

# 326 YEARS OF SUCCESSFUL



*Striding arm and arm down the sidewalk of their home church are (from left) the Beales, Swanders, Knights, Hocketts, Millses, and Hadleys, who have enjoyed a total of over 326 years of successful marriage.*

PHOTOS BY AKE LUNDBERG

BY RICHARD J. FOSTER

IN MOST of the cultures of the earth throughout most of the generations of mankind, the elderly have been held in high esteem for their sound wisdom and vast experience. Often people would travel for miles to receive some word of counsel or guidance from a wise sage. Contemporary American culture has lost this sense of respect for the sagacity of the older members of our society.

The glorification of youth is at epidemic proportions today. The old are conveniently tucked away in rest homes and retirement villages. Of course we visit them occasionally because convention dictates that we should, but seldom do we come in order to learn from their vast store of experience.

We are the poorer for such nearsightedness. As one of the younger generation who has spent many hours among older folk, I have come to deeply value their insight and understanding. Therefore, when I determined to write on success in marriage, I realized at once that one of the most qualified groups of people on the subject is those who over many years have made successes of their marriages. I thought to myself, *Why not have these couples share with the rest of us what has been the secret of their success? Why not!*

*With a growing concern for successful marriages, the author asked himself, "Who knows better than the ones who have done it well—those who have been married a long time?" Richard Foster is special lecturer and writer in residence at Friends University since July 1979. This article was written while he was a member of the pastoral team at Newberg, Oregon, Friends Church, where he served since 1974. Reprinted by permission from October issue of Moody Monthly. Copyright 1979 by Moody Bible Institute of Chicago.*

This idea led me to the delightful experience of visiting in depth with six couples whose long and happy marriages bear testimony to the power and love of Jesus Christ. The combined years of marriage of these six couples totaled 326 years—an average of more than 54 years of marriage per couple. What a wealth of experience and accumulated wisdom from which to draw!

A good variety of occupations and backgrounds were represented in the couples interviewed. I first talked with Charles and Mildred Beals, an extremely active and alive pair. They have been married for 48 years, and Charles has spent virtually all of his adult life in pastoral work. The Beales have raised three children.

Ivan and May Hadley were next on my list and proved to be stimulating conversationalists as they shared about their 58 years of marriage together. Ivan spent most of his working years as an employee of the Postal Service, while May taught piano and accordion to energetic students. Together they have raised three boys.

Buel and Mabel Hockett raised a family of three on an Idaho farm. The majority of the 56 years of their marriage have been spent in farming. Lewis and Joy Swander have one child who is now the wife of a college president. Lewis has worn a host of hats throughout his active life—farmer, carpenter, pastor, custodian. . . . The Swanders have been married for 48 years.

Roy and Crittie Knight could well be considered the patriarchs of the group with 62 years of married life behind them. Roy continues to be extremely active in preaching, which he has done most of his life—as well as being a teacher, a mechanic, and a citrus farmer. Like several others, Roy and Crittie have raised three children. Dillon

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and Fern Mills have successfully raised two children during their 54 years of married life. Dillon has been actively involved in pastoral ministry for over 40 years.

As I visited with each of these six couples, I noticed almost immediately that certain principles of life surfaced repeatedly. Taken together they form a foundation that helps explain the rare and lovely combination of joy and permanence that is so characteristic of these marriages.

## Christ the head

Perhaps the most universal and emphatic principle set forth was the absolute necessity of having Jesus Christ as the center and focal point of marriage. Dillon Mills said, "If couples will commit their lives to Christ, they will have a center and a purpose . . . without a purpose, you become self-centered, and then little aggravations become big."

The Knights were not Christians when they were married. Commenting on their conversion, which occurred several years after marriage, they stated, "Our commitment to Christ made all the difference in the world as far as the happiness of our marriage was concerned." In this regard Lewis Swander noted, "Take a biblically based marriage and you're not going to grow apart."

To have Christ as the center of their life had many important practical consequences for each couple. For Buel and Mabel Hockett it meant that they had a common ground upon which to make decisions. "We were able to pray together about everything. We have had our share of reverses, but that is not what has stood out in our lives. For us, answered prayer is far more prominent than any difficulties we may have had."

There is something solid that enters a marriage when two people can hold the decisions in their lives reverently before the Lord. Lewis and Joy Swander note that "We are both committed to knowing and doing the Lord's will, and so every decision of our marriage had that as its focal point." When a couple has this center of reference, then everything—finances, employment, living location, civic involvements—has a basis for evaluation.

Charles Beals noted that by frequently bringing to mind the standard of Christ's love for the church as the paradigm for his relationship with his wife, he was encouraged to be more sensitive to his wife's needs. Several others noted the crucial importance of being repeatedly reminded of that standard. To do so eliminates all sense of a power struggle in the relationship. The motivating desire is to meet the needs of the other person.

The Hadleys felt the fact that both of them were raised in a Christian home gave them a solid foundation for marriage. "We were able to blend our personalities from a Christian basis," notes May.

Every couple noted the importance of a family altar. The approaches were varied, but the conviction regarding

its necessity remained the same. Mabel Hockett put it this way, "Our children never went to school without a hot breakfast and prayer afterwards." Was there any problem of children who resented such activities? This seemed to be at a minimum, no doubt mainly due to the creative energies of parents who sought to make the time attractive and interesting.

Ivan and May Hadley, whose three boys have each established solid Christian homes, said, "Our boys felt it an honor to take part. It gave us a sense of stability, of togetherness."

Lewis Swander shared how knowing Christ as the head of their marriage affected their reading habits. "We have taken seriously the idea of Brother Lawrence's little book, *Practicing the Presence of God*. Therefore, we have determined never to have any kind of literature in our home that would go against that purpose. We like books, but we want them to be of the highest quality!"

## Divorce

Certainly an important factor in the stability of these marriages is the universal sense that their vow, "till death do us part" is irrevocable. May Hadley notes cryptically, "We crossed the word 'divorce' out of our dictionary!" There was no sense that if things got rough divorce was a way out of the problem. Each felt that trial marriage was simply not an option for a Christian.

The concern for the permanence of marriage was buttressed by an appeal to honest speech. The words that one speaks are taken with utter seriousness among these couples. If a promise is made for life, it is to be kept. The Apostle James meant it when he said, "Let your yes be yes and your no be no." (James 5:12 RSV) There was a deep concern that Christians today do not take seriously enough the words that they say.

Charles and Mildred Beals expressed a deep concern that Christians deal with any potential cause for divorce before marriage occurs. "People need a good solid basis for marriage, and love alone is not a sufficient base. Couples need to be in agreement and unity upon several basic areas if they are serious about living together for life." Romantic love alone is not an adequate reason for marriage. There must come to a couple a unity of philosophy and purpose in life. There needs to be a sense of covenant and commitment that is above the moment.

Several expressed the importance of an adequate time of preparation to ensure a long and happy marriage. Dillon Mills stressed, "I did not want to sweep any woman off her feet. I wanted to be absolutely sure that she loved me as much as I loved her. No fleeting romantic love for us!" In a word of counsel to young couples, Ivan Hadley noted, "Don't get in too big a hurry!"

## Dealing with differences

We must not get the impression that everything has been sweetness and light between these couples. Like any, they have had their share of differences and difficulties. The key seemed to be the commitment to work through their differences rather than giving up on each other.

Lewis and Joy Swander shared very candidly about their different personalities and how that has affected their relationship. Lewis commented, "Joy is more the optimist, I the pessimist; I have to see it before I believe it; she always believes it before she sees it." Joy added, "Lewis has always been the stronger one—you can always depend on him."

In chorus Lewis and Joy announced, "We are both strong-willed and on some issues we start out with very different opinions. However, we are both committed to finding God's will in our marriage, and that makes all the difference in the world. With that commitment we can talk it through and pray it through until we come to agreement." In a word of counsel that could benefit many of us, Lewis and Joy are convinced that "people with very different personalities can still make a good marriage."

## Raising children

When asked if he had any advice on raising a family, Buel Hockett replied, "I used three different ways to raise three different kids and I wouldn't recommend any one of them!" There was universal agreement that each child is different and his individual needs must be taken into account. "Just love each one and be sensitive to his individual needs," noted Crittie Knight.

Having been a busy pastor all his life, Charles Beals observed, "I always felt I was as responsible for raising my own children as I did the children of the church." In the churches Charles pastored, he always sought to make it clear to the congregation that Friday night was a special family night in his home. "I tried to encourage committees of the church not to meet on that night, and when there were exceptions, as there sometimes were, we would make Saturday night our time together."

"Friday nights were great fun," added Mildred. "We would always have a special meal, then everyone would wash the dishes together, and then we would play some family game. At the end of the evening, we would have some special treat like popcorn or ice cream. The children loved it."

Noting the problem of sibling rivalry, Charles counseled, "I think it is a good idea for the father to take each individual child out regularly. In this way the child has the full attention of Dad and there is no competition between

them. The other children are happy to let their brother or sister go with Dad because they know that it will soon be their turn. An immense amount of good sharing can occur during those times."

## Practical wisdom

What are some practical helps in keeping marriages alive and healthy? Our counselors were hesitant to lay specific advice upon others ("advice is cheap," they said), but they were happy to share from their own experience what they have found meaningful. "Charles has found some way every day to say 'I love you,'" observed Mildred Beals. Charles countered, "The really wonderful thing about Mildred has been that she has never nagged me."

Both Hadleys and Knights felt that a good marriage is one that sets each other free to be the man or woman God intended. The more they let the liberty bells ring in their relationship, the more it has drawn them to each other. "We do not hinder or interfere with each other's professional interests," remarked Roy Knight. "Crittie is a great bookkeeper, and so in our marriage she does the bills—and does a good job."

On every wedding anniversary, Dillon and Fern Mills try to go back to the same spot on the Oregon coast where they spent their honeymoon. For them it is a way of renewing their love and commitment for each other.

Every couple I interviewed went through the Depression during the first years of their marriage, so money was in short supply. You can well imagine that careful budgeting was a common characteristic among them. Regardless of how difficult the times, however, early in their marriage each couple made a habit of tithing their income to the church.

Regarding debt May Hadley shared, "My father would loan us money when we were strapped, but he would say, 'Remember, that little thing called interest can make or break a man.' We tried to remember that and it has paid off. We cancel necessary debts as fast as possible, save and put the money to work somehow."

Swanders shared this word of practical advice: "Whenever we moved into a new community, we didn't wait to have someone invite us to go to church. We went the next Sunday."

The Millses counseled, "Always keep plenty of humor in your home. It will get you through a lot of rough spots." Lewis Swander added this note, "Enjoy each other as friends; play together and enjoy life."

Perhaps these six couples could best be described by a comment from Buel and Mabel Hockett, "We've never found anyone happier than we are!" May God grant that all of us can increasingly say that regarding our own marriages. EPR