people together for their mutual benefit. In a vision, an angel directs the Gentile Cornelius to summon Peter. He sends three men to do that. Just before they knock on his front door, Peter dreams of a blanket of kosher and nonkosher animals and hears the Holy Spirit's instructions to go with the men at the door. Before interpreting this dream, Peter obeys. Cornelius welcomes him and explains his side of the story:

So I did it—I sent for you. And you’ve been good enough to come. And now we’re all here in God’s presence, ready to listen to whatever the Master put in your heart to tell us.

Peter fairly exploded with his good news: “It’s God’s own truth. Nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you’re from—if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open. The message he sent to the children of Israel, that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again—well, he’s doing it everywhere, among everyone” (*The Message*, Acts 10:33-36).

Mark Monk was a lonely teenager in Holland, Michigan, when he first met Pastor Rick Kiekintveld. The two became friends and, although the door was always open, Mark gradually drifted away. Several years later, the two men met again in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Mark began attending Pastor Rick’s church in that city.

He started attending a Men’s Life group at Pastor Rick’s church. Through the influence of that Bible study and continual contact with Pastor Rick, Mark eventually gave his life to Christ.

“Mark is now hungry for the Scriptures,” Pastor Rick says. “And he is bringing other guys to the group. No one else in our Men’s Life group is as fired up as Mark is.

“I’ve known Mark for sixteen years. It’s been a long sixteen-year process. Though it was a very hard experience at times, Mark now is one of the joys of my ministry.”

We can count on the Holy Spirit to perform some marvelously “coincidental” acts. We simply have to notice and follow through.

Believing in Jesus

A quotation from Max Lucado's *The Final Week of Jesus* should help restore your faith in your own salvation:

His final prayer was about you. His final pain was for you. [He and you were and are personally connected.]

His humanity begged to be delivered from what his divinity could see. There was a time when if he could have, he would have turned his back on the whole mess and gone away.

But he couldn't, because he saw you. Right in the middle of a world which isn't fair .-.-. betrayed by those you love .-.-. with a body that gets sick and a heart that grows weak. He saw you .-.-. and he didn't want you to be alone. He would rather go to hell for you than go to heaven without you.

Recording Answered Prayer

Are you consciously and regularly praying both individually and corporately for unsaved friends and acquaintances? Do you keep a dog-eared list of specific names and a thumb-worn notebook of God's answers to prayer? Make a habit of keeping records. It will become one of the greatest faith builders you will ever experience.

Experiencing God Lessons

To grow strong, vibrant faith requires continual filling with the Word and Spirit. Are you eager to meet Jesus every day, or does God have to come looking for you, as he did Adam and Eve, asking, "Where are you?"

God is love. Bask in that truth. His Word is the truth. Know it. The Spirit wants to transform you into a Christlike model. Be teachable.

How many times have you been flooded with the concerns of this life—how to provide for your family, how to discipline your child, how to be patient, how to love your spouse, how to find peace, how to help the poor, how to love the lost. As you present these concerns to God, his answers will bless your life. This is the essence of your faith story that he wants you to share with others.

“This is what God taught me this week,” you say. Or, “I think I am beginning to understand forgiveness better after what God has put me through at work.” God plans love lessons that prove his work in your life, give you spiritual direction, and build up your faith. Keep those appointments with him. Let your friends see and hear the overflow.

CHALLENGE

What lesson is God teaching you today? Practice sharing it with a Christian friend so that you will be ready to tell it to a non-Christian this week. If you have no such lesson, write down what you want God to work on in your life. Watch for his deeds so you will have stories to tell.

OUR INGROWNNESS AND SIDETRACKING

Like all people, Christians need a sense of belonging. We enjoy the safety and security of those we know and love. We like to fellowship with believers with whom we share a common history. We never tire of experiencing Christ's oneness without the pressure of a non-Christian's presence. We favor predictable group dynamics without tension, safe from outside influences.

Yet Jesus said, "Go into all the world." And he showed us what it means to *go*. Can you imagine the quantum leap he took to leave the relational harmony of the Trinity and his privileged position in heaven to enter our world? to move from eternity's freedom to the limits of hours and days and years? from being one with the Father to being torn apart by pagan persecutors? from being surrounded by perfection and praise to being swallowed by the horror of sin?

The contrasts are too great to imagine. What an immense bridge of love our Savior traveled! To share that love, we too must cross bridges. They are small compared to the great bridge Jesus crossed, but nevertheless these bridges span the gulf separating us from the world.

Crossing those bridges of love requires changing our priorities. We must examine how and with whom we spend our time. We may have been occupied with Christian activities before, but now we must move into the public arena. If we have been spending time with Christian friends only, we now need to seek out relationships with non-Christians. If we spend the majority of our time at Christian events or with Christian friends, we should reevaluate our priorities.

Our little bridges will lead us into the world and onto the turf of unbelievers. They are the ones whom Jesus came “to seek and to save.” How did he do it? The gospels remind us that Jesus got his sandals dirty while crossing bridges to get close to people. Seventy-five gospel chapters trace his search for the lost. One of those chapters, Mark 1, offers a glimpse into how mission-oriented he was. In that chapter, Jesus moves among lost people—by the river, in the desert, on the seashore, in the meeting place, in people’s homes, in a secluded place, and even where lepers lived. By the end of the chapter, he no longer needed to go out among the people; they were coming to him.

Our world today is no different. Lost people live and work everywhere. Who is waiting for you at the other end of your bridge of love? Here is a list to start you thinking. Number these in order of your priority.

- ___ a community bowling league
- ___ the sidelines of a Little League game
- ___ parenting classes
- ___ the YMCA
- ___ aerobics classes

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- ___ square dancing
 - ___ burnout support group
 - ___ business groups or auxiliaries for spouses
 - ___ recreational clubs (snowmobiling, horseback riding, quilting, writer's critique groups, book discussion groups, boating, camping)
 - ___ Tupperware or Mary Kay parties
 - ___ block parties
 - ___ community services (cancer drives, library board)
 - ___ city or county government
 - ___ lecture series
 - ___ events listed in local newspaper
 - ___ mall walking
 - ___ committees for charity benefits
 - ___ audition for the local theater production
 - ___ the synagogue
 - ___ fund-raising dinners
 - ___ cafeterias, restaurants, even bars
 - ___ hospital or hospice volunteer
 - ___ school boards, advisory councils, boards of trustees, community committees
 - ___ community college classes
 - ___ accepting invitations to homes

Notice that Christians could plan and manage nearly every one of these activities. There are Christian aerobics classes set to Christian music, Christian bowling leagues, Christian banquets, Christian musical groups, and so on. These are commendable; they meet certain needs. But as a Christian sent "into the world," you need to assess whether

- you attend more Christian functions than necessary for your personal spiritual welfare.
- you avoid secular events and places.
- you fail to ask why you are remaining in your comfort zone.

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- you neglect to pray for opportunities to “go into all the world.”
 - you feel the Holy Spirit nudging you out of your neat and tidy nest.
 - you lack the courage and freedom to change.
 - you need the support and prayers of other Christians to bridge the gap to the lost.

Like writers who sharpen one more pencil, pour one more cup of coffee, and search for one more Kleenex before writing their first word, timid evangelists also employ stalling techniques. How often do we put more effort into preparing a gospel presentation than actually delivering it. How easily we become sidetracked, resting in our comfort zones instead of walking that risky God-accompanied bridge to the lost.

One way to avoid this cowardice is to remember to “keep the main thing the main thing.” For example, we should extend hospitality to the lost with pure motives. Jesus said, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed” (Luke 14:12-14). Jesus invites the unwashed to his banquet. He speaks harshly to Christians who simply trade each other’s social invitations and do little to expand the kingdom.

Another popular sidetracking technique is trying to do too much. You can probably think of dozens of ways to connect with non-Christians. You may try to do so much that you do nothing well. God has lavished us with many gifts and many opportunities, but he prefers that we start small and focus our energies. Begin with only one or two relationships and allow him to work through you. This will keep you from becoming sidetracked.

Determining individual spiritual gifts is another way to avoid this problem. *Discover Your Gifts and Learn How to Use Them*, published by Church Development Resources, is a thorough and cost-effective resource. Call toll-free 1-800-333-8300 for more information. Discovering the spiritual gifts of people in your church distributes the work in a God-ordained manner and offers each member the opportunity to apply his or her gifts to the task of linking to the lost.

CHALLENGE

Over the last three days (seventy-two hours), how many hours did you spend with other Christians in Christian activity? how much with non-Christians? What is the ratio? Write down the changes you will make in order to modify that percentage. Pray for God to show you your sidetracking techniques. Write down three or four of them, praying that God will empower you to turn from them.

FACING OUR FEARS

Some days you frankly do not feel capable of linking to the lost. Put those doubts behind you. Stop fussing over who you are *not* and gratefully accept who you *are*. God planned your genetics, controlled your birth and heritage, managed the circumstances of your childhood, and orchestrated all the situations of your life. He has delivered you from much trouble, healed you, blessed you. Who are you to complain about the processes he used to shape you in his image? God has blended in you a unique combination of personality traits, hereditary talents, spiritual gifts, and fruit of the Spirit. He will match you with divine encounters of the best kind.

Do you have a warm personality? Exude it.

Are you a good listener? Discover needs.

An eager doer? Do.

Patient? Make yourself available.

Curious about life? Enter someone else's turf.
Unshockable and nonjudgmental? Good!
Observant? Find common interests.
An enthusiastic participant? Participate.
Transparent? Open up to others.
An optimist? Smile.
Outgoing? Carry on a dialogue.
Gentle? Bring calm into chaos.
Persistent? Keep at it.
Athletic? Involve someone else.
Affirming and encouraging? God knows the world needs
it.
Hospitable? Invite them.
God's friend? Tell them how to become one too.

No one person can be all things to all people. No one person has a corner on all of humanity's talents, character traits, and gifts. God alone has distributed those among his people. He alone chooses which lost person to bring into our lives. Trust him and enjoy his providence!

Following are some suggestions to tame our fears. They require honing skills such as asking, talking and listening, telling, and praying.

Asking

In her book *Finders Keepers*, Dee Brestin writes of a personal evangelistic experience:

One day [my little Sally and] I arrived at the park to find another mother there with her toddler. They began to play together.

As I watched them and thought about striking up a conversation with the little boy's mother, I remembered a comment made by a missionary friend from Saudi Arabia. He said, "People in America don't really know how to be friendly. We

have such great freedom of speech here, and yet people can't seem to open up a conversation." I decided I wasn't going to be like that. I began by asking this mother questions about her little boy.

It wasn't long before Annie was telling me she was new to Seattle and was feeling somewhat homesick. At that point I invited her for coffee the next day and she readily accepted. Annie was part of the fertile field, very open to spiritual reality. I discovered her simply by being alert.

How many new residents of your neighborhood are feeling friendless and isolated? In *Gentle Persuasion*, Joe Aldrich writes, "Evangelism means loving people until they ask you why." That's what the apostle Paul did. The jailer finally asked him, "What must I do to be saved?"

Talking and Listening

Talking is easy for most of us. We connect and affirm through talking, a crucial ingredient of any friendship. Talking should be invitational. (Make sure your church provides invitational, nonthreatening events to which members can bring pre-Christian friends.) We seem to trip up, however, when we finally move from small talk to meaningful conversation that mentions Jesus. Becky Pippert, in her book *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World*, writes, "Our problem in evangelism is not that we don't have enough information; it is that we don't know how to be ourselves." We need to be ourselves in our talk—welcoming servants of Jesus, unimpressed and almost unconscious of ourselves, ready to respond to our friend's deepest needs.

If talking is the glue of friendship, listening is the drying time needed for bonding. Glue usually takes longer to dry than to spread; we should listen more than we talk. Our active listening to others and the Holy Spirit will allow us

to get between the lines of those lost lives and trigger good responses in us:

Listening

for loneliness

for needs

emotional

mental

physical

spiritual

Talking

invite to Bible study

tell about your best Friend

use wisdom and wit

mention counseling referrals

suggest or supply resources

share your current God lessons

Imagine these one-liners as directional dialogues that point to God:

The Lost Person

“Well, I’ll be damned!”

“How are you?”

“How are you?”

“I’m depressed.”
times

“My kids are driving
me nuts.”

“I need a drink.”

“I’m a happy pagan.”

The Saved Person

“You don’t have to be.”

“Great! This is the day the Lord
has made.”

“Lousy. I think God is teaching
me something.”

“When I’m depressed it some-

means I am out of sync with God.
Could that be it for you?”

“Did you realize that there are
kid-raising helps in the Bible?”

“Have you heard of living water?”

“Maybe you’re satisfied with the
one green pea on your plate and
haven’t noticed the banquet feast
in the next room.”

“I’m bored.”

“Being a Christian is like seeing life in full-color on a huge screen compared to a little six-inch black-and-white TV.”

The apostle Paul urges us to let our conversation “be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Col. 4:6). *The Message* paraphrases this verse: “The goal is to bring out the best in others in a conversation, not put them down, not cut them out.”

Our goal in linking to the lost is talking and listening, thereby pointing those around us to Jesus Christ.

Telling

Author Joe Bayly once observed that Christian coffee never saved anyone. A person is saved through hearing about Jesus and personally believing in him and all that he has done—which means someone has to tell it like it is. May that person be you. You have prayed, crossed bridges, befriended little by little, and now the time has come.

First, focus on that lost person’s need for Jesus, not on your “getting it right.”

Second, ask for permission: “Is now a good time to talk about some spiritual issues? May I tell you about a relationship that has changed my life? Would you like me to tell you how peace became a reality in my life? how my frustration level got lowered? Would you like to know any more about how to become a Christian?”

Third, remember the simplicity of the gospel. Karl Barth wrote volumes of theology, but he boiled the gospel down to, “Jesus loves me. This I know, for the Bible tells me so.” You already know John 3:16 by heart and could easily put it in your own words. Since your conversion, God has also taught you many faith lessons that you could teach someone.

Be aware of anyone who is ready to hear the good news. While in a newcomer's Coffee Break study, a woman said she felt like crawling under the table when she thought about her own sin. A leader sat down with her after the discussion and asked what she meant by her comment. Together they concluded that the apostle Paul was under that table with her, and if God could save him, surely he could save her. She accepted Jesus Christ that day as Savior and Lord of her life.

A few years later she phoned the leader to say she was writing out her testimony to share with others and asked what verses were used when she made her decision for Christ. The leader remembered well, since the trauma of "getting it right" had made such a lasting impression. The woman who found Christ that day experienced the joy of the moment and forgot the details as she walked into a lifetime of difference. The leader replied, "Ephesians 2, verses 8 and 9."

Praying

Prayer makes effective the asking, talking and listening, and telling. The righteous one's fervent prayer is music to God's ears. Maxie Dunnam, in *The Workbook of Living Prayer*, says, "Praying for people will bring you to love them. Loving them will lead you to serve them. Serving them will be the open door through which God can move in to save, heal, and make whole."

Following is a paraphrase of the first half of the Lord's Prayer:

OUR FATHER
WHO ART IN HEAVEN

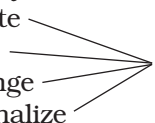
Father, are you listening?
You seem so far away some-
times.
We want to tell you something.
We believe in you.

HALLOWED BE
THY NAME

We love you for who you are:
the highest power,
the purest being,
and love personified.

We love you for what you can do:

create
save
change
eternalize



a person

THY KINGDOM COME

We believe you are up to some-
thing in this world. Prove it to
us. Create clean hearts in us.

Renew right spirits within us.
Use us to find the lost.
Save these unsaved ones,
Father.

} specific
names

THY WILL BE DONE

ON EARTH AS IT IS
IN-HEAVEN

Help us to see what your will is
for us on their behalf.

We believe you are up to some-
thing much, much bigger than
we are. Yes!

Amen.

CHALLENGE

Thing about how you are doing in one of the five areas:
asking, talking, listening, telling, or praying. Choose the
area that most needs improvement and write out a simple
plan for making progress.

LINKING TO OUR CHILDREN

In her book *Children and Religion*, Martha Fay describes her quandary when her three-year-old asked the big questions: “Why did Nanny die? What does *dead* mean? How old is the world? Where do people go when they die?”

Her young daughter “was in full pursuit of God, piecing him together from the conversations of friends and baby-sitters, from nursery school explanations of the various Jewish and Christian holidays, from greeting-card images and museum reproductions.”

The author describes how her daughter’s questions “felt like a series of small electric shocks.” She vividly describes what it was like “to climb back out of the hole you’ve dug for yourself by broad-mindedly announcing, ‘No, we don’t believe in God, but lots of other people do.’”

“Why do they?” the child asked, only later to alternate with the equally blunt, but surely more pertinent, “Why don’t you?”

God has built into the development of three- and four-year-old children a natural curiosity about him. Adults have countless opportunities to explain him to children. Parenting is a good place to start, but what if the parents are not Christians? Christian adults must create safe places for little children to ask the big questions and to hear the answers.

Child evangelism programs, such as Little Lambs and Story Hour, are uniquely situated to present the gospel to very young and preschool children. Be ready with love and joy to respond to the questions God plants in their minds and hearts. Small children may be God’s messengers to adult caregivers and parents. (See *Little Ones Need Jesus* in the Core Values Series for more on linking to children.)

Challenge

Think of the children you know in your neighborhood, family, and church. Who among them needs to know Jesus as Savior and Lord? Write down their names and pray for them.

RETHINKING EVANGELISM

How am I doing? Am I evangelistic?" A better question might be, "Am I doing all that is humanly and super-naturally possible to bring my lost friend to Jesus Christ?"

Does that question cause you to stumble through your guilt, seeking a definition of *evangelism* that lets you off the hook? Remember that God uses us in mysterious ways. We will never be able to clearly see or neatly measure what he is doing through us in the lives of others.

Look at Scripture and discover again the character traits God wants to develop in you. An evangelistic person who effectively links to the lost is .-..

Found and Saved

If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Rom. 10:9).

Out and Among

For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death: to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? (2 Cor. 2:15-16).

Burdened

The apostle Paul expressed “great sorrow and unceasing anguish of heart” over the lost (Rom. 9:1-3).

Dependent on God

[The Holy Spirit] will convict the world of guilt .-. he will guide you into all truth (John 16:8,13).

Do not worry .-. for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that time what you should say (Luke 12:11-12).

Prone to Action

Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16).

Encouraging

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds (Heb. 10:23-24).

Verbal

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have (1 Pet. 3:15).

Prayerful

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us .-. (Eph. 3:20).

Bold

Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel (Eph. 6:19).

Loving

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

CHALLENGE

Mark the three evangelistic characteristics that you most need to work on and write down ways to incorporate them into your life. Pray that God will build these characteristics into you.

HOW TO PLAY HIDE-AND-SEEK

In the early dry dark of an October's Saturday evening, the neighborhood children are playing hide-and-seek. How long since I played hide-and-seek? Thirty years, maybe more. I remember how. I could become part of the game in a moment, if invited. Adults don't play hide-and-seek. Not for fun, anyway. Too bad.

Did you have a kid in your neighborhood who always hid so good, nobody could find him? We did. After a while we would give up on him and go off, leaving him to rot wherever he was. Sooner or later he would show up, all mad because we didn't keep looking for him. And we would get mad back because he wasn't playing the game the way it was supposed to be played. There's hiding and there's finding, we'd say. And he'd say it was hide-and-seek, not hide-and-give-UP, and we'd all yell about who made the rules and who cared about who, anyway, and how we wouldn't play with

him anymore if he didn't get it straight and who needed him anyhow, and things like that. Hide-and-peek-and-yell. No matter what, though, the next time he would hide too good again. He's probably still hidden somewhere, for all I know.

As I write this, the neighborhood game goes on, and there is a kid under a pile of leaves in the yard just under my window. He has been there a long time now, and everybody else is found and they are about to give up on him over at the base. I considered going out to the base and telling them where he is hiding. And I thought about setting the leaves on fire to drive him out. Finally I just yelled, "GET FOUND, KID!" out the window. And scared him so bad he probably wet his pants and started crying and ran home to tell his mother. It's real hard to know how to be helpful sometimes.

A man I know found out last year he had terminal cancer. He was a doctor. And knew about dying, and he didn't want to make his family and friends suffer through that with him. So he kept his secret. And died. Everybody said how brave he was to bear his suffering in silence and not tell everybody and so on and so forth. But privately his family and friends said how angry they were that he didn't need them, didn't trust their strength. And it hurt that he didn't say good-bye.

He hid too well. Getting found would have kept him in the game. Hide-and-peek, grown-up style. Wanting to hide. Needing to be sought. Confused about being found. "I don't want anyone to know." "What will people think?" "I don't want to bother anyone."

Better than hide-and-peek, I like the game called "Sardines." In Sardines the person who is It goes and hides, and everybody goes looking for him. When you find him, you get in with him and hide there with him. Pretty soon everybody is hiding together, all stacked in a small space like puppies in a pile. And pretty soon somebody giggles and somebody laughs and everybody gets found.

Medieval theologians even described God in hide-and-seek terms, calling him *Deus Absconditus*. But me, I think old God is a Sardines player. And will be found the same way everybody gets found in Sardines, by the sound of laughter of those heaped together at the end.

“Olly-olly-oxen-free.” The kids out in the street are hollering the cry that says, “Come on in, wherever you are. It’s a new game.” And so say I. To all those who have hid too good. Get found, kid! Olly-olly-oxen-free.

—*All I Really Need to Know I Learned
in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum

PRAYING FOR THE LOST

Pray .-..

1. That God draws them to himself.

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him .-. (John 6:44).

2. That they seek to know God.

God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:27).

But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul (Deut. 4:29).

3. That they believe the Scriptures.

And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you

heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God .-.-. (1-Thess. 2:13).

Consequently faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ (Rom. 10:17).

4. That Satan is bound from blinding them to the truth.

When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart (Matt. 13:19).

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4).

5. That the Holy Spirit works in them.

When [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment. .-.-. He will guide you into all truth (John 16:8,13).

6. That God sends someone to lead them to Christ.

Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matt. 9:37-38).

7. That they believe in Christ as Savior.

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12).

“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24).

8. That they turn from sin.

[God] commands all people everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30).

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord (Acts 3:19).

9. That they confess Christ as Lord.

If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Rom. 10:9).

10. That they yield all to follow Christ.

And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again (2 Cor. 5:15).

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ .-. (Phil. 3:7-8).

11. That they take root and grow in Christ.

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness (Col. 2:6-7).

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