Faith in Family Life

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Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith [and] prayer.

IN *LECTURES ON FAITH*, JOSEPH SMITH DEFINED FAITH not only as belief but as "the principle of action in all intelligent beings" (1835/1985, p. 6). He further emphasized in the fourth article of faith that the first principle of the gospel is "faith in the Lord Jesus Christ." In "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," faith (as a principle of action and power) leads the list of nine foundational principles upon which "successful marriages and families are established and maintained" (¶ 7). Prayer is the second foundational principle mentioned in the proclamation and is defined, in part, in the LDS Bible Dictionary as "the process by which the will of the father and the will of the child are brought into correspondence with each other" (752–753). Such prayer is, like faith, a principle of action.

Our central purpose in this chapter is to examine the connection between faith and successful marriages and families, based on the social science record. As part of this examination, we briefly explore a central element of faith—prayer—and its connections to successful marriages and families. The chapter on prayer (chapter 19, this volume) explores this important principle in greater depth. Readers should be aware that it is difficult, perhaps impossible, for social science to "prove" that faith "causes" stronger marriages or other family outcomes. It is reasonable to conclude, for example, that persons in a healthy marriage are more likely to want to attend church together than a couple who are facing divorce. So, does faith influence family or does family influence faith? The answer is almost certainly both—but in terms of social science, the best we can usually do is to discover and examine correlations, or relationships, between ideas

such as faith and the quality of family life. This chapter, then, is not infallible proof, but a series of hints and connections that work together to create a sketch that becomes both clearer and more complex as our study of the record progresses—not unlike faith itself. We now turn to the social scientific record on faith.

The broader record includes more than 800 studies that examine the connections between different aspects of faith and individual—not couple or family—physical and mental health (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001). Among these, perhaps the most striking finding was the discovery of a 7.6-year difference in longevity among persons who attended worship services more than once a week compared with non-attendees—a figure that nearly doubled to 13.7 years among African Americans (Hummer, Rogers, Nam, & Ellison, 1999). However, as interesting as these and several other individual-level findings are, our focus in this chapter is on marriages and families. Employing a three-dimensional framework of *religious community, religious practices*, and *religious beliefs,* we now address the research-based connection between faith and family.

Dimension One: Religious Community and Family

There's an old [African] adage, "It takes a village to raise a child." Our congregation is the [village] that we have chosen to focus our energies on. . . . When we work with people, it helps us to keep our own struggles in a better perspective and they don't become a burden, just a part of life. . . .

[Also], I personally believe that people are at their happiest when they're serving others. . . . Service in the Church . . . is based on doing things for other people, [going] outside yourself.

—William, Latter-day Saint father of six (Marks, 2002)

The dimension of religious community encompasses and includes "support, involvement, and relationships grounded in a congregation or less formal religious group" (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004, p. 413). We have mentioned the increase in life expectancy among persons who attend worship services more than once a week. We now turn to the question of whether those who faithfully attend also have higher marital stability and quality.

Religious community and marital fidelity. One recent study reported "that with the exception of two religious groups (nontraditional conservatives and non-Christian faiths), holding any religious affiliation is associated with reduced odds of marital infidelity compared to those with no religious affiliation" (Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat, & Gore, 2007, p. 1571). However, the same study also noted substantial denominational variation in the odds of marital fidelity, particularly among those who strongly affiliate with their religious group. In another study of 1,439 currently married participants, Atkins and Kessel (2008) concluded that church attendance was significantly related to issues of fidelity and infidelity. However, measures of faith, nearness to God, prayer, and other religious attributes were not. In fact, data indicated that individuals who had reported "high religious importance" but low church attendance were more likely to have had an affair than those in many other categories. In sum, going to church together was what mattered, not more abstract reports regarding faith, importance of religion, or nearness to God. In an even larger previous study on fidelity involving approximately 3,000 couples, the same lead researcher measured marital satisfaction, opportunities of spouses to interact with other men and women (such as in workplaces), age at first marriage, previous divorces, socioeconomic background, and religious affiliation and attendance (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001). This study also found that religious involvement appears to protect against infidelity, but only among those who were reportedly satisfied in their marital relationship.

Atkins and colleagues (2001) concluded, "Couples who are not happy in their relationship might believe that participating in organized religious activities can help safeguard their marriages." Based on their study, however, "only people who were in happy marriages and were involved in frequent religious activities were less likely to engage in infidelity" (p. 747). It seems that the combination of marital satisfaction and shared religious involvement may work together to provide an effective preventive maintenance program for marital fidelity.

Religious community and avoidance of pornography, violence, and conflict. A recent study addressed Internet pornography, a growing concern because of its negative effects on the marital relationship and family ties, and found that greater church attendance was related to lower rates of pornography use (Stack, Wasserman, & Kern, 2004). Similarly, Ellison, Bartkowski, and Anderson (1999) found that regular attendance at religious services was related to lower rates of domestic violence for men and women. However, rates of abuse tend to escalate in situations in which "the men attend religious services much more often than their wives or partners" (p. 98). Indeed, differences in religious involvement seem to portend higher rates of both marital conflict and failure. A remarried mother in a recent interview-based study reflected:

I've been married before, and my first husband was not saved, and he wasn't interested. That goes back to what the Lord said about being equally yoked. I was at the church, but there was not a lot of [support] there [from him], because as a nonbeliever he thought I was giving too much time. . . . We weren't serving together, we weren't going together, and we would always feel some type of rift (Marks, Dollahite, & Baumgartner, 2010, p. 446).

While the above example focuses on marriage, another remarried mother from the same study discussed a parental hardship of being "unequally yoked."

[If a faith is shared, then children] see that the parents are doing it [going to church] . . . but if a house has a parent that's *not* going . . . that causes the child to have a misunderstanding of what you're really supposed to do. So it's really beneficial . . . to be worshiping in the same church. The

benefits . . . carry through . . . in the lives of your children (Author Data).

Consistent with the two preceding reflections, Curtis and Ellison (2002) found—based on national data from 2,945 first-time married couples—that not only are religious differences linked with increased religion-oriented disputes, but there also appears to be something of a spillover effect. When men attend church with their wives there are fewer disputes, not only over faith, but also over housework, money, how time is spent, and sex. Conversely, significant religious differences among spouses have also been linked to increased risk of violence and contention (Ellison et al., 1999). In summary, high levels of religious involvement—when dissimilar or unshared—may contribute to instability and volatility instead of marital satisfaction, stability, and durability.

Religious community and the importance of being "equally yoked." Differences in religious attendance also relate to increased conflict around parenting, as well as other domains of life. Research conducted by Bartkowski, Xu, and Levin (2008) explored the religious effects over time on psychological and social development and adjustment of children during early childhood and found that parental, couple, and familial religious involvement were all linked with more positive behavioral outcomes in children. However, these same researchers also report that religion often seems to undermine child development when it is a source of conflict in families (Bartkowski et al., 2008). Phrased differently, faith involvement can be a unifying blessing or a contentious curse. It has been nearly 30 years since Bahr's (1981) published finding that "same-faith marriages are much more stable than interfaith marriages" (p. 260)—but it is a finding that has been convincingly corroborated. Indeed, religious commitments that reportedly help bind marriages when shared often produce tension and conflict when these commitments are unshared. This is especially true of faiths that require significant sacrifices of time and money. Sociologists Lehrer and Chiswick (1993) found, based on five-year findings, that Latter-day Saint interfaith marriages were more than three times as likely to end in divorce as LDS-to-LDS marriages. LDS-to-LDS marriages were classified by the researchers as "remarkably stable" (13 percent dissolution rate), while LDS-to-non-LDS marriages had an "extremely high" rate of dissolution

(40 percent) during the five-year time frame of the study. Not only was the increase in the divorce rate from same-faith to interfaith marriages higher among the Latter-day Saint sample than that of any other faith, but no other faith was even close. The 27-point increase was double or nearly double that of most faiths. Why?

Perhaps part of the explanation is found in the significant demands placed on faithful Latter-day Saints. Research by Carroll and colleagues (2000) has found that "highly religious Latter-day Saints are less likely to engage in pre-marital sex, are more likely to support a traditional division of labor in marriage, [and] are more likely to desire a large family" (p. 202). These ideals are all proclamation-centered but they also tend to be (from a non-LDS perspective) expensive. They "cost" significant time, discipline, energy, sacrifice, status, money, and an array of opportunity costs (Marks, Dollahite, & Dew, 2009). Indeed, when a spouse is called to serve in a time-intensive Church position, there can be significant costs to the family. The demands of fully consecrated commitment to the LDS Church are best borne by married couples who are equally yoked and covenanted. By extension, the greatest blessings the faith has to offer in time and eternity are to be enjoyed by married couples who have jointly made and kept covenants of consecration.

Religious community and mothering. We now shift from a marital to a parental focus. Perhaps the first key research finding relative to religious community and the parent–child relationship is that women who are involved in a faith community (as measured by reported attendance) are significantly more likely to have children. Pearce's (2002) work emphasizes a mutual relationship in the religiosity–childbearing connection—namely, that the importance of religion in a woman's life appears to shape childbearing attitudes and behaviors, and that family situation (such as the presence of children) also seems to influence religiosity. This finding holds for some men as well (Palkovitz, 2002). The above findings were both confirmed and extended in work by Abma and Martinez (2006) who, based on a national sample of 4,032 women, ages 35 to 44, concluded that being voluntarily childless is linked with lower levels of religious involvement at every survey point beginning in 1982.

Research indicates that religious involvement and engagement influence family-related decisions (like the type of marriage, timing of marriage, and fertility),

and that family decisions (for example, divorce or voluntary childlessness) can negatively influence religious involvement. Further, family structure is associated with the level of benefits families receive from the religious community when they are religiously involved. Namely, unwed, divorced, and separated mothers tend to receive less social support from their faith communities than do widows (Sorenson, Grindstaff, & Turner, 1995). Findings like these contextualize Dollahite and colleagues' (2004) conclusion that a "key challenge for [many] American churches in the 21st century will be to find a balance between supporting the standard of marriage-based families that is idealized . . . [while] addressing the pluralistic family realities that confront them" (p. 414). This balance remains an especially important one in Latter-day Saint congregations due to "a veritable [Latter-day Saint] 'theology of the family'" (Jarvis, 2000, p. 245)—a theology that presents a challenge to those whose family structure does not meet the temple-marriage-based ideal, as well as a high standard for those whose family processes and interactions fall short of the celestial ideal—in other words, all of us.

Religious community and fathering. Nock's (1998) work has emphasized that a man is known and respected in his religious community for filling his responsibilities, including his responsibilities to his children. A central responsibility-related wrestle for many fathers is maintaining a balance between work and home life (Palkovitz, 2002), and recent work indicates that religious involvement seems to factor into these decisions for many men. Ammons and Edgell (2007) note, "Work–family strategies . . . [often involve] making sacrifices, hard choices, or accommodations . . . [and] religious involvement and religious subculture [often] shape [pro-family] trade-offs" (p. 794). This high priority of fatherhood is reflected by the following father:

> Fatherhood is the greatest thing I could attain. If I were president of the United States, if I were CEO of a major corporation—that would end. The time would come that I would be voted out of office or I would resign and retire. Yet I will *always* be the father of my children (Marks & Palkovitz, 2007, p. 209).

This ideal is reflected in an extensive review of literature by Dollahite and Thatcher (2007), who summarized

that a man with serious religious commitment and involvement, on average, is more likely than one with little or no religious involvement to:

- remain sexually chaste before marriage and faithful to his marriage vows and thus not endanger his wife and children with sexually transmitted diseases nor father a child out of wedlock;
- be and remain committed to marriage and children even during times of difficulty and thus not bring the trials and challenges of divorce upon his wife and children;
- be highly involved in the lives of his children and parent with higher degrees of emotional warmth;
- practice kindness and mercy in his relationship with his children and be less likely to abuse his children;
- remain involved with his children in the face of challenging circumstances such as dissolution of marriage or disability of a child;
- avoid practices that harm family relationships such as substance abuse, crime, violence, child abuse, pornography, gambling, and idleness (p. 431).

Dollahite and Thatcher concluded that "based on the evidence of the research we [have] cited, it may be that [religious involvement] provides the strongest force available to reverse the powerful trends that are breaking fathers and children apart" (p. 431).

Having discussed how shared involvement in a religious community links with marital, familial, and parental outcomes, we turn to the dimension of religious practices.

Dimension Two: Religious Practices and Family

Praying together as a family and reading the scriptures . . . together is probably the best [thing we do to pull us toward Heavenly Father and each other]. . . . It feels right. It feels good. . . . I'm grateful to . . . be able to do that. If my family that I grew up with ever would have done that . . . it would have been a fond memory that I would have held, but we never did. [Our family now] should pray more, but when we kneel together and hold hands as a family, it brings the Spirit in[to our home]

and makes the children feel right . . . and [teaches them] that this is what they need to do with their families—and I'm sure they'll remember it. It's special (Marks, 2002, p. 81).

—Shana, Latter-day Saint mother

Religious practices are "outward, observable expressions of faith such as prayer, scripture study, rituals, traditions, or less overtly sacred practice or abstinence that is religiously grounded" (Dollahite et al., 2004, p. 413). This definition captures both the proscriptions (or "thou shalt nots") and prescriptions (or "thou shalts") of religious practice.

The religious practice of prayer in marriage. Over the past 15 years, prayer has received increased attention in connection with marriage. A qualitative study by Butler and colleagues (1998) produced several findings that were substantiated and supported in a quantitative follow-up study with 217 religious spouses (Butler, Stout, & Gardner, 2002). These findings included participants' statements of belief that prayer enhanced experiences of emotional validation; promoted accountability toward deity; de-escalated negative interactions, contempt, hostility, and emotional reactivity; enhanced relationship behavior; facilitated partner empathy; increased self-change focus; encouraged reconciliation and problem-solving; and promoted a sense of guidance from God (Butler et al., 2002).

Although several positive outcomes have been associated with prayer, certain types of accusative or blaming prayer can also be "red flags" that reflect negative coping (Pargament et al., 1998). One recent study also indicated that one-sided prayer attempts indicate that "imbalances of anxiety, distress, and/or power may exist in a couple relationship [that] need to be addressed" (Gardner, Butler, & Seedall, 2008, p. 163). There can be diametric differences between a prayer where a marital couple seeks shared guidance from God throughout a difficulty (Butler et al., 2002), compared with blaming, resentment-filled prayer. Framed within a marital context, praying to God and stating "If you want my marriage to work, help my spouse to not be such an aggravating jerk" is far less active and facilitative than praying to Him and pleading, "Please soften our hearts and help us to be more patient and understanding with each other" (Marks, 2008, p. 682). Negatively focused prayer is associated with ill, not good. Conversely, humble, charity-filled, true prayer often helps with conflict resolution and promotes a sense of relational responsibility (Butler et al., 2002). A Christian mother in a recent qualitative study explained:

We have disagreements [in our marriage], we have things we don't see the same sometimes, and faith is a source of help. We can pray about things together and the Lord can help us work things out. Sometimes one person has to give in and accept the other person's point of view [and] it helps to be able to pray about things. The Lord, He's the best counselor you could ever have (Dollahite & Marks, 2009, p. 381).

The religious practice of family rituals. While prayer is reportedly helpful for the above couple and others like them, it is not the only influential religious practice. Fiese and Tomcho's (2001) work with a primarily Catholic sample linked shared, meaningful religious holiday rituals with higher levels of marital satisfaction. Lee, Rice, and Gillespie (1997) similarly linked home-based family worship with higher marital satisfaction. Even so, the study by Lee and colleagues also found that, in some cases, rigid, compulsory family worship was more detrimental for children than no family worship at all.

Research on Jewish families indicates that certain rituals, including the celebration of the Sabbath (for example, the lighting of the candles, the *Shabbat* meal, and sacred prayers and blessings), can serve as family-strengthening practices (Kaufman, 1993). Such rituals are often intended to prompt a deliberate turning from the mundane or even profane to the sacred (Eliade, 1959), which includes a renewal of relationships with spouse and children. A Jewish mother of two in one study explained:

When we take the time out, when we light the [Sabbath] candles Friday night, that's a time that I feel really close to (my children). . . . I always say a prayer of thanks for my children. . . . When we sit across the table from each other, my husband and I, and the Sabbath candles are lit, and I see the kids, there is something I get from that that is *so deep*. It's just a feeling that [all is right in the world] . . . it doesn't matter what else is going on. Right in that circle . . . it's awe-inspiring (Dollahite & Marks, 2009, p. 381, italics added).

Recent qualitative work examining devout Christian, Jewish, and Muslim families has revealed that these Abrahamic faiths include practices that reportedly promote a sense of familial closeness with each other and with God (Dollahite & Marks, 2009). Such practices include saying grace before meals for Protestants, offering novenas (prayers centered on gratitude) for Catholics, family home evening for Latter-day Saints, the *Shabbat* meal and accompanying rituals for Jewish families, and the Ramadan fast for Muslims. In most cases, these rituals and practices were reportedly meaningful (and sometimes deeply or transcendently so) for both fathers and mothers.

Religious practices and the parent–child bond. Rituals can be powerful, but sometimes simple conversation can be salient as well. Boyatzis and Janicki's (2003) study based on surveys and diaries found that most Christian mothers in their study frequently engaged in discussions with their children regarding matters of faith—a practice that has been reported to be influential, even years later in children's lives (Wuthnow, 1999). Pearce and Axinn (1998) found that "various dimensions of family religious life [including religious practices] have *positive* enduring effects on mothers' and children's perceptions of the quality of the mother–child relationship" (p. 810). Kind, loving behavior by parents seems to facilitate the ability of a child to conceive of (and believe in) a loving God, while hostile parental practices seem to dispel a child's faith in a benevolent supreme being (Dollahite, 1998). A positive illustration of this principle was offered by a Christian mother, who said of her husband:

> He loves the Lord and wants to do what pleases Him [by] modeling what he sees as being valuable for the kids to see. . . . A lot of our understanding of who God is comes through fathers, because God is presented as a father in the Bible. If a kid grows up having a father who is loving and kind and supportive and strong . . . I think it is easier for them to understand God and who He is (Marks & Dollahite, 2007, p. 340).

Fathers were the primary focus of early research on children's God images, but mothers are now studied as well, with some research indicating that, in some respects, "parenting [practices] by mothers *more than [by] fathers*

predicts youths' images of God" (Hertel & Donahue, 1995, p. 196). On a related note, Brelsford and Mahoney's (2009) work, based on college students and their mothers, found that mutual disclosure and discussion about religion and spirituality is a good indicator of the quality of the mother–child relationship.

A related series of findings from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NYSR) show that the greatest evidence of religious practice and involvement influencing youth's lives for the better can be seen when comparing the lives of the most religious youth, the "devoted" (8 percent of American youth), with the lives of the average American youth (Smith & Denton, 2005). Devoted youth report that their religion is "very or extremely important in [their] everyday life" and that they feel "very or extremely close to God"; they pray, read scriptures more, and attend religious services more than other American teens (p. 220). In their family relationships, the devoted group of highly religious youth reported having the highest quality of parent–child relationships in every area studied, including levels of honesty, acceptance, and understanding; getting along; and feeling loved by and close to their parents. These findings seem to indicate a strong, two-way connection between religious practice and family relationships.

We began our discussion of the dimension of religious practices by defining them as engaging in the "thou shalts" and avoiding the "thou shalt nots." It seems significant to us that several studies on adolescent outcomes indicate that a central key to helping our children, youth, and young adults avoid dangerous "thou shalt nots" (like alcohol, drugs, and premarital sex) seems to be high levels of participation in the "thou shalts" of religious practice (Carroll et al., 2000; Chadwick & Top, 1998; Laird, Marrero, & Marks, 2009). On this note, based on his national study, Smith (2005) offered two overarching conclusions: (a) "highly religious teenagers appear to be doing much better in life than less religious teenagers" (p. 263); however, (b) "a modest amount of religion . . . does not appear to make a consistent difference in the lives of U.S. teenagers; . . . only the more serious religious teens" seem to benefit (p. 233). In addition to "serious religious" practice, a second recurring key in promoting a wide array of positive outcomes is the sharing of meaningful family time (Chadwick & Top, 1998; Doherty & Carlson, 2002). For Latter-day Saint families, these two keys of religious practice and

family unity can be synergistically integrated in family prayer, family home evening, and family scripture study.

We now turn from the dimension of religious practices to the third dimension of religious beliefs.

Dimension Three: Religious Beliefs and Family

There's something that . . . when as a family your hearts are pointed together toward the same thing, and it's God, then parenting and economics and space and food and disagreements and hassles and joys and celebrations and all that other stuff . . . it works different, it seems different, it feels different. . . . Our family is all oriented in the same way. Christ is king, He's the center, He's what it's all about. . . . Our faith informs our relationships and everything about us.

> —Joseph, non-denominational Christian father (Marks, 2003, p. 10)

As we begin our discussion of the third dimension of religious beliefs, we note its close relationship with the second dimension of religious practices—particularly in connection with marriage and family life. Myers (2006) summarized:

Research in the past 50 years routinely finds a positive association between a couple's religious beliefs and behaviors [practices] and the quality of their marriage. . . . The extent to which husbands and wives hold similar religious beliefs and participate jointly in religious practices . . . appears to be one of the stronger religious predictor[s] of marital quality (p. 292).

Myers's repeated emphasis on the combination of belief and practice is apt. Indeed, neither belief nor practice carries much meaning without the other's animating influence.

Religious beliefs include "personal, internal beliefs, framings, meanings, [and] perspectives," which can, and often do, influence family life (Dollahite et al., 2004, p. 413). Over the past two decades, religious belief has received more rigorous, balanced, and comprehensive treatment in connection with family relationships than ever before (Koenig et al., 2001; Marks, 2006). Polls

and surveys have indicated that 95 percent of all married couples and parents in the United States report a religious affiliation (Mahoney et al., 2001), and religion is "the single most important influence" in life for "a substantial minority" of Americans (Miller & Thoresen, 2003, p. 25). In this section we will not focus on the pervasiveness of religious belief but on the ways it seems to influence and be influenced by family life.

Religious beliefs and parenting. Studies indicate that mothers in more positive mother–child relationships are more likely to transmit their religious beliefs to their adolescent children (Bao, Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Conger, 1999), and that agreement between mothers and their children on religious issues protects against child depression (Miller, Warner, Wickramaratne, & Weissman, 1997). These studies mesh with an extensive review of 64 studies, 60 of which reported linkages between higher religious involvement and lower depression (Koenig et al., 2001). Parental mental health is often a significant benefit to children, who appear to reap secondary benefits. Benefits of mental health extend to (and perhaps from) healthy marriages as well (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

Research from the past decade or so has linked religious beliefs with higher levels of fathers' care for and commitment to children, as well as increased father involvement (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 1998; Wilcox, 2002). In a related study, King (2003) concluded,

The influence of religiousness [including religious beliefs] on father involvement is generally modest and should not be overstated. . . . Nevertheless, certain aspects of father involvement are more frequent among the more religious, including better quality relationships . . . and stronger feelings of obligation for contact with children (p. 392).

Qualitative work with fathers, including fathers of children with special needs, has underscored and supported this connection between religious belief and a sense of sacred obligation. One Latter-day Saint father, reflecting on his beliefs about fatherhood, stated, "I learned that I would die for this person. . . . We will be linked forever. [I know that] this child is my responsibility forever, to guide, to direct, and to nurture" (Dollahite, Marks, & Olson, 1998, p. 84). This connection between faith in God and the responsibility to care for a child

is, perhaps, never tested or strained more than when parents see their child struggling for his or her life. In an in-depth interview, a Latter-day Saint father named Tom shared the following experience surrounding his 6-year-old daughter Megan's bout with leukemia:

> We did our best to make sure we got through it [Megan's leukemia] well. We weren't going to say, "Why me?" and that is something I spent very little time on. I still wondered from time to time why she had to go through this, but I didn't spend any time being mad at God. I decided early on that we were going to tackle this with faith and determination, and we were going to make it. We were going to come out being in love with God and not hating Him (Dollahite, Marks, & Olson, 2002, p. 282).

However, as discussed earlier, beliefs need the embodiment of practices to become real. Tom was tested to not only believe, but to act. He went on to relate:

> I have just about spent my life caring for and nurturing Megan, when I wasn't at work. Maybe the hospital is the part we like to forget but can't. When her pain got to the point that she couldn't [get up to] go to the bathroom, I was the one that got her bedpans for her. She would only let me do it; I was the one that did that. . . . I would get the bedpan as best as I could under her bottom without hurting her. Moving the sheets hurt her. It was not a good thing. But she let me do that for her, and I was able to take care of her needs, and it helped me that I was the only one she'd let do it. . . . You wouldn't expect bedpan shuffling to be a wonderful memory, but it was. She trusted me to do my best job not to hurt her, and that was special to me that she let me do that (Dollahite et al., 1998, p. 79).

In terms of mortal life, Megan lost her fight with leukemia, but she and her family won their struggle to "come out being in love with God." Of the more than 200 total studies focused on both faith and mental health, roughly 80 percent indicate greater hope or optimism, greater well-being, a greater sense of purpose and meaning in life, lower depression, less anxiety and fear, and less negative coping among those who are religious (Koenig et al., 2001). These numbers and percentage points represent personal and family lives like Megan's and Tom's.

Religious beliefs and marriage. As we indicated at length earlier, statistical (and real-world) differences in marriage tend to emerge when we compare spouses who share religious involvement with those who do not. Indeed, religious beliefs can impact marriage at ideological levels as well, including the very definitions of marriage. After interviewing 57 highly religious couples, Dollahite and Lambert (2007) reported, "The most prevalent finding in these data was that religious involvement 'sanctified' marriage by giving marriage a sacred, spiritual, or religious character" (p. 294). A highly religious mother in another study similarly stated:

> "What God hath put together, let no man put asunder." I don't believe in divorce. . . . God has engrained my marriage in me so deeply. . . . [Some] women might say, "I don't care if he [my husband] is mad or not." Or "I don't care if I spend all the money up." But in my mind I'm thinking . . . I've got to get myself together and give [God and my husband] the honor of what this relationship means (Marks, 2002, p. 101).

Such views contrast sharply with the privatized and contractual view of marriage that family scholar and therapist Bill Doherty (2000) disparagingly refers to as "commitment-as-long-as . . . things are working out for me" (p. 21). Comparatively, quantitative research has shown connections between religious belief and involvement and higher marital satisfaction, stability, duration, and increased commitment and fidelity (Dollahite et al., 2004)—as well as a "greater likelihood of future marital happiness" (Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004, p. 622). A qualitative study that examined potential reasons these positive marital differences tend to emerge among the more highly religious reported "insider" explanations, including pro-marriage/anti-divorce beliefs, shared religious beliefs, and faith in God as a marital support (Marks, 2005).

Conclusion

An in-depth U.S. study with nearly 200 diverse highly religious families clearly indicates that these marriages and families have their share of challenges and

problems—including some that are related to or exacerbated by their faith involvement (Marks et al., 2009). Religious community, practices, and beliefs do not unite to form a panacea. With this said, the social science research base (including myriad quantitative and qualitative studies) indicates that marriage-based families in which the parents share religious involvement seem to fare comparatively well. Many of these families may be fortunate enough to avoid some of the forces that threaten and destroy marriages and families. Whether this is the case or not, the multi-dimensional resources of faith seem to serve as valuable coping resources that help families of faith to navigate the challenges that inevitably find us all. In the words of one African American father, "When you believe in God . . . yes, the boat still gets to rockin' but [God] says, 'In me you can weather the storm'" (Marks et al., 2008, p. 179). Social science evidence suggests that shared faith appears to be a principle upon which "successful marriages and families are established and maintained," even during the storm.

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