

The Church as Forgiving Community: An Initial Model

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Abstract

Recent empirical studies have shown that forgiveness interventions decrease anxiety, depression, and anger, and increase self esteem, hope, and positive affect. We propose a three-tiered holistic psycho-educational approach called “The Forgiving Communities,” that targets three interdependent categories: the family, the school, and the Church. The goal of The Forgiving Communities is to deepen individuals’ (and society’s) understanding and personal practice of, and growth in forgiveness. We posit here an initial model of the Church as Forgiving Community, consisting of multiple levels of forgiveness education intended to cultivate a culture of forgiveness and the expectation that forgiveness is part of the congregation’s existence. The model targets the leadership of the congregation and every level of programming, from infancy through late adulthood.

The Church as Forgiving Community: An Initial Model

It is in the ancient pages of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament where the concept of interpersonal forgiveness first finds its shape. From the story of Joseph forgiving his brothers (Gen 50) to the forgiveness demonstrated by the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), the Scriptures paint a picture of forgiveness relevant not only in the divine-human relationship, but also in person-person relationships. This interpersonal nature is spelled out more explicitly in Pauline thought, where Christ's followers are urged, in their desire to pursue holy communal living, to forgive one another because they themselves had been forgiven by God through Christ (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13).

The essence of a forgiving response, as seen in the biblical texts above, is the cessation of resentment and the implementation or the resumption of a beneficent response toward an offender. Enright & Fitzgibbons (2000) define forgiveness as follows:

People, upon rationally determining that they have been unfairly treated, forgive when they willfully abandon resentment and related responses (to which they have a right), and endeavor to respond to the wrongdoer based on the moral principle of beneficence, which may include compassion, unconditional worth, generosity, and moral love (to which the wrongdoer, by nature of the hurtful act or acts, has no right) (p. 24).

To forgive is not to condone, excuse, forget, or even to reconcile (see Enright, 2001; Worthington, 2005). To forgive is to offer mercy to someone who has acted unjustly.

Though forgiveness has been part of the Church's message and mission for millennia, it began to draw interest from social scientists only twenty years ago, when Smedes (1984), Enright, Santos, and Al-Mabuk (1989), and Worthington and DiBlasio (1990) introduced the

topic. A key feature of the social scientific work was the development of process models, or detailed descriptions of how people actually go about forgiving others. The two most often-cited models are Enright's process model and Worthington's REACH model. In Enright's model the forgiver moves through four phases: uncovering anger (acknowledging the pain and exploring the injustice), deciding to forgive (exploring forgiveness and making a commitment to work toward forgiveness), working on forgiveness (reframing and developing empathy and compassion for the offender and bearing the pain), and the outcome (healing is experienced) (Freedman, Enright, & Knutson, 2005). On the forgiveness journey, one progresses at his or her own pace through 20 forgiveness guideposts, often skipping some and revisiting others. In a series of studies, using the gold standard of randomized, experimental and control group designs with follow-up testing, Enright and colleagues have shown strong evidence for the emotional health benefits of using a road map to learn to forgive someone who was deeply unfair to the participant. Participants with a wide variety of hurts have experienced statistically significant reductions in anger, depression, anxiety, grief, and post-traumatic stress symptoms and statistically significant increases in forgiveness, self-esteem, hope, positive attitudes, environmental mastery, and finding meaning in suffering (Holter, Magnuson & Enright, in press).

In Worthington's model, the forgiver (R) recalls the offense in a supportive environment, builds (E) empathy for the offender through various exercises, gives an (A) altruistic gift of forgiveness to the offender, recognizing that, in the past, one has hurt others, (C) commits publicly to the forgiveness one has already experienced, and (H) holds on to (or maintains) the forgiveness that one has achieved (Wade & Worthington, 2005). A key feature of the forgiveness process, according to both the Enright and Worthington models, is empathy, or "the experience

of feeling what another feels, or being able to understand and relate to the experiences of others” (Wade & Worthington, 2005, p. 167). Empathy, in fact, was a component of all 14 published forgiveness interventions reviewed by Wade & Worthington (2005). Early studies of Worthington’s model (comprising only three steps [REA]) showed small gains in forgiveness after brief (1-2 hour) interventions. Furthermore, psychophysiological data indicate that adopting the REA steps after an offense leads to lower physiological stress responses and greater perceived control than does holding a grudge (Witvliet, Ludwig, & VanderLaan, 2001). Later studies that tested the full REACH model in 6-8 hour psychoeducational interventions produced “moderate to strong effects for helping participants overcome their unforgiveness across time...gains in forgiveness that may be more clinically significant than shorter interventions” (Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005). Other researchers, such as Rye & Pargament (2002) and Hart & Shapiro (2002) have integrated elements from Worthington’s and Enright’s models into successful interventions. Wade et al.’s (2005) recent meta-analysis provided “some support for the specific effectiveness of explicit forgiveness interventions for promoting forgiveness,” particularly when “providing a coherent treatment, rather than a smattering of disjointed interventions” (pp. 435-436).

In addition to increased psychological health, forgiveness has physiological correlates as well. Forgiveness has been linked with lower blood pressure (Toussaint & Williams, 2003; Witvliet et al., 2001), lower skin conductance-level scores, lower heart rate, and less tonic eye muscle tension (Witvliet et al., 2001). Similarly, Lawler et al. (2003) found that trait forgiveness was linked to lower blood pressure levels, and that state forgiveness was correlated with lower blood pressure levels, rate pressure product, and heart rate. In her review of the psychophysiological forgiveness literature Witvliet (2005) concludes that the studies “show self-

report, cardiovascular reactivity, and facial EMG patterns that reliably distinguish unforgiving responses toward others (as a state or trait) as generating more negative and aroused affect and greater reactivity and prolonged activation than do forgiving responses toward others” (p. 311).

Clear, then, is the notion that forgiveness is an important and desired transaction for psychological, physical, and relational health. Yet unanswered in the published literature are the following questions: Is it possible to help children learn to forgive? If forgiveness aids in the coping with and the resolution of conflicts in adulthood, then is it not reasonable to begin equipping children with forgiveness so that they can confront injustices in a proven, healthy way later in life? What is an effective way to help children learn about forgiveness and learn to forgive? How can forgiveness become part of a child’s central communities of home, school, and place of worship? Along with Worthington (2005), we wonder whether forgiveness interventions, which have been effective in clinical trials, will be effective in other settings like homes, schools, or churches.

To begin promoting the essential moral virtue of forgiveness in children and within their central communities, we propose a three-tiered holistic psycho-educational approach that we are calling “The Forgiving Communities,” that targets three interdependent categories: the family, the school, and the Church. Although forgiveness, as we understand it, can be practiced regardless of an offending person’s response, living in a forgiving community implies a responsibility for those who offend to repent of their unjust behavior and demonstrate that they can be trusted in an ongoing relationship. More will be said about this later. The point of The Forgiving Communities is to help children to learn more deeply about the concept of forgiveness, and at the same time, to help parents, teachers, and pastors to deepen their

understanding, personal practice, and encouragement of forgiveness as they help the children.

Many of us know that we learn most deeply when we try to teach something to a child.

The most developed component of the approach to date is the school system. Enright et al. (2003, 2007) have introduced psycho-educational forgiveness interventions in select primary schools in Belfast, Northern Ireland, an area plagued for many years by violence, injustice, and anger. Initial findings from the interventions are promising (see Holter, Martin, & Enright, 2006; Enright, Knutson Enright, Holter, Baskin, & Knutson, 2007). Similar programs are being implemented in elementary schools in urban Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Gassin, Enright, & Knutson, 2005).

As is evident from a perusal of the published literature, the concept of interpersonal forgiveness has been explored in a variety of contexts, including marital relationships, families, and even school systems. If the notion of The Forgiving Community is to spread beyond the school, it must be explored within the religious arena. That this field has been somewhat overlooked as a place to sustain forgiveness education is rather ironic, since it is the ancient texts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament that are the first to introduce forgiveness into the moral realm of human relationships. This article proposes an initial model of a forgiveness education initiative in the context of a Christian congregation: the Church as Forgiving Community.

The Model

Lampton, Oliver, Worthington, & Berry (2005) argue that “churches can promote forgiving by promoting an environment that explicitly values forgiveness by preaching, teaching, and providing experiential opportunities that explicitly promote forgiveness” (p.279). Our proposed model consists of multiple levels of forgiveness education that take place at fixed times

each year to cultivate a culture of forgiveness and the expectation that forgiveness is part of the congregation's existence not only for a short period of time, but for life. The model targets the leadership of the congregation and every level of programming, from infancy through late adulthood. It should be noted that the model outlined here is designed with large, multi-staffed churches in mind, but can be adapted to any size congregation. Although our focus for developing such a model has been the children, the current model extends the focus to all age groups. Thus, this model can be adapted to accommodate the existing needs of any given church. For example, congregations that do not have a children's minister would still be able to incorporate forgiveness curricula into Sunday school. The responsibility would simply lie with volunteers, rather than paid church staff. Similarly, churches without a small group coordinator can still develop interest groups or book study groups that center on forgiveness.

Content

In the close interpersonal relationships required in true community, one will encounter interpersonal injustices of one sort or another. Thus, although a community like the local church has great potential for good, it can also be an entity that causes pain. Since interpersonal transgressions often occur in community, how can a community ever survive? Jones (1995) maintains that forgiveness is necessary for community to develop and maintain itself. He argues that forgiveness "creates a new context and capacity for community" in which "forgiven forgivers" live, paradoxically, in "communities of broken yet restored community" (Jones, 1995, pp. 175-176). He insists that forgiveness must be embodied as a way of life for a community to thrive. Helping a congregation attain this embodiment of forgiveness, then, requires at least two major emphases: granting forgiveness and receiving forgiveness. In emphasizing each of these areas, the burden of mending disrupted community is borne not by victims alone, but also by

those who offend. In the following discussion, we will employ the Enright process model of forgiveness as an example. Other models, especially Worthington's REACH model, could be used as well; the model emphasized here was chosen because it is based on two decades of academic inquiry and empirical research. In addition to an emphasis on forgiving, other related topics might be introduced, such as apologizing, confessing, repenting, or making restitution. Of course, these must be handled in a temperate manner so that people do not feel cajoled into them.

Granting Forgiveness

As one approaches the forgiveness process after the experience of an injustice, one must first uncover one's anger. In so doing, one can work through such issues as identifying psychological defenses (like denial), confronting the anger, or sometimes acknowledging the experience of shame. One might examine the extent to which the offense drains one's energy reserve or how often one replays the incident in one's mind. Furthermore, one might compare one's situation to that of the offender, or one could become aware of a permanent life change or altered worldview.

As one considers the foregoing issues, one might realize that former resolution strategies no longer work. At this point, one might consider forgiveness and ultimately commit to the forgiveness process.

Once one has committed to forgive, one can begin the work of forgiveness by viewing the offender in new ways (not to condone, but to understand) by developing empathy and compassion toward the offender, and by absorbing the pain.

After one has worked on forgiveness, one might find new meaning in the suffering, recognize that one has been an offender in the past, and realize that one is not alone on the

journey toward wholeness. Furthermore, one can uncover a new purpose in life and experience emotional relief (Freedman et al., 2005).

Receiving Forgiveness

Before an outline of the process of receiving forgiveness is presented, a few comments are in order. It is important that offenders do not attempt to “engineer” another’s forgiveness journey. At the same time, offenders are not merely passive recipients of forgiveness. Instead, they might be willing to welcome forgiveness, might actively seek it, and must be willing to wait until forgiveness is granted (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1996). Enright and colleagues (1996) distinguish between an offender *deserving* forgiveness and being *worthy* of receiving it. That is, although the unjust behavior makes the offender undeserving of forgiveness, all people—because they are created in the Image of God—are worthy of it. The group also distinguishes between entitlement and hope. Since forgiveness is a gift given freely by the victim, the offender is not entitled to it; instead, the offender is free to wait in hope that the other will forgive him or her. Finally, the offender can receive forgiveness in at least three different ways. First, the offender can reject forgiveness as irrational. He or she may be unaware of the original offense and its impact. Second, the offender can “receive” forgiveness simply as justification to continue the offending behavior. Third—and the only true reception of forgiveness—the offender can receive forgiveness with certain attitudes like remorse for one’s behavior, respect for the injured person, and acts of genuine repentance, including behavior change (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1996). In fact, Witvliet et al. (2002) (cited in Worthington, 2006) found that the more that people received apology and/or restitution in the face of an offense (i.e., the more justice they received), the more that people forgave. In

order for the church community to be a forgiving one, offenders (which includes all of us at some point in time) need to display such repentant attitudes.

The process of receiving forgiveness parallels the process of granting forgiveness. First, one explores how one hurt another person. This exploration can include such things as uncovering denial, feelings of guilt, remorse, self-anger, or shame. Dwelling on the offense, replaying it in one's mind, and comparing one's own situation to that of the victim are other possible areas for exploration. Finally, one can examine how the victim's life has been adversely changed by the offense or how one's own sense of self (through self-criticism) can be altered by the offending action.

After uncovering these issues, one realizes that one must make a change in relation to the other. One desires to be forgiven by the other and may even ask for it (remembering that one cannot *demand* it). Not demanding forgiveness suggests that no coercion (verbal or nonverbal) can occur. This point is important in the church setting where victims might feel pressured to forgive. Next, one commits to wait in hope of the forgiveness that one desires.

After one decides to forgive, one begins to work on receiving forgiveness. This work involves viewing the victim as suffering, vulnerable, and maybe in need to extra time to forgive. It also involves developing empathy and compassion for the victim—feeling the other's hurt (to which one contributed) and being willing to suffer along with the other. Finally, one absorbs the pain by allowing the other to be angry and accepting one's role as a “remorseful offender seeking change” (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1996. p. 114).

After the work of receiving forgiveness, one might find meaning in the offense and accompanying journey of receiving forgiveness, and a new sense of purpose in life might emerge. When one realizes that one has been a victim in the past and has forgiven others, one

gleans new insights into the process of granting and receiving forgiveness. One might also recognize that one is not alone in the journey toward restored relationships. Ultimately, one may experience release from the pain, gratitude toward the victim, and perhaps even reconciliation in the relationship. For a more thorough explanation of the process of receiving forgiveness, and the interaction of granting and receiving forgiveness—including charts—see Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1996. Again, one might also adapt Worthington's REACH model to include receiving forgiveness.

The benefits of seeking forgiveness have been demonstrated empirically. In a study by Witvliet, Ludwig, & Bauer (2002), participants were asked to reflect on a transgression that they had committed, to imagine ruminating about the transgression versus seeking forgiveness, and to imagine various responses from their victim. Results showed that seeking forgiveness (rather than ruminating about the transgression) was associated with reduced feelings of anger, sadness, guilt, and shame. Similarly, the hope of receiving forgiveness or reconciling (rather than being begrudged) was linked to greater positive emotion, gratitude, control, forgiveness, empathy, and hope, and reduced anger, fear, sadness, arousal, shame, and guilt.

Multiple Levels

Lampton et al. (2005) have demonstrated that a general, untargeted forgiveness intervention can be effective in the context of a Christian university. At the same time, they found that the general intervention is more effective when it is paired with smaller workshop groups where individuals are assisted in forgiving a specific offense. Furthermore, the meta-analysis of Baskin & Enright (2004) showed that effect sizes increase as the forgiveness intervention becomes more focused (.82 for group process-based interventions vs. 1.66 for individual process-based interventions). To maximize the positive outcomes associated with

transforming a church into a Forgiving Community, then, forgiveness education needs to address multiple levels within the congregation. If forgiveness education comes only from the pastor's sermons or only from Sunday school, the impact will be diminished. Developing a forgiving climate begins with church leadership, from the pastor/priest to the associate ministers, to the lay volunteers who carry out various ministries within the congregation, to the couples and families who make up the congregation, to the individual. In such a progression, multiple forgiving communities may slowly begin to change church culture and energize congregations that might be stuck in maintaining "status quo" ministry.

The Pastor

The pastor holds a position of great importance on at least two levels. To the parishioners, the pastor is God's representative who is called by God to lead, teach, and nurture the congregation. The pastor's words are taken seriously by those who have been placed under his or her care. Church-goers look to the pastor each week to help them 1) encounter God and 2) learn how to live their lives according to God's ways. To the rest of the staff, the pastor is the leader who casts vision for the direction of the ministry in the congregation. The pastor cares for the staff so that the staff can care for their volunteer leaders, so that the volunteer leaders can care for the people whom they serve.

The pastor, then, is the prime target in the forgiveness education program and in developing the Church as Forgiving Community. For the program to have any success at all, it must be wholeheartedly endorsed and embraced by the senior pastor. The pastor will be involved in two ways. First, the pastor will commit to a series of sermons each year on the topic of person-to-person forgiveness. How many is sufficient? We recommend at least five sermons each year on the topic of forgiveness, which amounts to about 10% of all Sunday sermons. These sermons

need not follow any particular sequence, and should flow from a variety of biblical texts. In fact, the sermons might be more effective if they are spread throughout the entire year rather than lumped into one series of messages. We say this for the sake of sustainability of the idea of forgiveness throughout any given year. Second, the pastor will be educated in the forgiveness process and encouraged to develop a forgiving atmosphere among the staff of the church. This forgiving climate will eventually trickle down through the staff's relationships with others so that the church will begin to feel like an accepting, forgiving place. Since pastors often carry pains of hurt, betrayal, and resentment, the pastor will be encouraged to work through the forgiveness process him- or herself. In effect, he or she will become a "product" of the process.

Associate ministers

The associate ministers are the second target of the forgiveness education program. These staff members work closely with the senior pastor and with lay volunteers who carry out the daily ministry of the church. As such, these staff members can be key players in the success of the forgiveness program. Furthermore, many forgiveness issues arise in daily church life between the senior and associate pastors and the associates and the lay volunteers when these people are not working collaboratively. Therefore, collaboration and the practice of forgiveness is essential among these leaders. Like the senior pastor, the associate ministers will be educated in the forgiveness process and encouraged to walk through the forgiveness journey themselves before they lead others through it.

Music minister. The music minister works closely with instrumentalists and vocalists in the production of music for worship services. Forgiveness has immensely close ties to worship, in such practices as the sacraments of communion and baptism, the Lord's Prayer, and confession and the assurance of pardon. The music minister will be encouraged to implement

songs into the church's repertoire that link with these elements of worship and that deal with themes of forgiveness, grace, mercy, confession, and repentance. Regardless of worship structure (i.e., liturgical or "free"), worship should be integrated in a way that highlights the place of forgiveness in the actions of the worshiping church. The music minister should meditate on the messages of these songs and help the vocalists and instrumentalists internalize these messages so that they begin to embody them. As these singers embody the message, the congregation may follow. The music minister will be encouraged to see his or her choirs and ensembles as mini forgiving communities.

Youth minister. The youth minister works with the volunteers who carry out ministry to students in the church, and, to a certain extent, does this ministry him- or herself. The youth minister's responsibilities will be twofold. First, he or she will establish a forgiving atmosphere among the volunteers who work with youth. He or she will teach the volunteers about forgiveness and help them journey through the process themselves. This can be done in the context of a one-day seminar or leader training period. Second, the youth minister will implement forgiveness education into the larger religious education of the young people. For example, every year, fifteen consecutive developmentally-appropriate lessons might be dedicated to the theme of forgiveness in each age group: middle school, high school, and college/career. These lessons should begin and end in unison with the children's ministry.

Children's minister. The children's minister works with the volunteers who carry out ministry to children from birth through elementary school, and, to a certain extent, does this ministry him- or herself. Much like the youth minister, the children's minister will establish a forgiving community among the children's ministry volunteers. Also like the youth minister, he or she will implement forgiveness education into the larger religious education of the children

with a similar fifteen-week, developmentally-appropriate, forgiveness curriculum held in unison with the youth ministry. Both the youth and children's curriculum will have exercises that involve parents and outside activities. Such curricula are already being tested in the schools of Belfast and Milwaukee's central city (Knutson & Enright, 2002). As an example, part of the first grade curriculum employs Dr. Seuss' *Horton Hears a Who*, in conjunction with Scripture, to teach the lesson that all people have inherent worth, regardless of size, age, ethnicity, etc. So far, Knutson & Enright (2002, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007) have developed curricula for first through fifth grades, with the sixth grade curriculum soon forthcoming.¹

Pastoral care. The director of pastoral care also serves a key role in the implementation of forgiveness education. Since the job of the pastoral care minister is to offer pastoral counseling and consultation with church members, it is essential for this person to receive thorough training in the forgiveness process. Of course, some cases must be referred to professional counselors, but many issues can be resolved with the help of pastoral counselors. The pastoral care professional can help people walk through the forgiveness process, and he or she can develop forgiveness support groups or care groups to facilitate forgiveness. We recommend that at least once a year there should be a ten-week forgiveness group for people who wish to work through their resentment in the context of a caring community. Caution with respect to confidentiality must be exercised here, however, since the issues that are revealed in such a group could become fodder for church gossip. Two books that could serve as a guide to the journey through forgiveness include Worthington's (2003) *Forgiving and Reconciling: Bridges to Wholeness and Hope*, a work that walks the reader through the REACH model of forgiveness, or Enright's (2001) *Forgiveness is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving*

¹ To obtain a curriculum guide, please contact the Director, International Forgiveness Institute, Inc. at director@forgiveness-institute.org.

Anger and Restoring Hope, a manual that guides the injured person through Enright's process model of forgiveness.

Adult education/small group coordinator. The adult education/small group coordinator has the important job of overseeing the adult education or connection groups. In conjunction with the senior pastor, this person implements a coherent plan of Christian education for the adults in the congregation. As such, this individual is another key player in the forgiveness education program. In some respects, this area will be perhaps the most difficult area in which to implement forgiveness education, especially in a church that contains a wide variety of groups with different interests and needs. At the same time, this area could be the most influential because of its far-reaching impact. The small group coordinator might be encouraged to work with the volunteers to create a forgiving community among the leaders. This can be done first with a three-hour introduction to forgiveness seminar and then in monthly leaders' meetings. The small group coordinator can then work with each individual group leader to assess how forgiveness education could be implemented in the context of each group. Following are some areas that could be especially relevant.

A premarital group could go through the forgiveness program in a one-day seminar or in a 5-10 week group that meets once a week. The church could offer a marital enrichment retreat that focuses on the topic of forgiveness. Spouses could work on family-of-origin issues and then on couple issues. The focus could also be on prevention, i.e., developing a forgiving relationship that extends to their children. In addition to the forgiveness emphasis, an important related topic could be preventing injustice in marriage. Aside from general forgiveness groups, and depending on the size of the church, forgiveness groups could be offered for special populations, like people

who have recently lost jobs, experienced (or experiencing) divorce or breakup, are dealing with substance abuse, or facing an impending death.

In the other small groups (Bible studies, etc.), five studies each year could deal with the topic of forgiveness. In this way, every adult who attends the church, regardless of where he or she fits in the adult education programming, will encounter forgiveness education in one form or another. Forgiveness education will be especially salient for certain populations, but everyone may benefit from at least some exposure to the topic. Further, and as appropriate, if the adults are encouraged to bring their learning about forgiveness to the children, then the theme of The Forgiving Community as being at the service of the children may be realized. Such encouragement may take the form of new teachers joining the ranks of the Sunday school teachers, bringing instruction directly into one's own home, and similar strategies.

Last, some groups might choose to participate in a book study about forgiveness or forgiveness-related topics. One of the most promising works for this purpose might be Volf's (2006) *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, which was the Archbishop of Canterbury's choice as the official 2006 Lenten book.² Many other books are available for such a group including Holeman (2004), Shults & Sandage (2003), Kendall (2002), Stanley (2002), Tutu (1999), Smedes (1997) and Jones (1995).

Lay Volunteers

Lay volunteers are often in the front lines of ministry. They work directly with people as small group leaders, helpers, Sunday school teachers, nursery workers, and in a variety of other positions. As a result, this group is important in the forgiveness education program. With this group, one of two things can be done. First, all volunteers, regardless of their areas of service,

² We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing us toward this most excellent work, as well as several other book club possibilities.

could go through a forgiveness education seminar prior to the start of a new volunteer cycle. A second—and perhaps more beneficial—strategy would be to break up the volunteers into their prospective ministries (youth, children, music, adult, and so forth) and have them journey through the forgiveness process together. Again, the multiple forgiving communities fostered by such an approach may generate a culture change and paradigm shift in the larger congregation. Initiating the change in multiple contexts should reinforce the message that forgiveness is a healthy choice that will strengthen the community and make the church a more inviting place for those seeking grace and love.

Singles

Ministry to single persons is an important, and sometimes overlooked, component of church ministry. Until a certain age (usually around 25), often singles are part of student ministries. After that, however, they can become lost amid the focus on family ministry. Singles have distinct developmental needs, and, as such, will benefit from a focus on relevant issues. Some singles might benefit from discussions about forgiveness in the context of break-ups or rejection in the realm of romantic relationships. Others, who have divorced, will perhaps benefit from divorce groups. Older single adults might gain from topics centering on forgiveness in family relationships and aging. Developing a forgiving community of singles might look different depending on the developmental needs of each age group, and is equally important to the forgiveness programs for other populations in the church.

Couples and Families

A church is only as healthy as its families. Couples and families should be primary targets of The Forgiving Community. For those considering marriage, the church might offer forgiveness education as part of the premarital counseling program. If couples can integrate

forgiving principles into their relationship and deal with some family-of-origin issues before they marry, they may avoid many potentially painful experiences later on. For couples with toddlers, we recommend that the church offer a seminar about teaching forgiveness-related virtues to their children so that children have a foundation on which a more developed view of forgiveness can be built in subsequent years. Picture books on forgiveness are available for this purpose (e.g., Enright, 2004). We recommend similar seminars for parents of elementary, middle, and high school students. In this way, parents can help their children mature in their understanding of forgiveness and ability to forgive in developmentally-appropriate ways. They can develop a forgiving family unit that will be a building block in the forgiving church community.

In addition to parental education, we recommend specifically the targeting of children and youth within The Forgiving Community. As outlined above, fifteen weeks each year could be devoted to forgiveness education. One example of curriculum (Knutson & Enright, 2002) covers Bible passages and includes relevant learning activities and parent-child discussions and activities. Children and youth can hear forgiveness messages from the pastor, Sunday school teachers/small group leaders, parents, and (if they attend the church-sponsored school), their school teachers. The reinforcement provided by these various systems should foster attitudes and traits of forgiveness.

Couple-specific programs can follow the process of granting and receiving forgiveness outlined above (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1996), or other couple-specific forgiveness interventions like Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder (2004), DiBlasio (2003), Worthington (1998), or Hargrave & Sells (1997), which are outlined in a review by Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder (2005).

The Individual

As outlined above, there can be several opportunities for forgiveness education at the individual level. This includes both general Bible studies and other small groups that can contain units on forgiveness and content-specific forgiveness groups that target general hurts or specific hurts such as divorce, job loss, pregnancy terminations, substance abuse, or impending death. Intervention at the individual level is perhaps most salient when restoration of the broken relationship is not the goal of the intervention (in cases when the offending person is unwilling to reconcile, no longer living, or poses a threat to the victim)—what Malcolm, Warwar, & Greenberg (2005) refer to as *unilateral forgiveness*.

Sustainability

The rapid rise of parachurch organizations and publishing agencies in the late twentieth century has produced a consumerist mentality on the part of many church leaders when it comes to church programming for adults, youth, and children. Church leaders have hundreds of different curricula at their disposal, and many want “cutting-edge” materials for their congregations. As a result, some churches tend to pass from fad to fad in the search for the magical curriculum that will make their church healthy, vibrant, and inviting. Surely, many of these curricula make a positive difference in the life of the congregation. Whether the quest for change stems from the effectiveness of a given curriculum, motivating instructional staff to seek even newer material, or from the natural human attraction to novelty, however, is another issue. Certainly some curricula, because of the content, produce good results. Even these, however, are often discarded after one use in favor of the next hot program. For forgiveness education to make a lasting impact on the congregation and the world, it must be sustained over time. It cannot be used for one or two years and then cast aside like the most recent program. Recent forgiveness

meta-analyses bear out this point: both Baskin & Enright (2004) and Wade et al. (2005) report that longer interventions result in larger effect sizes.

Ultimately, character stems from repeated actions, which stem from repeated decisions, which stem from repeated reminders of values and virtues. Thus, in the forgiveness realm, it is the consistent reminder of the moral virtue of forgiveness (and opportunities to exercise that virtue) that leads to repeated forgiving actions that lead to a forgiving character, which is the goal of the forgiveness education program. The challenge, then, is for the forgiveness education program to be incorporated in a meaningful way into the church calendar each year.

In addition to incorporating forgiveness into small groups and educational opportunities, pastors and church leaders should be encouraged to designate a certain time of each year to emphasize the virtue of forgiveness. For many traditions, the Lenten season, with its emphasis on repentance and forgiveness, affords such an opportunity. Perhaps the church could invite a special speaker each year at that time to address the issue of forgiveness. Maybe this time of year would be apt for offering forgiveness retreats or seminars. An annual focus on forgiveness may create in parishioners the expectation that they will hear about, practice, and experience forgiveness during that time. In this way, people will look forward to at least a yearly experience of forgiveness. To keep the message fresh and powerful, pastors and the other educators could incorporate video clips, dramas, artwork (e.g., religious paintings) and other illustrations in their instruction about forgiveness. Churches could arrange special times where they corporately ask for forgiveness from others (perhaps others who have been hurt by the church as a whole, those of other religions, races, and so forth). Many different forms can be used to carry out the function of maintaining a Forgiving Community. Incorporating multi-sensory experiences of forgiveness, rather than focusing on reasoning alone, will lead to longer lasting behavior and

character change, and help to foster a Forgiving Community. Church leaders should be encouraged to be creative in the implementation of the forgiveness program for long-term positive results.

The psychological, physical, and social benefits of forgiveness outlined in the beginning of this article are thought-provoking reasons to work toward making forgiveness a well-known and well-used method of dealing with injustice and its resultant negative impact. Those benefits, coupled with the biblical ideal of forgiveness in response to conflict and injury, lead one to seek out a coherently integrated system, reaching across ecological contexts, designed to teach people how to forgive one another. If a major focus is the children, then developmentally more subtle and challenging curricula should be created across the age spectrum. A significant challenge is to provide effective forgiveness education so that, by the end of high school, the youth are theologically, philosophically, and psychologically sophisticated forgivers. Those who then remain in the congregation as adults will have an expertise to pass on their knowledge of and enthusiasm about forgiveness to the next generation. To be sure, developing a model of the Church as Forgiving Community is only one small—albeit important—step in the process of creating a societal culture of forgiveness. At the same time, as the Church reasserts its rightful role as facilitator and dispenser of interpersonal (and even intergroup) forgiveness, change in other aspects of society will likely follow.

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