

CHAPTER V

STRATEGIC PRACTICAL THEOLOGY: UNDERSTANDING WORK-FAMILY COMPLEXITIES FACED BY CHRISTIAN MEN IN SINGAPORE

5.1 An Opinion Poll: Attitudes of Married Christian Men in Singapore toward Work and Family

This opinion poll is not meant to be a comprehensive survey. Rather, it is aimed at getting an indication of some attitudes of Christian men toward their work and family. This exercise is carried out by using a questionnaire to test the validity of three assumptions (see Annexure IV). The three assumptions are: i) the Christian man's view of success is very much influenced by the achievement-oriented culture in Singapore; ii) the Christian man in Singapore cares much about his family, but he tends to do so materially rather than emotionally; iii) the Christian man in Singapore still holds to the traditional views of masculinity (see Chapter I, pp12-13). The target group is Christian men who are married and working, and have dependent children.

Two evangelical churches of different denominations were selected for this opinion poll because a high proportion of the men there can be categorised as 'average working men with young families'.¹ A total of 117 questionnaires were distributed and 60 completed ones were returned, giving a 51.3 % response.²

¹ These two churches will be identified as Church A and Church B. Church A has a congregation of about 300 worshippers while Church B has about 150.

² Of the 95 questionnaires distributed to Church A, 46 were returned. There were 14 responses from Church B out of the 22 questionnaires given.

5.1.1 Tabulation and interpretation of responses. Tables will be used to give a quick overview of the statistical data. Selected statistics will be given special mention and interpreted with reference to the three assumptions being tested.³

TABLE 12: Ages of Respondents

Age	No (%)
Below 25 yrs	0
25 - 35 yrs	6 (10%)
36 - 45 yrs	42 (70%)
46 - 55 yrs	12 (20%)
Above 55 yrs	0

An enormous 70 % of the respondents are between 36 to 45 years old. This is the stage of adulthood during which a man is either busy building on his career or reaching the peak of his career.

TABLE 13: Occupations of Respondents and Spouses

Occupation	Respondent No (%)	Spouse No (%)
Professional/Technical	28 (46.6 %)	7 (11.7%)
Business/Financial	6 (10%)	7 (11.7%)
Administrative/Managerial	10 (16.7 %)	9 (15 %)
Educational	5 (8.3 %)	2 (3.3 %)
Clerical	1 (1.7 %)	1 (1.7 %)
Others	10 (16.7 %)	34 (56.6 %)

Majority of the respondents are in professional/technical (46.6 %) and administrative/managerial (16.7 %) types of employment. This implies that they are generally earning good incomes and holding demanding jobs.

As for the spouses, many of them are classified under the 'Others' category (56.6 %). However, what is interesting is that most of the wives under this category are actually housewives/homemakers - 29 of them. This in turn computes into a high 48.3 % of the total number of respondents' spouses (that is, 29 out of 60).

³ The total number of respondents from both churches is 60.

barely in their teens - 48 % of them are between 7 to 12 years old.

The statistics do indicate that many of the respondents are reluctant to have more children. Though these men are generally well qualified with well-paying jobs, the demands of

the workplace as well as the desire for personal freedom seem to discourage them from having more children, even if their wives stay at home to do the caregiving. Also, the high percentage of children between 7 to 12 years old points to a great need for their fathers to be involved with them during these formative and impressionable years.

TABLE 16: Responses to Statements 1 to 4 in Questionnaire

Statement	Agree Strongly No (%)	Agree No (%)	Neutral No (%)	Dis-agree No (%)	Dis-agree Strongly No (%)
1. I compete with others so that I can stay ahead of them.	0	9 (15 %)	19 (31.7 %)	23 (38.3 %)	9 (15 %)
2. I compete with others so that I can bring out the best in myself.	6 (10 %)	25 (41.6 %)	16 (26.7 %)	9 (15 %)	4 (6.7 %)
3. I measure achievement in terms of getting the desired results.	8 (13.3 %)	35 (58.3 %)	5 (8.4 %)	8 (13.3 %)	4 (6.7 %)
4. I measure achievement in terms of experiencing the satisfaction of having tried hard.	25 (41.6 %)	24 (40 %)	5 (8.4 %)	6 (10 %)	0

These four statements have been designed to test the assumption that the Christian man's view of success is very much influenced by the achievement-oriented culture in Singapore.

Though majority of the respondents disagree that they compete to stay ahead (38.3 %), an almost equally high percentage of them choose to be 'neutral' (31.7 %). 41.6 % of them claim that they compete with the desire to bring out the best in themselves. This corresponds with the finding that most of them either agree strongly (41.6 %) or agree (40 %) that the satisfaction derived from knowing that they have tried hard is already achievement enough. However, what is really revealing is that 58.3 % of them qualify themselves by agreeing that getting the desired results determines their measure of achievement.

Summing up the whole picture, what may be implied is that there is this desire to work hard and to excel in one's undertakings. The motivation behind this spirit of diligence and excellence is not only to stretch and bring out one's potential, but also to get the desired results. These results are related to competing and winning over others though this motivation

may not be openly stated or verbally expressed. Thus, the findings do validate the assumption that the Christian man's view of success has been greatly influenced by the achievement-oriented culture in Singapore.

TABLE 17: Responses to Statements 5 to 8 in Questionnaire

Statement	Agree Strongly No (%)	Agree No (%)	Neutral No (%)	Dis-agree No (%)	Dis-agree Strongly No (%)
5. I work hard at providing well for my family so that they can be materially comfortable.	8 (13.3 %)	38 (63.3 %)	10 (16.7 %)	4 (6.7 %)	0
6. I work hard at relating closely with my family members.	20 (33.4 %)	32 (53.3 %)	8 (13.3 %)	0	0
7. I expect my family members to be understanding when work takes me away from them.	9 (15 %)	35 (58.3 %)	14 (23.4 %)	2 (3.3 %)	0
8. I enjoy doing things <i>with</i> my family more than doing things <i>for</i> them.	24 (40 %)	25 (41.6 %)	10 (16.7 %)	1 (1.7 %)	0

Statements 5 to 8 are designed to test the assumption that the Christian man in Singapore cares much about his family, but he tends to do so materially rather than emotionally.

There is a tremendous affirmation from the respondents in that majority of them support the importance of family intimacy. They either agree (53.3 %) or agree strongly (33.4 %) that they work hard at relating closely with family members. Besides, 41.6 % affirm that they enjoy doing things *with* their family while another 40 % even affirm this strongly. However, work is also important to the respondents, and 58.3 % of them have no qualms in agreeing that they expect their family members to be understanding when work takes them away from home. It does imply that these men view work life as having priority over home life. Another dominant figure is that 63.3 % of the respondents affirm that they work hard to provide well for their family materially.

The findings do reveal that family is important to many of the respondents. They try hard to improve the quality of their family life. However, they also value highly their work. In fact, work gets the nod when there is a clash of priority with the home. The reason can be

attributed to the fact that these men consider the provision of material comfort as their key role in responsibly improving the quality of their family life. Should they fail at work, financial hardship will creep in, and family togetherness and intimacy will only be an illusion. Thus, these men expect their family members to be understanding when they answer the demands from work because they are 'sacrificing' for family's sake. Again, the findings here support the assumption that the Christian man does care much about his family, but he tends to do so in material terms.

TABLE 18: Responses to Statements 9 to 12 in Questionnaire

Statement	Agree Strongly No (%)	Agree No (%)	Neutral No (%)	Dis-agree No (%)	Dis-agree Strongly No (%)
9. I fail as a man if I cannot be the sole breadwinner in my family.	12 (20 %)	14 (23.3 %)	11 (18.3 %)	19 (31.7 %)	4 (6.7 %)
10. I lead my family by sharing substantially in home responsibilities.	19 (31.7 %)	33 (55 %)	7 (11.6 %)	1 (1.7 %)	0
11. I fail as a man if I have integrity of character but no influence of control.	8 (13.3 %)	22 (36.7 %)	11 (18.3 %)	15 (25 %)	4 (6.7 %)
12. I lead my family by listening to their views before making decisions that will affect our home.	22 (36.7 %)	35 (58.3 %)	3 (5 %)	0	0

These statements are designed to test the assumption that the Christian man in Singapore still holds to the traditional views of masculinity. The findings here are perhaps the most 'eye opening.'

31.7 % of the respondents disagree with the traditional view that man is to be the sole breadwinner of the family. However, 23.3 % agree and 20 % agree strongly that they would have failed as a man if they cannot be the sole breadwinner. This means that a total of 43.3 % stand on the side of the traditional view.

As far as home responsibilities are concerned, 86.7 % affirm that they share substantially in these (31.7 % agree strongly and 55 % agree). This seems to contradict the traditional view that the home belongs to the domain of the woman. But there is a strong likelihood that these men are viewing home responsibilities not so much in terms of domestic

chores. Based on the findings already mentioned, it is likely that they are giving heavy weightage to their breadwinning role.

Though a high 25 % disagree that one fails as a man if he has integrity of character but no influence of control, 50 % affirm that a successful man is one who has both integrity and influence; character and control (13.3 % agree strongly and 36.7 % agree). Thus, virtue and power are both seen as important essentials in a successful man. The message seems to be this - a truly successful man not only gets things done, but gets them done the right way.

As far as decision making in the home is concerned, the respondents are clearly non-traditional. Unlike the traditional, autocratic head of the house who directs and expects to be obeyed, 95 % of them indicate that they adopt a consultative approach in family affairs (36.7 % agree strongly while 58.3 % agree). They are willing to listen to their family members before finalising any decision, especially in the major concerns of the home. This is a more democratic style of home management.

Interpreting the statistics here is not as straightforward as the earlier attempts. Though many of the respondents have indicated their choice of man as sole breadwinner, a significant number of them have indicated otherwise. It is also interesting that most of them have indicated that they help out substantially in home responsibilities. It is quite puzzling how being the sole breadwinner can afford them the time to help out substantially at home, unless breadwinning is viewed as a heavy family responsibility. Putting the pieces together, what may be implied is that breadwinning occupies a high place in the mindset of these men - if they cannot be the sole breadwinner, then at least the primary breadwinner. This of course is quite contrary to the rising trend of dual-income families in Singapore where even women contribute significantly to the family economy. But the Christian man seems to want to stay clear of this trend. It may be that man's role in breadwinning is viewed as the biblical pattern.

Also, majority of them have indicated that they believe integrity and influence go hand in hand. A successful man is not only one who knows what is right, but also able to correct what is wrong. Hence, just like the traditional male, the power to control in some sense is what makes many of the respondents feel masculine. However, when applied to the home situation, many are prepared to consult and listen to the views of their family members before any major decision. They still want that traditional 'last say' but are willing to say it only after a democratic process. They seem to stand for the belief that man is given sole headship at home, yet he is to exercise it by way of shared leadership with others in the family. Besides imbibing this idea from secular management, it is also likely that they are so convicted because they are either taught or understand this to be the biblical pattern.

In a nutshell, the Christian man as represented in the opinion poll seems to regard himself as a non-autocratic breadwinner in relation to his family life. Is the assumption that the Christian man in Singapore still holds to the traditional views of masculinity valid then? Using the poll as a preliminary instrument, one can say that it is not valid in the ethnic or cultural sense because non-autocracy in family headship is not traditionally Asian in perspective. On the other hand, one can say that it is valid in the Christian sense because being non-autocratic is consistent with teachings on male headship in Christian traditions.

5.1.2 Summary of conclusions. Based on the statistical findings in this opinion poll, some conclusions can be made:

- The Christian family man is generally a person with good education and holding a well-paying but demanding job.
- Though he can afford economically to bring up more children, he chooses only to have only one or two. This is because he is well aware of the demands in building up a family.
- The Christian family man is generally under pressure to compete and excel in his work. He is caught up in a culture that often presses for results in terms of not only doing one's best, but also winning over others. Thus, he is constantly tempted to focus on this-worldly pursuits and conquests.

- Though he values his family, he often does so in material terms. This then helps him to justify placing work as more important than family when there is a clash of priority. The challenge is for him to work on the emotional aspects of being intimate and nurturing at home.

- Being constantly influenced by a result-oriented and materialistic culture, the Christian man is generally quite confused as to how he can be a man of God and a man in the world at the same time. On one hand, he values earning power, control and the right to have the 'final say' in the workplace. On the other, he sees the need for non-monetary passion, integrity, sharing with and listening to others, especially in the home. The consolation is that while he may often be tempted to follow the world in his work, he tries hard to be 'traditionally Christian' as a family man - to provide well for his family, listen to them as their head, involve them in major decision making, and participate in family life.

All these conclusions point to some prevailing values that are influencing the mind and thinking of the Christian man in Singapore. To better understand the socio-cultural forces that Christian men have to constantly contend with in their work and family, data from qualitative interviews with some individuals will be documented in the next section. These interviewees are viewed as conversational partners sharing their complex stories.⁴

5.2 Conversational Partnerships: Understanding Work-Family Complexities of Some Christian Men

5.2.1 Environment of complexities. Singapore is called an 'unlikely nation' for good reasons. Her lack of land, natural and human resources are not favourable to her becoming a nation. But the fact that she has become not merely a nation, but a thriving one, makes her an 'exceptional state' now in existence. However, the lack of the same resources means that while her nationhood exists, her vulnerabilities remain. Hence, it is understandable that as far as the makers of national policies are concerned, living in Singapore must of necessity be pressurising.

⁴ In conducting and documenting these interviews, the approach taken is adapted from: Rubin, Herbert J and Rubin, Irene S 1995. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

No slowing down. When asked if it would always be like living in a ‘pressure cooker’ in Singapore, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong answered:

It would always be in Singapore. You can’t slow down. If I may give an example. Let’s take the port of Singapore. Can you slow down? Why do you want to work 365 days a year and 24 hours a day? Slow down. Relax. Tanjung Pelepas will take over. West Port will take over. And then what do we become?

In this game, if you’re not No. 1 or No. 2, you are nothing.

So we have to be realistic.⁵

Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew also reminded Singaporeans of the vulnerability of the nation to economic and political shake-ups globally and regionally. Though the nation’s economy grew an unexpected 10 per-cent in the year 2000, he cautioned the people not to be complacent but to work harder: ‘... I’ve never gone for “Tomorrow will be a sunny day.” We work to make tomorrow a sunny day.’⁶

No over-protecting citizens’ jobs. To further underscore how hard Singaporeans are expected to work, the nation’s Trade and Industry Minister, Brigadier-General George Yeo, warns:

There’s always temptation in an economic downturn to say ‘out first with the foreign workers and protect the jobs for Singaporeans’. I would caution against such an instinct because the reason why we are attractive to many foreign investors is the assurance we give them that ... if they need engineers, accountants, cartoonists, if you can’t find them in Singapore, you can bring them in ... If in an economic downturn, we suddenly say, well, you are foreign, you go out first even though he may be doing a good job, this will unravel the reputation that we have built up painstakingly over the years.⁷

Work-related travel encouraged. In its 2001 World Competitiveness Yearbook, the Swiss-based International Institute for Management has ranked Singapore as No. 2 for

⁵ *The Straits Times* 24 January 2001. Face To Face With The PM, pH3.

⁶ *The Straits Times* 31 January 2001. 5 % growth probable, says SM Lee, p6.

⁷ *The Straits Times* 12 July 2001. Retrenching foreigners first will only hurt locals, pH7.

competitiveness for the fifth consecutive year. However, Singapore this time slips in two key areas - business efficiency and infrastructure.⁸

In quick response to this slip, the Government announced almost immediately that it would ease exit control measures for men who were reserves in the military, police and civil defence force. This would make it easier for them to travel abroad for work. Passport validity for these men would also be extended from nine months to ten years. Another significant change that was announced is the waiver of a monetary bond for youths who had yet to serve their national service, but had to accompany their parents abroad on overseas employment.⁹ This monetary bond used to be a banker's guarantee of S\$75,000 or 50 % of the parents' income, whichever is higher. With the announced change, a bond by deed and a legal agreement by the parents would suffice.¹⁰

Impact of work-related travel on wives. These concessions may sound good to men as they consider taking up job opportunities overseas, and which is one infrastructure value that the Government hopes to inculcate in people in its effort to keep Singapore's competitive edge. However, two academics have recently cautioned how the push for globalisation and regionalisation can affect the family adversely. In a study, Dr Brenda Yeoh of the National University of Singapore and Dr Katie Willis of the University of Liverpool have concluded that women in Singapore often end up losers when their husbands go overseas to work. For example, they cite that in two out of three cases, the family moves with the man when he goes overseas. This often means that the wife gives up her job to take care of the family in a new country. When she returns, she is often unable to find a job, and thus, goes on being a stay-at-

⁸ For business efficiency, Singapore fell from 6th in 2000 to 10th in 2001; for infrastructure, from 3rd in 2000 to 5th in 2001 - *The Straits Times* 25 April 2001. S'pore No. 2 again for competitiveness, p4.

⁹ National service in the military, police or civil defence force is for males who have reached age 18.

¹⁰ *The Straits Times* 27 April 2001. Easier travel for NSmen from May 1, p6.

home mother and wife. Consequently, the difference between men's and women's roles has been deepened, for better or worse.

Dr Yeoh said:

Inevitably, the regionalisation drive puts an extra burden on women - whether they stay behind for the sake of the children's education or they go along with their husbands.

Their households are women-centred as husbands become visible players in the workforce.

The go-regional policy becomes one that helps men more than it does women.¹¹

Challenge of 'woman power'. Benny Bong, president of the Society Against Family Violence and executive director of the Counselling and Care Centre, has this to say about Singapore men: 'Men struggle to cope with the fact that women are now income-earners, well educated, more confident of their own positions in life. Some men can't cope with the fact that women are making decisions about their own relationships and sexual life.'¹²

Stressed and restless young. Anthony Yeo, clinical director of Counselling and Care Centre, further points out another dilemma in home life:

Children feel they are not enjoying their childhood and worry too much about their studies to think of having fun, which is a fundamental element for parent-child bonding.

It does not help if one government ministry is promoting family life, while another seems to be demanding time and commitment to other pursuits that could work against family togetherness.

Perhaps a comprehensive approach is needed to send a clear, consistent message that family life is paramount. This may require some rethinking about upholding the constant striving for economic excellence.

There must be a way to experience a world-class home without necessarily having a world-class economy.¹³

¹¹ *The Straits Times* 25 April 2001. Wives lose out when husbands go regional, pH3.

¹² *The Straits Times (LIFE! Section)* 16 January 2001. Male Order, pL4.

¹³ *The Straits Times* 6 March 2001. Promote marriage in a realistic way, p19.

In fact, it has been reported recently that the competitive lifestyle has increased markedly the number of stressed up children (some even as young as pre-schoolers) seeking psychiatric help. The report says:

The number of young psychiatric patients multiplied 3 1/2 times between 1990 and 1998, and this trend will continue if the children's pressure-cooker environment does not change ... Most of the young patients have anxiety disorders and behavioural problems that stem from the fear of school, exams and failure. Two thirds of these patients were in primary school or pre-primary centres. Latest figure show that 20,000 children sought help in 1998, compared with just 5,600 in 1990.¹⁴

The drive to remain competitive and stay on top is also affecting the thinking of the young in Singapore. Today, there are some 450 000 teenagers who were born in the last millennium and growing up in the present one. These are known as the Generation-M. What are their values like? Below are some samples:

Christopher Lim, 18: 'My generation is definitely more self-centred than my parents', and that's because we have always been told to place ourselves before others, starting from school. There is also the need to be at the top.'

Elaine Chow, 19: 'I will probably not live in Singapore all my life. Not only do I want to see the rest of the world, I also do not feel any sense of belonging. I don't have much family here and, besides family, Singapore doesn't have very much to offer me.'

Goh Teow Lim, 17: 'While the country is prosperous, we are content to let the Government carry on without question. But if things take a turn for the worse, I don't think we would be able to make any political judgments. We wouldn't know how to, having never done so.'¹⁵

The overall portrait of these youths is that of an ambitious and self-centred generation. They grow up in homes and a culture whereby the drive to excel has material comfort and self interest as the highest stakes.

¹⁴ Commenting further on the situation, Dr Tan Chue Tin, consultant psychiatrist at Mount Elizabeth Hospital, says in the same report: 'The school system is very result-oriented. As a result, parents became anxious and push their children to succeed, sometimes beyond their means' - *The Straits Times* 2 March 2001. More S'pore children seeing psychiatrists, p1.

¹⁵ *The Straits Times* 3 May 2001. Goodbye Gen-X, hello Gen-M, p112.

Dr William J Doherty, professor of Family Social Science and director of Marriage and Family Programmes at the University of Minnesota, sounded this caution at the Singapore Family Forum 2001 organised by the Ministry of Community Development and Sports: 'We need a counter-culture to stop this capitalistic culture. We cannot abandon it, but we must contain the force of this culture. Families cannot be taken for granted.'¹⁶ Indeed, many Christian homes are not spared from the powerful influences of these values.

5.2.2 Profiles of conversational partners. The purpose of these conversations is to better hear and understand work-family complexities in the life experiences and stories of some Christian men. It is not the intent here to arrive at any definitive indicator. The conversational partners are of diverse backgrounds and have to deal with different work-family complexities in their everyday lives. They are between ages 40 and 50, sharing and reflecting on their experiences even as some of them contemplate reengineering their own lives.

TABLE 19: Profiles of Conversational Partners

Code	Age	Education	Occupation	Years Working	Wife's Education	Wife's Occupation	No. of Children (Ages)
M1	43	Tertiary	Teacher	22	Tertiary	Homemaker	2 (13,9)
M2	50	Tertiary	Estate Manager	28	'O' Level	Supervisor	2 (23,19)
M3	40	Tertiary	Auditor	16	Tertiary	Homemaker	3 (8,6,5)
M4	46	Tertiary	IT Manager	18	Tertiary	Homemaker	1 (12)
M5	41	Tertiary	Military Officer	21	Tertiary	Computer Programmer /Analyst	3 (14,11,3)
M6	44	'O' Level	Home-manager	26	Tertiary	Accountant	2 (16,13)

¹⁶ *The Sunday Times* 27 May 2001. When work is a threat to family values, p39.

5.2.3 Hearing the stories. The data gathered from the conversations can be categorised under four main themes - realities in the workplace; attempts in family involvement; alternatives in child caring and housekeeping; perceptions of success.

Realities in the workplace: There are some 'givens' which one must be prepared to struggle with in a meritocratic work culture that demands both diligence and excellence. Such struggles faced by the conversational partners are described below.

Competing to show results. Through the conversations, a number of stress-inducing factors in the workplace can be identified. One of them is that of competing to show results. M1, who is now a teacher in a secondary school, has spent almost 20 of his 22 working years in the armed forces. He says this as he looks back at his military days:

I had been with the military for 20 1/2 years. I was asked to do more project-oriented assignments. But I am more a relational and people-oriented person. Doing projects is not my cup of tea. Also, I had always wanted to teach. The military gave older soldiers like myself the opportunity to be a teacher ... to help them remain gainfully employed through a 'second-career' change.

M1 reveals that the big projects which he had undertaken usually required much logistics, and that he first began his military career as a counsellor. Recalling further, he adds:

I could be stressed out (by these big projects) and feel pressurised by these huge tasks. I felt frustrated in my soldiering career during times when I had to undertake big projects. I couldn't be entirely on my own anymore. I had to depend on others' support ... the outcome was not always in my control. I needed others to play their part too.

When I was working as a counsellor, the working relationship with my fellow counsellors was very cordial ... they were helpful. However, when I worked with people from another unit in a joint project, they were usually not very helpful ... were guarded and suspicious. This has to do with the fact that the military is a very rank-conscious organisation. Performances are important. People want to take opportunities to shine ... to compete.

But if competition is for the purpose of improving oneself, the system or the organisation, then it is healthy. But if it makes one become self-centred, selfish and indifferent to the welfare of others, then it is bad ... it affects relationships badly.

M2 feels that competition in the workplace will become increasingly intense in the days ahead. There is no running away from this 'rat race' as long as one is working in Singapore.

With a heavy heart, he laments:

The 'rat race' is very real in Singapore. We have no natural resources, except human beings. It is the fittest who will survive. If you have low education or any shortcomings, you better do something about yourself ... to catch up with other people.

The situation is even worse now - we have to compete with foreign talents who are working in our country if we want to keep our jobs.

It is difficult to move up by playing fair in this 'rat-race' society. Playing fair can even put you at a disadvantage. But I personally do not like to curry favour people in order to move my way up. Thus, the way I have chosen to move my way up is to go for qualifications - both in education and experience.

When I applied for the position of project manager in a construction firm, my friend was the boss. But I like to believe that I got the job based on my own merits - my previous experience as a senior project executive had given me the edge. My friend took me in not only because he knew me, but also because he was sure what I could do.

While acknowledging that competition in the workplace is almost unavoidable, M3 feels that he works better on the basis of cooperation. He describes his struggle this way:

Personally, I would like to do well through cooperation. But it is undeniable that competition will always be there - part and parcel of the working world. However, if competition is not something that I can control, but if it's healthy, then I can accept that.

Advancement is only for a limited few. Therefore, you have to make yourself stand out among your peers in order to be recognised by your superiors. So, you see colleagues, who are equal with you ability-wise, doing things that may seem not very ethical - using personal relationships; saying things about you behind your back; trying to gain favour by volunteering to do things on behalf of the boss. Such competition may seem unfair, but it may also not be wrong because people are only exercising their creativity in order to impress; to be recognised. Though I am not that kind of creative person, I accept that it is only reasonable for people to want to be ahead in life.

In the early part of my career, I enjoyed a good relationship with my peers. But when the assessment came, I was better appreciated by my boss ... I got promoted, and some peers began to talk bad about me because they had lost out.

On the other hand, there were times when my peers had worked hard, did well and were better appreciated by my boss. Initially, I didn't feel good but I had learned to accept it later. It is not natural of me to compete with that kind of intensity. But sometimes, I find myself doing it just to be part of the competing culture.

When you are with ambitious people, you find that they strategise how to achieve what they want. You need this kind of focused, competitive spirit to give you the edge with everything else being equal.

Looking back, my only disturbing question is this: 'How long will the company accept my kind of unconventional choice - that is - choosing to accept that having done my best is good enough for me?' Corporate conventions actually want us to compete to be the best. Hence, I think those who want to be less driven like me must be prepared to be by-passed and not complain about it.

While M3 has shared how he is prepared to pay the price for being less competitive, M4 points out that wanting to be more competitive involves a price as well. He tells the story of his pursuit to better himself in his working life:

I started work as a civil engineer with the Public Works Department after my polytechnic education. There, I came to see the real working world - interacting with people of different levels from technicians to contractors. I was assigned to the road division where I had to work under the hot sun in the day, and even doing night work if we had to avoid inconveniencing the day traffic.

I realised that this might not be the best place for me to work. It was not easy dealing with contractors - they were daily-rated workers, and that meant saying 'no' to them working on rainy days was to deprive them of a full day's wage.

I then decided to further my studies at a university in Montreal, Canada, in 1979. I went there wanting to further my engineering studies, and did a course in computer programming in my first year. I enjoyed this course very much because it was very analytical in nature - something I found both challenging and new. I also reckoned that computer skills would pave the way for me to more opportunities when I returned to Singapore. Hence, I switched from engineering to computer science after my first year.

The first job I took up on my return to Singapore in 1983 was with an oil company as an IT person ... IT is fast moving with lots of changes to be anticipated - the opportunities to learn and explore are challenging.

But today, on hindsight, it might have been too much to handle for me. Old technologies become obsolete quickly, but the need to keep changing and updated is the key challenge in the IT industry.

Besides being in demand and paying well, the IT industry provides challenges for self-development - that is - keep pace with changes; be innovative; maximise usage of resources; keep staff happy even as you stretch them.

But the demands are great because of tight schedules - you need to push people to the limit, and that's not the most pleasant thing to do. Also, the emphasis on results is always there - on time; within budget; meeting requirements. You must be prepared to put in additional hours if need be, including weekends and evenings.

When you are younger and eager to prove yourself, this kind of challenge may be what you want. But when age begins to catch up on you, and family commitment becomes more heavy, you may not have the stamina to continue to meet the challenge.

My present company, where I am doing project management, is an IT service provider. Therefore, the customer's interest always comes first - there's no way for you to stand still or slow down for your own interest ... you'll become irrelevant in no time.

M5 holds the rank of Major in the military, and has a somewhat different experience from the others. He works hard but does not feel the need to pressure himself to outdo other people. He shares:

I worked in the armed forces. Things are pretty structured - to put it bluntly, even if I don't do well, I still have my job. So, there's really no need for me to work for my survival in that sense - it's up to me as to how well or how much I want to do.

Yes, we do meet with all kinds of people here. But then, things are pretty structured here - we have command in place, and people are expected to obey orders. Another way to work is to persuade people until they understand.

But generally, people here are pretty well-disciplined ... there are consequences if they don't. This makes my job that much easier.

M6 has the most unusual occupation when compared with the others. He is a home-manager, or as he himself puts it: 'I am a full-time househusband.' His earlier experiences in the working world saw him go through three retrenchments. He sees himself as not so much a victim of competition, but of circumstances. He tells his story:

I started work young - after my 'O' level. Two years later, I was enrolled into national service. After that, I resumed working - my family was not well to do

and as the eldest child, I had to work very hard to help the family financially ... I hardly had time for leisure.

In 1978, I was retrenched as a manager with a fast-food restaurant because of an economic downturn. My next job was that of a storekeeper. But I experienced my second retrenchment in 1982 (I was married then). This then set me thinking ... I then decided to do a leadership course with a Christian organisation. After this course, I was recruited as an administrative assistant by this same organisation. In 1986, I again had to leave my job because the department that I was in had to be closed down.

I did not feel very down when I was first retrenched. But when I was retrenched a second time, I really felt depressed - I was then a family man and with no work, and with just an 'O' level education, jobs were not easy to come by for me. It was then that I decided to attend a full-time course in leadership for 6 months with a Christian organisation.

When I was retrenched a second time, I did some soul-searching. I knew that it was not because there was someone else better than me, or I was lazy at work. It was because the company was simply not doing well and had to fold up. In fact, I would consider myself a workaholic, always trying hard to work my way up.

Being pragmatic and not dogmatic. Another reality in the workplace is being pragmatic to accept what works. This implies that one must be flexible enough to change and adapt so as not to lose out; to survive in different environments. M1 shares his experience in his new career as a teacher:

I experienced a bit of 'culture shock' initially. I have been a teacher for more than a year already. The environment is different. Discipline is expected in the military, but my students are not so disciplined ... adjustment is needed on my part ... to accept things ... to change my mindset ... my style of communication.

M2 feels that it is not easy to stand firm on one's principles of right and wrong in the workplace today. He shares of two experiences in which he was sidelined because he tried to stand on his principles rather than to be pragmatic:

I started work as a technician in a statutory board in 1972. I spent 9 years there. I learned much about estate management - how to deal with people, contractors; how to meet the needs of occupants of buildings; how to be submissive to my boss; how to attend to the public. I soon found out that I was quite weak in the area of public relations. But I was not given any grooming in this area. Until today, this is still my weak area.

On one occasion, some people complained about illegal hawking in a certain place which was under my charge. I wanted them to be specific, but they tended to exaggerate things. That caused me to lose my temper and I became very unfriendly. I was told off by my senior who then took over the case and attended to the complainants.

Because of my hot temper, I was easily irritated. I was young then, only about 20. But I had wanted people to be truthful and not exaggerate things. My senior was actually trying to cool down the situation.

We were a public service company; we were not to antagonise our clients ... the customers are always right. But I thought then that this was not fair to us. On the other hand, if we were to sell our services, then we would need good public relations.

On another occasion some years later, I clashed with my immediate boss - the property manager - when I was a property officer with a private firm. He then complained to the GM about me. So, I had to tell the GM my side of the story. The property manager accused me of sabotaging him.

The clash was over the matter of getting competitive quotations for some renovation works. My boss, the property manager, was getting only his friends to quote ... I felt that he was only favouring his friends ... other people were not given the chance to tender. I disagreed with him over this; I was not happy with him.

In the end, it was clear that one of us would have to leave the company. My property manager had an advantage over me - he had a higher qualification - a degree - while I had only a polytechnic diploma.

I felt that it would be very miserable for me if I continued to work for a boss whom I could not see eye-to-eye. I decided that the best thing to do was for me to resign.

But after some hard knocks in the workplace over the years, M2 agrees that he needs to be more realistic and pragmatic in life. He admits:

When you are younger, it is easier to change or switch jobs. But when you are older, such a change or switch becomes more difficult ... you have to be realistic here.

So, an older man like myself must learn to change himself instead of his job ... change the way you think, do things ... learn and try new things, like IT.

Of course, your level of qualification does help ... no high qualification, the situation will be more difficult for you. But again, you have to be realistic ... about the economic situation for example.

M5 can empathise with the reality that standing on what you believe has a price on one's career advancement. His own experiences with different superiors in the workplace go like this:

I have all kinds of superior - the caring and concerned ones, and the task-driven ones. I have no problem even with the task-driven ones because working hard is not a problem with me. My problem is with bosses who are political - you don't know what's on their mind even if you've worked hard.

I had such bosses before, and those times were difficult years. I didn't quite know what to do with them, except to cling on to what I believed was the right thing to do.

For example, I once had this boss who told me this: 'Working hard and delivering results are important. But playing hard with people is equally important.'

To him, to play hard with people is to join them in heavy drinking and other activities that I think are not right to my own convictions. As far as this boss was concerned, I was not doing well because I didn't join in these activities.

In the case of the family of M6, pragmatism rules as well, especially since his wife has a stronger earning power than he. In fact, the decision for him to stay home and for his wife to work outside was very much on pragmatic grounds. Looking at his family situation at that time, he decided not to stick to the old tradition of 'man works outside and woman stays home'. He explains:

My first child, Samuel, was one year old then, and was not in good health - he had asthma. My wife and I felt that one of us would have to remain at home to take care of our young son.

My wife was an accountant and it was difficult for her to give up that profession. We talked and prayed about the matter. We both felt that I should be the one to stay home.

I have since become a househusband until today. But for the past 7 to 8 years, I have also been a part-time taxi driver ... allows me to work flexi-time and to have time for our children as well.

Work above family. Though M1 is now enjoying more predictability in his work as a teacher, he remembers those times in the military when he had to put work above family. He

recollects that there were times when he had 'to be away from home for a day; a night; even a week if it was an overseas trip.' 'There were times when I was asked at the last minute to stay back to work,' says M1 and adding, 'I remember one occasion when I had to miss a family function because of this ... and felt very bad about it.'

M3 tells of a time when he made the deliberate choice to forego an opportunity for career advancement. He admits that this means that he will be by-passed when opportunities do arise in the future. However, he realised then that 'to take up that opportunity would take up too much time from me, even time from family.' 'I reckoned that this would not be healthy in the long run both for myself and for my family,' concluded M3.

Indeed, the refusal to put work above family must be carefully considered because of the interplay of roles and responsibilities in these two areas. M3 has this to say:

The struggle has always been how to balance my roles as worker, provider, husband and father. I am very conscious of all these roles - what will be the implications if I overemphasise on one of these?

For example, if I want to be the father whom I should be, I have to check how far I want to be a good worker in terms of taking on work load. On the other hand, I realise that if I am not a good worker, my career will be affected, and I will then not be a good provider. I see the need to keep a balanced interplay of all these roles and responsibilities.

M5 also has to deal with the need to travel in the course of work and with longer working hours from time to time. These demands inevitably affect family life. But he takes comfort in that he does not have to work harder and longer hours over prolonged periods. However, he answers the call of these demands with a positive attitude whenever it comes. In a matter-of-fact manner, he says:

My work is supposed to be from 8 am to 5.30 pm on a normal day. But to be realistic, I normally leave home not earlier than 6.30 am and return home not later than 6.30 pm.

My work also requires me to travel. In fact, 4 years ago, I had to be away in Russia for 6 weeks ... on the average in the last few years, I had to travel 3 to 4 times a year, each time for about 1 to 2 weeks.

I also get assignments that require me to work harder at certain times - for example, we were involved in the National Day Parade last year. But things have been quite manageable except for the occasional peak periods.

My wife and my two older kids have been understanding when I have to handle these peak periods ... the youngest one is still too young to miss me too much even when I'm away.

By God's grace, I don't have to work long hours for prolonged periods. In fact, my wife's schedule is right now more demanding than mine. If I don't check her, she'll come home after 8 pm every night!

Attempts in family involvement: The meritocratic work culture in Singapore naturally demands much of the working man's focus and attention. Hence, how much to be involved in family life does pose some uncertainty and confusion to him.

Desiring understanding from family. M1 takes his career seriously. But when work takes him away from family time, he seems to feel a sense of uneasiness. On the other hand, he also expects his family to understand his situation. He tells of his struggle here:

When I promised my children to be home for some play together, they really looked forward to my coming home. But when I told them later that I had been held back and could not be home to play with them, they were obviously disappointed.

I had broken my promise to them. I could sense their unhappiness, but I tried to explain to them. I then learned not to make promises to my children so readily.

Yes, there was a time when I unwittingly communicated to my family that they were not so important because of my enthusiasm to complete a counselling case. I was guilty of putting aside family. My kids could sense that I was shifting my priority from family to work. My wife also felt that I was overenthusiastic and overcommitted in my work.

But sometimes, it is just a case of bad timing - things happen at work just when the family needs you. However, my wife had been generally supportive of me. She could understand that as a counsellor, the nature of my work would demand irregular hours. Also, as a Christian wife, she subscribed to the biblical teaching of being submissive.

M2, whose wife is working, is also one who desires understanding from his family when he is faced with work-family conflicts. When asked whether work demands or family

needs are more important to him, M2 confesses: 'It depends on the

needs are more urgent at that point in time, then I'll put family first. But if the work cannot wait, then I'll see ... I'll see if my wife can handle the family need without me. If she can't, and the need must be attended to without delay, then I'll have no choice.'

M3 hopes that his family will understand that 'there will be peak periods during which I will be really stressed and strained.' 'Providing emotional support to the family during these times will be at a low point. But when the job becomes better managed, the emotional support from me will be more forthcoming,' M3 admits. Thinking a little deeper, he shares further:

My wife is very serious about my involvement in the family. In fact, she will openly remind me of this if I am spending too much time in my work. This may seem like nagging on her part, but it certainly helps me to keep things in perspective.

Of course, the usual frustration is that her reminding me seems to indicate that she doesn't understand the stress and strain that I am going through at work. We do have heated arguments because of such work-family tensions from time to time. But from hindsight, I think my wife has been a good indicator - telling me not to carry things at work too far at the neglect of our family.

Breadwinning and bonding. All the conversational partners have no problem accepting their role as head of the family. As head of the family, they see the importance in ensuring that the family needs are well met, especially the material ones.

M1 shared this with strong conviction when asked about his involvement in family life: 'Scripture says that I am to be the leader of my family and head of my household. I need to set an example for my family - in terms of being responsible for the material welfare of my family and the educational needs of my children.'

When further asked how he attempted to meet their emotional needs, M1 paused and then went on to say: 'My training as a counsellor has helped me to be a good listener to the concerns of my family members. I also take time to talk with my children while doing things together. I talk with my wife while dining and watching television together.'

M1 is also especially convinced that man should be directly involved in the breadwinning aspect of family life. He stresses: 'It is a matter of responsibility that man takes his role as breadwinner seriously. When I married my wife, she was already earning more than I. But who earns more is not really an issue with me. What's more important is what we do with the income we have; how do we spend it wisely. What's important to me is that I still have a part in bringing in money for the family.'

M2 is one who always challenges himself to work his way up. In the early years, it was more a way of proving his own potential. But when his children came, a new emphasis was added - to provide well for their material and educational needs. M2 recalls: 'I wanted to compete and climb up fast. But in those days, promotions were based on seniority - unless your senior was promoted, there's no way for you to take over his place. That's why I left my technician job and took up further studies ... I needed more money when my children came.'

While M2 focuses much of his story on the material well-being of his family, M3 feels that the emotional bonding among family members is important too. He enlightens: 'For me, emotional support for my family is in the form of interacting with the children - talking to them about their day. Also, I check with my wife about her day with the kids ... about their behaviour ... including household and maid issues and see how I can support her. In addition, I use family time on weekends to bond with my family - going to church together, interacting with other Christians, shopping ... and doing other things together.'

M4 has begun to ponder on the need to be a father-mentor as he observes the growing-up pains in his teenage son. Though still very much bound to his work as an IT manager, M4 thinks aloud of his desire:

Melvin is in his teenage years now. He is a people-person. He wants a sense of belonging when he is with people, and needs to feel accepted by them. Hence, it is important that he has a good foundation to help him handle peer pressure.

I would like to help him develop in certain character traits and values. At this point, my work has not allowed me to do so. But I do spend time playing with him - badminton, ball kicking, chess ... this helps to build bonding between us. Now, we even hug each other and call each other as 'friend'.

I am equipping myself through reading and seminars on how to impart values to him as his father. But as I have admitted, I do not have much time at this point to really get down to doing it.

I am not too sure if Melvin had felt the lack of a father figure in the past. But today, I do see the need for greater involvement on my part in his life. I think it is important to leave behind a good Christian legacy to my child - to cultivate a lifestyle of knowing God's call for you, and living out that call as a mission in your life.

Talking on the subject of a Christian legacy, M4 also wants to communicate more with his wife about journeying together, and to create a climate of family worship. He adds:

My wife and I are considering how we can be more involved in touching lives. She feels a strong call to work with children ... I am not too sure of my own passion as yet. But we need to see how we can fit into each other's passion. At this point, we need to communicate and pray more together.

As a family, we also need to make deliberate efforts to spend time together. Being first-generation Christians, we were quite ignorant of the need to build up a good Christian heritage in our family life - we did not have family worship time or things like that when we first started our family. Besides, the demands of work have always undermined the priority for the establishment of Christian rituals at home.

To sum up, I think a strong family life should include the following features:

- strong bonding
- good character building as reflected in the moral values of parents and children
- good economic management - that is - living within your means because material possessions do not bring economic freedom if we are overwhelmed by financial debts
- willingness to share and help others outside the family instead of being self-centred.

M5 is one who makes spending time with his family a very deliberate and consistent duty the moment he goes 'off duty' from his command position. Moreover, unlike the other conversational partners, he has a very strong family worship life at home. M5 enthuses:

I spend a lot of time with my family. In fact, the whole night is with them and for them once I reach home. This is the priority I give to my family. That's why I don't go for 'happy hours' except for the annual special celebration or event.

As I've said, my wife is busy during this period with a project that will stretch from this year till next - this makes it even all the more important for me to spend time with my children ... at least one of us must do it, but better still if both of us are there.

Dinner is usually over by 8 pm. I'll then take the youngest child and be with him till he sleeps. I'll read to him using the Bible and books that I have borrowed from the library ... at least he develops the discipline of sitting down and listening.

For the two older kids, I'll give them time when they need coaching. They are to come to me when they need help from me.

We also have family worship - devotion, singing and prayer as a family. But we don't have all these elements together all the time. Sometimes, we just have 5 minutes of prayer. On the average, we have family worship three times a week. A long session will be one hour while a short one will be 5 minutes.

We put a lot of emphasis on family worship. As a father, I make it a point to record down our prayer requests and answers ... this helps the family to see how God is working in our family.

My oldest child, Jonathan, was baptised last Sunday. This is one way we see the fruit of our labour in family worship over the years. For my wife and I, parenting is our responsibility. We are to take care of our children's material and spiritual well-being. This is not the primary role of the maid, or even the church ... we as parents are to teach our own children.

Seeking consensus in family decisions. The men do not portray themselves as crusaders of male dominance in the area of making decisions at home. In fact, all of them are very ready to consult with their spouses on family matters. As M1 puts it:

I am a person who prefers consensus ... I like to discuss matters. I don't want to dominate in decision-making. I would prefer to arrive at joint decisions with my wife on important concerns. If we cannot agree on something, I would prefer to differ the final decision till a later time ... examine why we cannot agree. When the matter at hand is appropriate to my children's ages, I would also allow them into the decision-making process.

M3 confesses that he is not a very decisive person. But knowir

major family decisions, he leans 'more on consensus and delegation in our family decision-making process.' M3 adds: 'My wife and I do discuss and agree on certain basic principles in relation to the disciplining of our children which either of us can carry out. In matters pertaining to finance, I do have the final say. My wife's contribution is more in the area of our children's behaviour and upbringing.'

M3 then continues to relate one precious lesson he has learned about his fathering role:

For 7 to 8 years, I was under the impression that it was my wife's responsibility to pass on good values to our children. But I heard a preacher one Sunday who challenged us with this question - 'What kind of spiritual legacy do we want to pass on to our children?' He made it clear that the father was to be the key person in this passing on of spiritual values to the children.

I then took it as a personal challenge - today, I am doing more Bible reading and explaining Bible lessons to my children ... I want to let them know that it is their father who has to take the lead in imparting good, Christian values to them.

My wife complements me very well because she spends more time with the children than I - she will feedback to me how our children are learning to apply those values.

I think my ignorance in the past concerning this matter has to do with the fact that I was brought up in a traditional Chinese family - where it is the mother's responsibility to teach values to the young.

But now I know I'm the leader in this regard, and together with my wife's help, I think this is a better proposition than what I had thought in the past.

Discussion is also the way M5 and his wife resort to in major family decisions. Though a senior military officer himself, M5 has never used his position as head of the family to command his wife to obey him. He describes their decision-making process this way:

My wife and I talk and pray over our family decisions. We also look at what's happening in our family. We acknowledge that as the husband, I am the head of the household ... my wife knows that and she's my helper. Together, we work out what we want for our family. My wife respects what I want to do for the family as head, and I respect what she wants to do as my helper.

For example, she wanted earlier to stay home for about a year when our second child was born ... but it didn't work out well for her. So, we try out things and make adjustments together. The important thing is to have time for our children, for each other, for friends, and for extended family members.

I believe strongly that as head of the household, I am responsible to take the lead and to act with my wife as helper. It is not a matter of telling her what to do, but hearing from her ... the wise thing is to listen to her; to get feedback.

There is this sense of mutual support and respect. I have never understood that a wife cannot work outside the home. I respect and honour my wife's need to be fulfilled as a person ... to allow her the choice to do what she wants as a person. Also, I have never understood that housework is only my wife's job. I'll help in whatever housework that needs to be done though we do have a maid.

As the only non-breadwinner among the conversational partners, it is interesting to hear how M6 heads his family and how his children view him. He has this to say:

Even though I was not the breadwinner, I did not lose my headship and leadership at home. Yes, my wife is the breadwinner, but I am the one running the finances because all the money comes to me. In other major decisions, we discuss them with each other.

Making the decision to be the home-manager does not seem to affect my children negatively ... not in their attitude toward me. In fact, it seems that what they enjoy is to have a parent full-time at home, regardless of whether it is the father or the mother.

In 1986, my wife made the decision to take one year of no-pay leave to stay at home for the family. This allowed me to be a full-time taxi driver for a year. But in the end, it seems that my children preferred me to be the one full-time at home with them!

This decision for me to stay at home for the family and children is mutually agreed between my wife and I. It was basically a practical one when we first made it - our son needed one parent to be with him full-time at home because of his asthmatic condition when he was young; the cost of living was rising rapidly; if we needed to depend on one income, then it would have to be my wife's since she was earning more than I.

However, if I am earning more and if my wife doesn't mind staying at home, then I am most happy to be the breadwinner. In fact, my wife has told me that since our children are now more independent, she wouldn't mind me doing some regular work. When my daughter enters her 'O' level in three years' time, I may seriously consider this. But right now, I am happy with the way things are.

Factoring children's needs into wife's full-time vocation. Should wives be working outside or be staying at home to care for the children? The men have no strong objection against their wives working - but not at the expense of their children's well-being. In fact, whether the wife works or stays home would depend how this affects the children.

M1's wife is professionally qualified, but she is now a homemaker and only free-lancing as an accountant. He tells why:

My wife stopped work when our second child came. It was about 9 years ago. The reason being she wanted to give more time to the family. Moreover, our older child was about to go to primary school. Well, it does seem that taking care of family demands can be stretching for her as well.

On my part, I will take care of all the housework - cleaning up, washing dishes ... and all that. She will take care of the children's homework ... some sort of division of labour, but I am not doing the cooking ... she still cooks for the family.

I have learned to enjoy this since I can free her to take care of the children's education. Yes, much of the success of our children's education is due to my wife's contribution. And I have indirectly contributed to this success too by freeing her to do this.

Success of my children in their education is in terms of getting good results and going to a good school. But we realise that the child's ability is also important - we help them and they do their part.

My older son is very motivated, ambitious and self-competitive - he knows what he wants and he tries hard. He is now in the top secondary school in Singapore. If he can't be there, I think he would probably be more disappointed than us. We have to teach him to manage his own expectations.

If our children's education is at stake and they need help, dual income may not be the best thing. I would prefer my wife to support them by stopping work ... but she can still work part-time.

If the children are progressing well in their education and more independent, and if my wife wants to return to work and the opportunity comes along, I would support her decision to do so. But when the children are young, I would prefer my wife to be at home. She can return to work when time is right because I know she needs to develop herself as a person too, and not necessarily for the finance.

M2 has a dual-income family. Both he and his wife have been working since they were married. The main reason for this arrangement is finance - they want their children to be well provided for, especially in their educational needs. As M2 shares of his family situation, one can sense some regret because he would have preferred his wife to be at home with the children in their younger days. He reveals:

When I got married, I was hoping that my wife could stay at home to care for the family and raise the children in the biblical way. But when the children came. I realised that my income as a technician was not sufficient for the family. Hence, my wife had to continue working to supplement my income.

In fact, my wife had been working all along. She started off as a factory operator in an electronics firm ... the pay was low ... she was retrenched after 20 years. She then went to work in the service industry until today and is now a supervisor.

Both of us had to be working because our children were small and we needed the money for them. Now, they are much older ... but they still need our financial support for their studies.

But my personal preference is for my wife to stay home and care for the family and children's needs ... not so much because it is a biblical instruction. But I think that this would be the ideal arrangement - I work outside and she stays home for the family and children.

But in my circumstances, I had no choice ... my wife had to work even when the children were young ... but if I had the choice then, I would prefer her to be home for them.

But I am not against working wives. If I have the money to meet family needs and if my children are older, and if my wife wants to work for her sense of fulfilment ... I would be very happy to let her do so.

M3's wife once worked as an IT professional. Though she was still working when their first child came, she is now a homemaker, and has been so for the past 6 years. M3 talks about how that decision came about:

When our first child came. she was actually feeling guilty that she had to continue working. At that time, it was I who persuaded her to keep her work until we were more financially comfortable with one income. At that time, we had my father and a maid to help us out when both of us were at work.

When our second child came, she stopped work and has since stayed home to mother the children. But I must admit that to have my wife as a second income earner has always been attractive to me - it takes the load off me as the sole breadwinner.

I do realise too that for my wife to stay at home all the time with the children can be very stifling to her own personal development and fulfilment. It is important that she knows what is going on outside the home environment; that she interacts with other people; that she feels a better sense of self-worth.

Therefore, my wife has been doing part-time work since three years ago - she is an IT administrator in my children's school. This allows her to be well informed about our educational system, and prepares our children to meet the demands of the system accordingly. She enjoys it, being able to meet up with other people ... I'll let her have the final say as to whether she will return to full-time work in the future.

M3 and M4 share common features in that both have wives who are tertiary educated yet prefer to be homemakers. Like M3's wife, M4's wife also believes that her role is very much with child caring at this point in time. M4 says this of her:

We are only a family of three. Melvin is our only child because we are biologically not able to have another ... but it makes our single income a viable arrangement.

My wife stopped work when Melvin came. Anyway, she had never enjoyed herself in the working world. Rather, she prefers to help and interact with others in a non-employed capacity.

In Melvin's early years, my wife was the one who taught and imparted values to him since she was with him most of the time. This did strengthen the bond between mother and son.

Unless for economic reasons, she is not making any deliberate effort to go back to full-time work. However, she still feels fulfilled because of her involvement, interaction and networking with other people not as an employed worker, but as a concerned person. But should she one day decide to return to full-time work, I will not stop her from doing so.

For M5 whose wife is a computer programmer/analyst, the decision to continue working is one that has been carefully considered. How his wife feels about staying at home and how the children are progressing are important factors. M5 shares how he and his wife have arrived at the decision for her to continue working:

When our second child, Sarah, was born, my wife and I talked and discussed about how best to manage the family. We gave something a try - my wife stayed at home for about a year. She realised that that was not what she would want to do. She felt that she could be more productive working outside the home ... socially fulfilling for her and financially helpful to the family.

But we also looked at how our first two children, Jonathan and Sarah, were growing up ... we believed then that they were doing well (and even with our youngest child, Andrew, today) ... that both of them could manage well even with both of us working. In short, we are happy with the way we have trained and taught our children even though we are both working parents.

Alternatives in child caring and housekeeping: All the conversational partners have experienced using maids and/or grandparents as alternatives in child caring and housekeeping. They tell of the pros and cons of using these alternatives.

Maids. Though not denying the helpfulness of a maid in the home, M1 shares his reservations:

When our first child came, we had a Christian maid. But we realise that if we leave the maid to care for the housework and child, something is missing. The child may think that life is all about being served by a maid.

But the maid was helpful initially because my wife was adjusting to the new birth. Imparting good values to children is important in the long run. Help from maids and child care centres is only good at certain times when such support services are needed for family adjustments to changes. In fact, we put our first child in a child care centre for 3 to 4 years.

But we saw him picking up some bad values ... vulgar words, rudeness to parents ... probably by observing other children's behaviour. As for the maid, she can be helpful in housework, but don't depend on her to impart parenting values to the child. The tendency is that when a maid is there, we leave everything to her ... relax and not do our part.

M2 has no experience of having a maid in his family. But he stays on the negative side when asked how he feels about maids: 'I have learned from friends that children tend to pick up the (wrong) values of their maids. These helpers often give way to the children who then grow up without learning to respect people. Even worse, maids may abuse your children when you are not around - this has been reported from time to time in the papers.'

M3 has a maid at home. He agrees with M1: 'The maid can never take the role of the parents. My wife feels strongly about this. However, the maid can offer useful help in the housework, allowing my wife to parent and teach our children.'

Though his family has never had a maid, M4 confides his feelings when asked to comment:

We have never felt the need for a maid. But from my in-law's experience, I do acknowledge that a good maid is a great source of help at home, specifically with the housework and freeing others in the family to attend to other concerns.

But maids also spend a lot of time at home with the children. So, whether we like it or not, some of their values can be directly or indirectly imparted to the children.

Also, how adults treat their maids at home will in turn influence the way children regard these helpers.

Whatever it is, the responsibility of child upbringing rests with the parents, not with maids or grandparents.

M5's experience with a maid at home is largely a positive one. He describes the maid's role:

We have a maid. When my wife and I are at work, she is the person-in-charge in that she takes care of the housework. In the morning, she will prepare breakfast and then cook lunch for my two older kids when they return from school. But these two older ones are very independent and do not need much watching over.

She'll also take care of our youngest child, Andrew, while my wife and I are at work. But when I return home, I'll take over the care of Andrew.

So, our maid is very much a domestic helper in that she sweeps the floor, cooks the meals ... The parenting is left to my wife and me.

M6's experience with a maid at home in 1985 had been a negative one. The family had lots of problem with her. This then resulted in him staying at home full-time to care for the home and children. He explains: 'I was earning much less than my wife. By staying at home, I could help to save the cost of having a maid in the house.'

Grandparents. Though M1's children are never looked after by any grandparent, he seems to regard this option as better than having a maid do it. He explains:

I think getting grandparents to care for your children is better. A maid is only paid to do her job. But there are some maids who are good ... but rarely. So, grandparents is a good option for child caring provided they can and are willing. They must be happy to support your family need in this area.

M2 has mixed feelings about his children being cared for by their grandparents. He shares his experience with a tinge of sadness:

My mother-in-law was staying with us when our children were young. She helped us care for them. When she died, my mother came over to help us with the children during the hours when both my wife and I were at work.

My mother-in-law was not a Christian. I could see that some of the values that she was imparting to my children were not biblical. Hence, there were times I had to tell her off.

Perhaps, I am seeing the effects today - my children accepted Christ when they were young ... went to church with us ... attended Sunday School. But today, they have lost interest in church. Maybe it was a lack of biblical upbringing in their early years ... maybe it is the influence of peer pressure today. I am disappointed.

But the positive thing about it all is that having our children cared for by their grandparents in the early years had allowed us to work and be financially stable.

Like M1, M3 also feels that grandparents are better caregivers than maids because 'they have the necessary experience, and are likely to show more love because they are related to the children.' However, M3 believes that grandparents also cannot replace the parents themselves. He stresses: 'I have learned that values imparted by grandparents may not be always right too. They may dote too much on the children, encouraging them to become self-indulgent ... they may exercise favouritism, causing sibling rivalry. In short, even grandparents cannot take over the role of parenting.'

The grandmother of M4's wife lives near to where they are. As such, she has been a great help in taking care of their child whenever he and his wife need to be away from home.

Additionally, M4's mother-in-law is tutoring his son, Melvin, in the school subject of Chinese. He is grateful that these 'extended family members have enriched their family life with their sharing and helping.' He adds further: 'We are fortunate in that they leave family decisions to us ... they will not interfere in how we want to bring up Melvin. Some families may have elderly folks trying to influence the child's upbringing. This often brings conflict into the situation.'

Getting grandparents to help care for their children had also not worked out well for M6 and his wife. He recalls:

My son was asthmatic since young. We did try to get my mother to care for him initially. But we discovered that she had her own ways of doing things. Unfortunately, her ways had often brought regular asthmatic attacks upon my son. Hence, there were much misunderstanding between my wife and my mother.

Perceptions of success: All the conversational partners do not view themselves as failures. However, they do describe success in terms of different emphases. Their stories below will capture these perceptions.

Results matter. M1 has just switched to a teaching career after about 20 years as a counselling officer in the armed forces. This is because the military has a 'young' policy and those nearing age 45 are given the option of switching to a second career. M1 looks back at his military career with pride because it is a 'noble task to take care of fellow soldiers.' He shares of his ups and downs while serving in the military:

I counselled soldiers facing problems, especially family problems. I tried to help them resolve their issues in life. Sometimes, it had been tough ... I had to refer such cases. But there were good memories ... like seeing people improving their lives and having control over their lives. These were some indicators of success in my work as a counselling officer when I was with the armed forces.

I remember on one occasion, I was called to counsel a soldier who was contemplating suicide. I was activated and given the task of dissuading him from jumping down a high-rise building. It was scary. But I eventually managed to convince him not to jump. It was very satisfying even though it took me 3 1/2 hours!

On another occasion, I did not find out enough information about the marital conflict of a soldier. In my enthusiasm to help, I suggested some inappropriate solutions. In the end, I had to do damage control to help the couple to patch up again. I think I had failed on that occasion.

Looking back, I basically became frustrated whenever I couldn't see the end product appearing, or sensed that my best did not seem good enough. When support was not forthcoming from others; when deadlines were not met; when I had to answer to my superiors for delays, I began to question my own abilities.

Prestige of high education and position. M2 started work as a technician after completing his 'O' level. Over the years, he has worked himself up - gaining a polytechnic diploma and attaining the position of a manager. He relates his story:

I started work as a technician. Though I felt contented in my job as far as learning and exposure were concerned, I was ambitious. I wanted to climb the ladder of success. I did not want to remain a technician for life. That would mean not going anywhere. But I only had an 'O' level education then. I could not go anywhere. I would need a higher education to do that.

That spurred me on to do part-time studies at the polytechnic in 1979. I worked in the day and studied at night for the next 5 years. In 1984, I graduated with a diploma in estate management.

After I received my diploma, I went over to a private company as a property officer. I found that it was different from the statutory board that I had worked in previously. For one thing, there were less red tapes ... I made my own decisions and used my own initiatives. This was what I liked. My self-esteem was also improved. I was answerable to one boss - the GM. In my previous place, I had to answer to many people ... I am one who prefers not to be told what to do, but be allowed to use my own initiatives.

However, I have no dreams about going into business and be my own boss in spite of my desire for autonomy in work ... I myself have seen how businesses have failed. It is not easy, and you need lots of ready cash to back you up, especially in bad times. Hence, I have come to the conclusion that it is still best to work for someone; to be a wage earner.

I worked in this company where I was the property officer for 5 years before I switched again. I had not been promoted; I was ambitious and I wanted to climb up the ladder as high as I could.

In my next move, I went over to project management. I became the senior project executive of a corporation that was managing the construction of 6 golf resorts on Batam (an Indonesian island near Singapore).

After some time with this corporation, I went to work for a Christian organisation in its move to some new premises. I had actually wanted to help them part-time. But since they really needed a full-time person, I went over to join them for 2 years. After helping them to settle into their new premises, I felt that to continue with them would be quite unfruitful. Hence, I left this Christian organisation and joined a construction firm.

I was given the position of project manager - my highest achievement so far ... this was in 1996. Because I was good in paper work and legal matters, the firm promoted me to contracts manager, only just below the GM. I helped the firm to attend court cases. Some of our contractors had failed to pay their sub-contractors because of poor cash flow. These sub-contractors then sued our firm, and we in turn sued the contractors.

Looking back over the years, I can say that when I was young, I wanted very much to prove myself to people; to stretch myself so that I could be promoted. But I have never resorted to backstabbing others or try to curry favour my boss. But these underhand tactics are very real in working life.

But my perspective in life has changed somewhat because I am much older now. I realise that there is more to life than just positions ... I realise that I am looking for something more. And as a Christian, I am beginning to desire to go deeper into the Bible.

True to one's abilities and priorities. M3, by his own admission, does not like the cut-and-thrust competition in the workplace. He is by nature more bent toward cooperating with others and places great importance in family life. He shares how he has lost out but harbours no regret:

There are people who try to move their way up by playing politics. But ultimately, I think in our country, merits still count. If you use only relationships to get to where you are, but lack the necessary know-how and skills, your deficiencies will show up eventually. You'll then lose your edge to compete effectively. I would say that merits are still a more assured way of moving up in one's career.

Being a less competitive person, I have often felt inadequate to meet the challenge when given opportunities to prove myself. However, though I may have somehow lost out in my career development, I feel that my personal health is better - I don't have to sit uncomfortably in a high position, always feeling inadequate to do the job well.

I don't enjoy feeling pushed and being on my toes all the time. But there are some who enjoy intense competition because they like the push and the challenge. In my case, I have opted to be more cooperative and harmonious in working attitude.

I remember in 1999, I was given an opportunity to be the acting head of a division in my company. But I really felt uneasy because I know I had to handle much competition, expectations and uncertainties that would come with the job. So, I approached my boss and told him to get someone else.

It was a struggle - I was almost there, but because I didn't feel strong enough to cope with the added competition, pressure and expectations, I had to say 'no'. This seemed like not taking a good step forward ... not an easy decision.

But as I now look back at my decision philosophically, I feel comforted - I still have enough for my family and myself, yet without having to cope with misery day to day. I am convinced that this has been a wise decision personally. But from the corporate perspective, I have made the unconventional decision of not taking a step forward in my career path.

Yes, I aspire to be a good worker, but I am also mindful of my own ability - whether I can live up to what is entailed, and if not, I will not take up the challenge.

I also value my family highly and I am not prepared to compromise on that. My wife also does not expect me to provide the family with the non-essential luxuries in life. Because of this outlook, I have learned to say 'enough is enough'. Hence, we are basically a one-income family today. I personally feel that we are not a typical family in our contemporary society - most of my colleagues prefer the dual-income arrangement as it gives them better financial stability and standard of living.

M5 shares quite similar sentiments with M3 about success in life. Though their backgrounds and experiences are different, both emphasise on accepting one's abilities and priorities, and committing oneself to work one's best with these in view. M5 says:

Right now, I have been given a job which I can handle. In fact, I am somehow prepared in advance to take on new jobs that have come along over the years. I think I am alright at this point in time because I am doing a job that is within my capacity.

Looking back at my 21 years with the armed forces, I have had good opportunities and good jobs. And along also comes appropriate recognition - I am now a major. But if I am aiming to be a one-star general, it will be a different perception altogether.

Besides earning my bread and butter, my work has also helped to mould me as a person. For example, I am a very shy person ... in fact, I am an introvert. I am not comfortable standing in front and leading a discussion.

But I remember in 1982, I was given a project that required me to teach after I had returned from an overseas training stint. Fortunately, I was also given the

opportunity to be trained as an instructor, and this prepared me to handle teaching responsibilities in the workplace. Today, I am able to lead small groups or chair meetings though I am still an introvert by nature.

I am now a deputy commanding officer in an air-force unit with a number of people under me. I can see that my responsibilities have increased slowly ... in parts that I can handle.

I remember in 1988 I was given an assignment - to organise a productivity convention within the air force. I first thought that this was beyond me. But when I responded to the challenge and had gone through it, I realised that this was something I could do ... of course, with much dependence on God's enabling.

Besides accepting his abilities and doing his best with them, M5 also speaks about standing firm on his priorities:

I remember a time when I was literally thrown into the sea for refusing to drink. Though I do drink occasionally, I have difficulty consenting to drink myself silly ... cup after cup or bottle after bottle. Hence, to such demands, I'll say 'no' because one cup will lead to another ... one bottle will lead to another ... there's no end to it. I'll just have to stand firm and make my choice.

Of course, some of them today still tell me that I could have done much better if only I have played along with them in their fun. These are my bosses and superiors. But I don't see myself as losing out ... just standing firm on my priorities.

Though both my wife and I are working, we have already decided on our priorities within this arrangement. This means that we must learn to say 'no' to certain things if we are to have time for our children, for each other and for other people. That's why I am still not a full commanding officer and my wife is still not a manager.

Nevertheless, if I were to list some things as a measure of success in my life, they would include:

- affirmation by the air force in that I have been given a command position
- results in terms of seeing work done and achieving new targets
- help given to people in their times of need
- sense of doing things that are meaningful, regardless of the material reward and status they may bring.

Modest lifestyle rich in relationships. As far as M4 is concerned, to enjoy better financial stability and standard of living is not in terms of being able to make or service purchases of many possessions. In fact, M4 counters that having more possessions could imply

less financial freedom because of increased financial obligations in terms of loan servicing and maintenance. At this point in his life, M4 prefers to view success in terms of a modest lifestyle that focuses on relationships rather than possessions. He advocates:

At this point of my life, I am thinking about some readjustments in my life ... to slow down and give more time to my real passion in life (yet to be identified) ... more time for relationships. I realise that work is not everything; only a means to an end. For example, if I have fallen ill, the company will not be there to stand by me ... only my family and close friends.

But I will have to consider any switch today carefully ... how best to change my pace without going into too much uncertainties. Family stability is a key consideration. Yes, I am in a dilemma today - the pace of work will not get slower, but will pick up even more. In my plans to slow down, I will have to work out certain decisions. For example, I may want to sell our private property and move into public housing so as to free ourselves from financial debts.

So far, our one-income arrangement has worked out well for us though I must admit that I do feel the pressure as the sole breadwinner. But this allows my wife to have more time with our son and other people.

We have successfully opted for a modest lifestyle with one income all these years. To me, the basic essentials in a modest lifestyle would include:

- freedom from financial debts
- a roof above our heads
- enough food for family
- educational opportunities for children and personal growth
- budget for leisure
- decent savings
- some ability to give and share.

I would not consider a car as a basic essential in Singapore. But it's useful if one has to travel often. Otherwise, the public transport system is efficient enough ... buses, MRT trains and taxis.

Being practical, not popular. Most men will have difficulty describing themselves as having done well in life if they have been home-bound. But M6, who has experienced three retrenchments and has since been parenting full-time at home while his wife works, feels very positive about himself. He talks about the reasons for his healthy self-image in spite of adverse opinions from others:

When my wife and I first decided that I should be the one to stay home, I was at peace with it. But other parties - in-laws and family members - could not accept it because the Chinese culture viewed that men must work outside the home. Some friends were also of the same opinion.

But I was clear that it was a decision between my wife and I ... that I stayed home for the sake of our son, and not because I was lazy to work.

There were times at family gatherings when some of my cousins would ask me what I was doing. I would tell them that I was full-time at home looking after the children and doing the housework.

I remember on one occasion when I was asked that question, my mother-in-law quickly answered on my behalf that I was running my own business. She then cautioned my wife and I to answer likewise whenever relatives asked that same question again.

I am also not really troubled about marrying a wife who is academically better than me. When we began to get serious in our relationship, I asked her: 'Would you mind marrying someone who is lower than you academically?' Her answer was a firm 'no'.

I was attracted to her because of her personality. She was attracted to me because she liked my leadership quality. She confessed that she saw in me a reliable and dependable person.

Yes, some Christian friends did discourage her from going out with me. To them, I was lower than her academically and less mature than her as a Christian. But we managed to overcome those hindrances. These people changed their attitude after knowing me better.

As for our parents, my father was proud that I had married a graduate. But my mother-in-law was a different story. Initially, she was not too unhappy with me - she had 4 daughters and were concerned that they were not able to find life partners. But when I was out of work and eventually became a full-time person at home, she began to compare me with her other sons-in-law.

Our relationship was strained and my wife and I avoided visiting her. She felt our displeasure and got an uncle to talk to us. We told him the reason. Today, my mother-in-law's attitude toward me has changed because she realises that I am sincere and care much for my family.

At the end of the day, what is important to me is that both my wife and I know what is best for our family situation. We make our decisions and do not let others' opinions upset or pressurise us. In fact, we are not ashamed to tell others that we have switched roles - I am not ashamed to tell others that I am a full-time househusband; my wife is also not ashamed to let others know the same about me.

5.2.4 Interpreting the sentiments. Having heard the stories of the conversational partners, the task now is to interpret the sentiments expressed in order to present a preliminary profile of the average Christian man in Singapore as a basis for further research. Below is a thematic interpretation of the men's sentiments:

- *Competition is inevitable in a meritocratic society.* M1 is one who recognises the inevitability of competition in the workplace. He acknowledges that this is even necessary in a meritocratic work culture. Indeed, outcomes, results and performances are important to M1. He even admits that he gets frustrated and doubts himself when he 'couldn't see the end product appearing, or sensed that my best did not seem good enough.'

M2 is all eager to make his way to the top since he first started work. To him, the way to work his way out of his humble beginnings is to sharpen his competitive edge by way of better education and experience. As he puts it: 'It is the fittest who will survive. If you have low education or any shortcomings, you better do something about yourself ... to catch up with other people.'

Though M3 is not a very driven person by his own admission, he accepts the fact that 'it is only reasonable for people to want to be ahead in life.' Sometimes, he even finds himself drawn into the competition to be ahead 'just to be part of the competing culture.' But on the whole, M3 is contented just to be doing what he can manage, implying that he wants to be sure of delivering the results.

Being in the information technology industry, M4 is well acquainted with the challenges of fast change, innovation and maximisation of resources. He has come to terms with the frenetic pace in his work - 'there's no way for you to stand still or slow down for your own interest ... you'll become irrelevant in no time.'

- *Work-family balance is not easy to maintain.* The working men take their breadwinning role seriously. They work hard not only to maximise their potential, but also to provide well for their family materially. Understandably, most of them find it difficult to balance work and family demands.

Some of them feel that their family members misunderstand them at times. For example, M1 speaks of bad timing when 'things happen at work when the family needs you.'

M2 laments that while he and his wife have worked hard to provide well for their children, they have little time to parent them. In fact, he is disappointed that his children today lack Christian commitment and wonders if there has been 'a lack of biblical upbringing in their early years.'

M3 shares that his wife will openly remind him if he is spending too much time at work. This does sound like nagging to him at times and that she does not understand 'the stress and strain that he is going through at work.'

M4 is now trying to make up for lost time in that he wants to help his son develop a foundation of good values as he is into his teenage years. Also, he wants to spend more time communicating and praying with his wife about how to journey the next phase of their life together. However, he confesses, 'I do not have much time at this point to really get down to doing it.' Though he is seriously considering a slower pace, he wants to do it 'without going into too much uncertainties' that will affect the family's financial stability.

M5 ensures that both his career and that of his wife will not affect their family life adversely. Thus, while not deliberately trying to be under-achievers in the workplace, both he and his wife have learned to say 'no' to certain things. This then allows them more time to be together as a family. Though they have adequate financially, the trade-off is that he is 'still not a full commanding officer and she is still not a manager.'

On the other hand, M6 who has spent many years at home caring and parenting his two children, is quite unprepared to do some regular work outside the home. He knows that a regular job can be demanding and views his priority now as still with his children.

- Family responsibilities are often shared rather than gender specific. There seems to be a narrowing of the gender gap in Singapore. What this means is that family roles and responsibilities are often shared between man and woman without any strict adherence to gender distinctions. Rather, the determinative question is this: 'How can man and wife share in family tasks in order to bring about the best possible arrangement for the family?'

Though M1 believes that man should be directly involved in the breadwinning role, he feels comfortable sharing this role with his wife if the home and children are not unduly neglected, even if she earns more than him. M1 says: 'When I married my wife, she was already earning more than I. But who earns more is not really an issue with me. What's more important is what we do with the income we have; how do we spend it wisely. What's important to me is that I still have a part in bringing in money for the family.'

Though he very much wants to bring in the money for the family, M1 is also equally willing to pick up the broom at home. He shares how he and his wife work together at home: 'On my part, I will take care of all the housework - cleaning up, washing dishes ... and all that. She will take care of the children's homework ... some sort of division of labour.'

However, this 'division of labour' between man and wife is one arrangement that is more idealistic than realistic in M2's situation. He explains: 'Both of us had to be working because our children were small and we needed the money

for them. Now, they are much older ... but they still need our financial support for their studies.'

M3 is the breadwinner in his family. However, he considers it his responsibility not only to support his family materially, but also emotionally even as a man. In spite of his heavy work demands, he wants to let his children know that 'it is their father who has to take the lead in imparting good, Christian values to them.' Hence, he makes and takes time to work with his wife in nurturing their children together. He adds: 'I use family time on weekends to bond with my family - going to church together, interacting with other Christians, shopping ... and doing other things together.'

Echoing the same thinking is M4 who works in the fast-paced computer industry. Though his work is still taking him very much away from home, he is now reading and attending seminars on how to impart values to his teenage son. He says this concerning his son: 'But today, I do see the need for greater involvement on my part in his life. I think it is important to leave behind a good Christian legacy to my child' And concerning his relationship with his wife, M4 adds: 'My wife and I are considering how we can be more involved in touching lives ... we need to see how we can fit into each other's passion. At this point, we need to communicate and pray more together.'

M5 is another father who does not see child nurturing as belonging only to the female gender. Married to a woman who is a computer professional, he says this of their family situation: 'My wife is busy during this period with a project that will stretch from this year till next - this makes it even more important for me to spend time with my children ... at least one of us must do it ... There is this sense of mutual support. I have never understood that a wife cannot work outside the home. I respect and honour my wife's need to be fulfilled as a person ... to allow her the choice to do what she wants as a person. Also, I have never understood that housework is only my wife's job. I'll help in whatever housework that needs to be done though we do have a maid.'

The wives of M1, M3 and M4 are homemakers and all tertiary educated. And the reason they are staying at home is primarily pragmatic - if one parent is to stay at home for the children, then the more nurturing makeup of the mother often makes her the natural choice.

M1 recalls why his wife has decided to stop her work as an accountant: 'My wife stopped work when our second child came ... The reason being she wanted to give more time to the family. Moreover, our older child was about to go to primary school ... taking care of family demands can be stretching for her as well.'

In the same vein, M3 says this of his wife: 'When our second child came, she stopped work and has since stayed home to mother the children. But I must admit that to have my wife as a second income earner has always been attractive to me - it takes the load off me as the sole breadwinner.'

M4's wife stopped work when their only child was born. He reveals that 'she had never enjoyed herself in the working world' and 'prefers to help and interact with others in a non-employed capacity.'

However, M1, M3 and M4 all express no objection to their wives returning to the workplace one day.¹⁷

M1: 'She can return to work when time is right because I know she needs to develop herself as a person too, and not necessarily for the finance.'

M3: 'I realise too that for my wife to stay at home all the time with the children can be very stifling to her own personal development and fulfilment ... I'll let her have the final say as to whether she will return to full-time work in the future.'

M4: 'However, she still feels fulfilled because of her involvement, interaction and networking with other people not as an employed worker, but as a concerned person. But should she one day decide to return to full-time work, I will not stop her from doing so.'

As the only man who is parenting full-time at home among the six conversational partners, M6 has this to say about the decision: 'It was basically a practical one when we first made it - our son needed one parent to be with him full-time at home because of his asthmatic condition when he was young; the cost of living was rising rapidly; if we needed to depend on one income, then it would have to be my wife's since she was earning more than I.'

- *Major decisions are discussed in order to adopt the most beneficial family arrangement.* Indeed, all the men stress that they discuss with their wives before making major family decisions - such as work, finance and children's needs. This implies that while the men acknowledge male headship in the family, they also recognise the need to share leadership with their wives in various concerns of the home.

For example, M1 says: 'I would prefer to arrive at joint decisions with my wife on important concerns. If we cannot agree on something, I would prefer to differ the final decision till a later time ... examine why we cannot agree.'

Expressing this same consensus-reaching approach, M3 adds: 'My wife and I do discuss and agree on certain basic principles in relation to the disciplining of our children ... In matters pertaining to finance, I do have the final say. My wife's contribution is more in the area of our children's behaviour and upbringing.'

¹⁷ This provides a corrective to what has been concluded earlier based on the opinion poll - that many highly educated wives have become homemakers because they and their husbands subscribe to this as a biblical pattern.

In the case of M5, he relates an experience with his wife: 'I believe strongly that as head of the household, I am responsible to take the lead and to act with my wife as helper. It is not a matter of telling her what to do, but hearing from her ... the wise thing is to listen to her; to get feedback ... When our second child, Sarah, was born, my wife and I talked and discussed about how best to manage the family. We gave something a try - my wife stayed at home for about a year. She realised that that was not what she would want to do. She felt that she could be more productive working outside the home ... socially fulfilling for her and financially helpful to the family.'

M6's decision to stay home for his children is one made on practical grounds and mutually agreed - his wife's earning power as an accountant is stronger than his, and his children need a parent full-time at home. He explains: 'We talked and prayed about the matter. We both felt that I should be the one to stay home.' Thus, both he and his wife have decided not to stick to the old tradition of 'man works outside and woman stays home.' In spite of this unconventional arrangement, M6 says this of his 'status' at home: 'Even though I was not the breadwinner, I did not lose my headship and leadership at home. Yes, my wife is the breadwinner, but I am the one running the finances because all the money comes to me. In other major decisions, we discuss them with each other.'

This openness on the part of the men to discuss and seek the most beneficial family arrangement applies not only in the area of breadwinning, but also in child caring and housekeeping concerns. In this regard, the men acknowledge that child care centres, maids and grandparents are possible alternatives in child caring and housekeeping in spite of their drawbacks. The one important thing is this - these alternatives free couples to perform the important role of parenting their children as responsible fathers and mothers.

Perhaps, M1 best describes the collective sentiments of the men here when he says: 'Help from maids and child care centres is only good at certain times when such support services are needed for family adjustments to changes ... grandparents is a good option for child caring provided they can and are willing. They must be happy to support your family need in this area.'

Summing up, this thematic interpretation of the men's sentiments presents some notable features that profile the average Christian man in Singapore:

- i. He accepts competition as inevitable in a meritocratic society.
- ii. He works hard so as to develop to his best potential and to provide well for his family materially.
- iii. He often has little time to bond with his family relationally unless he makes a deliberate effort to do so.

iv. He does not equate male headship with sole leadership at home. Hence, he shares or delegates family responsibilities, including that of breadwinning, housekeeping and parenting.

v. He discusses rather than dictates decisions related to major family concerns. Hence, he is pragmatic enough to seek and adopt alternatives that are most beneficial to the family. These include choosing options like dual-income, child care centre, maid and grandparent to meet the breadwinning, child caring and housekeeping needs of the home.

5.2.5 Suggestions on being pro-family in a meritocratic work culture. Having tried to hear and understand the work-family complexities faced by some Christian men in Singapore, this chapter will now conclude with some suggestions on how men can work toward being pro-family in a meritocratic society. These are not meant to be pet answers, but as ideas to provoke further thinking in one's attempt to explore options and alternatives.

Before presenting these suggestions, it is appropriate at this point to briefly review some of the biblical-theological formulations summarised in Chapter IV (pp274-78):

- *Success has to do with pushing oneself to do one's honest best, but not necessarily to end up as the best.* It is not about winning over others though this can be a valid motivation. More importantly, it is about finishing well with integrity and dignity. Competition is for one to reach his personal best without reducing the worth of others. Competition is desirable if it is a way of bringing the best out of one another; of spurring one another unto love and good works.

- *The realisation of a man's potential does not only mean that he has achieved something materially because what he has achieved relationally is just as important.* This emphasis on both the material and relational implies that a man must balance his pursuits in life so that these are in line with God's values and purpose. The relational dimension further implies that a man's potential is not so much about his independence of others, but his interdependence with others.

- *Enjoyment is not only personal as it also embraces the responsibility to love God and others with one's material blessings.* The materially successful man has the spiritual responsibility to be godly before the Almighty and the moral responsibility to be gracious to the less fortunate.

- *Since the Christ-like personality embodies both masculine and feminine traits, taking up certain roles may just make one more Christlike rather than less masculine or less feminine.* For example, child nurturing and housework do not necessarily make a man less masculine. On the other hand, earning big money and holding a high-position job do not necessarily make a woman less

feminine. In fact, such endeavours by the man and woman may well be their way of serving each other, and the family with Christ-like love and faithfulness.

- *Man as sole provider is a cultural rather than a biblical assertion.* Eden was an agricultural setting whereby manual labour, not technology, was the means of livelihood. Hence, the physically stronger Adam was told by God to work the ground, and Eve to care for children and home. But the age of technology has made such division unnecessary because the most valued work outside the home today demands more brain than muscles. Advances in the study of families in Bible times have also indicated that many of the passages pertaining to family life are descriptive rather than prescriptive in purpose. In fact, the family structure in those days was more like a clan, and thus, more extended and very unlike the structure of the contemporary nuclear family.

- *Equal regard means that both man and woman, as partners in life, are to have equal access to the privileges and responsibilities of the workplace and the home.* The man is to accept the fact that his wife can be as good as, if not better than, him in providing for the family economically. Instead of feeling threatened and trying to stop her from so providing, the man does well to complement her in areas where she is lacking, even if it means taking on more home tasks.

Measuring the features that profile the average Christian man in Singapore against these biblical-theological formulations, some concerns come to light:

- i. Though the man is to do all things well for the glory of God, competition today can dull his compassion for people.
- ii. Though the man is to work hard in developing his God-given potential and providing well for his family, the meritocratic culture today can lure him into elitism and materialism.
- iii. Though God does bless the deserving man with success and achievement in this world, the passion for results and recognition today can blind him to the importance of relationships and recreation, especially with loved ones.
- iv. Though God has made man to head his family within a framework of shared leadership, the busyness of working life today can lead him to knowingly or unknowingly shirk his responsibilities and push them to others, especially to his wife.
- v. Though man is answerable to God as to how well he manages his family, the pragmatism today can tempt him to use people and things as means to safeguard only his personal and family well-being, and thus, promoting self-centredness and individualism rather than other-centredness and community.

Having enumerated these concerns, they will now serve as a basis that 'authorises' some suggestions on being pro-family in a meritocratic work culture. Before that, it must be acknowledged that the Government of Singapore is now making some serious efforts to encourage Singaporeans to have strong families. In fact, it recognises that strong families is an important pillar in nation building. This statement has been made to the nation:

Singaporeans have always valued strong families. They are the foundation for healthy lives and wholesome communities. But we must ensure they are strengthened even further, because the 21st century will bring greater pressures on them. With an ageing population, there will be fewer working adults to care for aged parents. Children will need to be supported through more years of education. In many cases both mother and father will be working. Their jobs will be more demanding. Children will be open to more influences and be harder to manage.

To ensure that these do not strain the family too much in the future, we must constantly reinforce family bonding. Government policies must reflect this emphasis. Employers too must play their part by allowing more flexible work arrangements. Individuals can take the strain off ourselves and our families by leading a healthy lifestyle and planning for our old age.

Strong families give security and meaning to life. They are the 'base camp' from which our young venture forth to reach for high aspirations. They are the conduit through which our elderly pass on their values and lessons they have learnt in life.

They ensure that our children grow up happy and well and our elders enjoy respect and dignity. They are an irreplaceable source of care and support when we need it, at whatever age (Government 1999:12).

In recent times, the Government has indeed tried to encourage building strong families in Singapore though its call to economic excellence is never muted. This is largely through the efforts of the Ministry of Community Development and Sports (MCDS) which works closely with other organisations. For example, in encouraging father involvement in the family, the MCDS has endorsed the setting up of the Singapore Centre for Fathering (SCF). This centre frequently conducts fathering seminars in the workplace, as well as organising special fun activities to help in father-child bonding. In addition, 'family day' events and family life

conferences have been organised from time to time by the MCDS in collaboration with the SCF and other family life agencies. Family life educators and experts have been invited to share their insights at these conferences. The aim is to create greater family awareness and to discuss how others' experiences can help families in Singapore. Pre-marital, marriage enrichment and parenting events have been scheduled regularly by the MCDS together with related agencies for the purpose of public education and participation. Even more recently, the MCDS has endorsed the launching of a new programme in Singapore. This is the Diploma in Family Life Education (DipFLE) which is offered by the Edith Cowan University in Australia. The DipFLE is the first of its kind in Singapore and is taught locally in collaboration with the Fei Yue Counselling Centre and the Academy of Human Development. Those who successfully complete the programme will be recognised as trained family life educators in Singapore. All these point to the Government's desire to promote public awareness in the value of strong family life.

In view of this, the suggestions proposed are not meant to be explored independently as an individual or even as a church. Rather, they are meant to be explored in conjunction with the nation's efforts to make strong families as a pillar of society. In this way, the undertakings of the Christian or the Church are not merely some means to stay apart from society, but really actions to impact society for God's glory and human good.

How can the individual Christian be pro-family? One suggestion is to *work hard so as to earn enough to turn limited time and energy into actual pro-family events*. With good incomes, people have enough to possess what they want materially. However, this will only be succumbing to the lure of consumerism. Hence, people do well to remind themselves that though they may have enough to possess many material things, they do not have to possess all of them in order to be happy. But then, how do people make pro-family 'investments' with the

earnings they have? Some common family concerns today are highlighted in order to get some leads in answering this question:

i. The education system in Singapore is competitive even at the primary school level. Parents obviously want their children to succeed educationally, and many of them feel that personally coaching their children in their studies is a good means of bonding with them. However, the reality is that they often lack the time and energy after work to do a good job with their children. Moreover, some have found that they do not have the skills, patience and updated knowledge to tutor their children effectively in their studies. Hence, what is meant to be a time of bonding between parent and child can turn into a very stressful period for both.

There are many tutoring centres in Singapore today, and these are complemented by numerous individuals offering private tuition. Of course, the better-staffed centres and better-qualified individuals will offer their services at comparatively higher charges. But parents who can and are willing to pay such higher fees will enjoy good returns – children will be competently tutored, leaving their parents to just monitor progress and encourage effort, and most of all, maximising every opportunity together for relationship building and bonding.

ii. Men have recently been encouraged to be more actively involved in housekeeping, especially if their wives are working. Such involvement is supposed to help bring man and wife closer together. Again, the reality is that both may already be too tired, and the limited time and energy they have can be better spent in just being together and enjoying each other without exerting themselves any further.

An alternative then is to employ a full-time maid/domestic helper. The flourishing number of maid employment agencies in Singapore is indicative that many families are turning to such an option. However, the supply of such 'maid power' comes totally outside of Singapore – with the Philippines and Indonesia being the main sources. Those from the Philippines cost more to employ as they are largely English speaking and familiar with urban living – this makes it easier for them to fit into the Singapore setting which uses English widely and is highly urbanised. But this option of foreign domestic helpers is not without difficulties. One of which is the cultural gap between these domestic helpers and their Singapore employers. This gap is especially problematic when the maid concerned speaks little English and comes from a village background, and thus, ignorant of many of the norms and practices in urban living. In fact, many conflicts between these maids and their employers are the results of this cultural gap and misunderstanding. On the other hand, the many known cases of maid abuse do indicate that many Singaporeans lack patience and understanding in their treatment of their foreign maids.

In short, though employing a foreign maid is a viable option in relieving the couple of the burden of housework, it is no guarantee that things will be easier

at home. In fact, the very presence of a stay-in foreign maid can easily upset the established relational dynamics in the family system. Hence, besides being able to pay for a maid, what is equally essential is being prepared to relate with a maid in a cross-culturally sensitive manner. Yes, the might of money can demand that the onus is on the maid to please her employer. But for the Christian family, the power of God's love and grace dictates that this hired hand be treated as a worthy human being created in the image of God.

iii. Family members need something to look forward to in the midst of working or studying hard. This implies that a time for rest and holiday needs to be deliberately marked out in the family's calendar so that work and studies are not the only emphases in family life. There is a time to relax and slow down without feeling guilty about it; a time to be away from it all as a family.

Many Singapore families are taking overseas holidays during school vacations. This indicates that many are willing to spend money in order to have some time together. However, the thing that prevents busy people from coming together as a family is often not a problem with money, but with the mind. This has to do with a cultivated lifestyle – that is – the habit of being so intense and driven in what one has been doing that the preoccupation with it makes it difficult for one to focus on and enjoy a new experience.

That being the tendency, the act of coming together must then be a constant feature in family life in spite of many competing demands. Learning to enjoy the present moment together, be it just a family meal, is a disciplined state of mind that can be cultivated only through deliberate, regular efforts. Indeed, family holidays are truly 'time together' not because people have the money for them, but because they have the mind for them.

iv. Many parents in Singapore like to send their children for enrichment instructions, such as playing the piano. This is not necessarily wrong, especially if the child has an aptitude for it. However, many of such instructions are also examination-oriented, and this inevitably adds another load to the already examination-stressed child.

Perhaps, a better option is to get together for some exercise-oriented activities - like swimming, canoeing and some racket games. These activities will inject the element of fun, so essential in family bonding, into the time together. These will also help one to de-stress and keep fit physically. Indeed, healthy bonding, healthy minds and healthy bodies are worth making the effort.

A second suggestion as to how a Christian can be pro-family in a meritocratic society is to *adopt an extended family member into one's own home*. This can be a grandparent, an elderly uncle or aunt. After all, the family in biblical times was definitely more extended than the nuclear family of today.

Such thinking helps to temper the harshness of meritocracy in two ways:

i. When an elderly person becomes economically inactive, he/she often experiences a loss of self-worth and a sense of redundancy. By adopting such a member of one's extended family into the family, and allowing him/her to help out in areas like supervision, housekeeping or child caring (not the parenting), the elderly person is made to feel that he/she can still contribute. In fact, their presence at home can give the working parents better peace of mind in the workplace, knowing that both home and children are in good hands. And by helping these parents to work with better concentration, the elderly person contributes indirectly to the economic well-being of the family and the country.

ii. One danger of meritocracy is that of making yourself look good and others look bad. By adopting an extended family member into the home (often an elderly person), it reminds one that he/she is not only to look after and advance his/her own interests, but also to care for others, especially those who are related to him/her. Hence, this is pro-family in that it turns one away from an inward-looking concern for oneself to an outward-looking concern that embraces others in the extended family. This is one good value that all parents will do well to model before and pass on to their young ones.

In fact, many social problems associated with an ageing population are already looming ahead in Singapore - labour shortage, high medical costs and increased elderly care. The population growth has been slow over many years. The effectiveness of the population control programme during the poor era of the early 1960s, and the present demands of success-oriented living have discouraged many from having more children.

To deal with the anticipated elderly issues, people in Singapore are encouraged to view elderly care not simply as a social responsibility, but as a family responsibility as well. However, many families today prefer to privatise their family life - that is, to guard their 'nuclear' status.¹⁸ Thus, many couples are unwilling to let an extended family member to stay in with them. Potential conflicts resulting from different ideas in homemaking and child caring are often cited as reasons for this unwillingness.

¹⁸ 'Nuclear' here refers to the family structure comprising man, wife and their child(ren) staying in the same household.

While acknowledging that such differences are real, it must be stressed again that family life today is very much privatised - restricted only to the parents and their children. This preference can be regarded as an expression of an inwardness that downplays the need for a wider community.

For Christian families to help strengthen the bonds of human relationships in their society, what is needed then is for them to first nurture a wider and stronger community sense within their own family context. Hence, the suggestion of adopting an extended family member into one's home is an attempt to bring about this sense of social cohesion - learning to bridge intergenerational gaps and live together within the family as a fundamental step toward living together with others in the larger society. More importantly for the Christian family, it is modelling before the young the virtue of loving and honouring the elders, especially one's parents.

How can the Church be pro-family? Many churches in Singapore today have set up various family-related services for the public. These include child care centres, before-and-after-school care, elderly care, and family counselling. However, much can still be done in terms of setting up more of these facilities and services, and upgrading existing ones. With more financial resources being channelled into such ministries, personnel can be further trained and better ones can be recruited. This will ensure a high quality of facilities and services. In this regard, *the Church should encourage and challenge Christians to give more* in two ways:

- i. Give financially to these facilities and services so that quality can be assured. This will not only benefit the Christians themselves as they too can have access to these, but also to the society or community in general.
- ii. Give time to these facilities and services as volunteers. Many Christians are relevantly trained themselves to effectively complement the full-time staff in these areas. Such volunteerism allows blessed and gifted Christians to look beyond themselves and to 'love their neighbours.'

Many today are highly stressed up as a result of the pressures of contemporary living. It is not surprising then that counselling is emerging slowly but surely as a much sought-after service and profession, even among Christians. In fact, many pastors and lay Christians have been competently trained in counselling because it has become a major need in the contemporary church. While this need is real and valid, what is disturbing is this - many Christians seem to lack grounding in their faith, resulting in them often not able to adequately handle their problems in life. Anthony Yeo (2000:76), who is a Christian himself and serves as Clinical Director of the Counselling and Care Centre in Singapore, sounds out his concern about counselling emerging as a major feature of Christian ministry:

... it is pastoral care that should be the prominent feature of Christian ministry. If people can experience care and concern within the Christian community, not only can problems be dealt with, they would also have available to them resources for coping with difficulties of life

If counselling is needed, it is to be located within the context of pastoral care. I tend to believe that all God's people need care but not all need counselling ... This assumes that not all have special needs, although all may have need for a listening ear, shoulder to cry on and a helping hand.

Taking Yeo's comments a step further, what can be implied is that many Christians who are competently trained in counselling may be using their skills only to meet church needs. In other words, if counselling has become a prominent feature only within the context of church ministry, it does indicate that the Church has failed in two respects - i) it has not adequately strengthened the faith of its people in that many are unable to personally take control of life's problems; ii) it has not made an adequate impact on the larger society in that many of its trained people are serving in church to satisfy 'private consumption' rather than outside church to be a 'healing balm' to the hurting world.

Indeed, the Church in Singapore can still do much to meet family-related needs (like children's education, health care and family welfare) in the larger society because it has been blessed with both the financial and human resources to do so.

The Church can also emphasise and promote family life as a key focus in Christian education. This will help Christians to communicate, to impart values and to establish biblical rituals in family life. Also, with such equipping, they can be encouraged to participate in family life education, or even be family life educators in the workplace as well.

Perhaps, one problem facing many Christians in Singapore today has to do with the fact that they are first-generation believers. This means that many Christian families do not have any Christian home traditions or rituals to go by.¹⁹ What happens then is that the children of these first-generation Christians are constantly taught in church that worshipping God is important, yet they have hardly seen it reinforced at home because there is no vital family worship. The lessons that these young ones have learned in church are then nothing more than empty religious talks to them. Larry Christenson (1970:159) rightly points out:

... Oftentimes young people who rebel against the Christian Faith are not rebelling against God at all. They have never had an actual encounter with the Living God to rebel against. They are rebelling against a dead religious formalism

Christenson must be commended here for a reminder of great significance - faith and its practice are not merely taught to the young in church, but more importantly, to be caught at home. This implies that Christian parents are to exemplify the faith life before their children at home. If children are taught that the worship of God is important, then they must see it not only in church, but also at home as they see their father (and mother) regularly worshipping God at home and bringing the family together in worship. Indeed, for the Christian family,

¹⁹ It is then not surprising that of all the conversational partners, only M5 has categorically mentioned that he maintains a regular family worship.

time together is not just centred on work, studies, things and pleasure, but on the worship of God as well. Otherwise, the message unwittingly sent to the innocent young is that God is given attention only when convenient, and not important enough to make and take time for Him when we have other demands to deal with.

The challenge then is for the church to emphasise family life as a key focus in Christian education. Family-related issues and topics should be deliberately worked into the preaching, teaching and social schedules of the church. For example, a Family Month can be planned annually so that Christians are consciously made to focus on various aspects of family issues and concerns each year over a protracted period. Besides such structured events, the church should also provide informal opportunities all year round for people to come together to share their family pilgrimages and learn from one another. And as mentioned earlier, many first-generation Christians are either indifferent to or ignorant of the importance of family worship as a means to enhance not only family life, but also family faith in God. The church then needs to encourage and challenge parents to both reinforce and re-enact the Christian faith at home - to be examples of recipients of God's love and of lovers after God's heart before their children. Family life becomes strong when there is unconditional devotion to one another as a result of appreciating God's unconditional love for each family member. For example, family worship reminds us that God created man in His own image. Thus, the hardworking man who earns less money than another, or the studious child who scores lower grades than another can still come home as one worthy of love and acceptance because he is in God's image, and not as a failure or handicap. This then is the determinative dimension that those in the church can demonstrate to the world in which many families are being torn apart because people fail to fulfil mutually imposed conditions for loving and accepting one another.

How do Christian families honour Christ in a culture that values ‘face’? In an Asian context like that of Singapore, the value of ‘face’ is very important. To have ‘face’ is to be able to hold up one’s head and look good before others. However, a negative expression of ‘face’ is the stubborn refusal to admit one’s folly or deficiency before others. A recent press report has given this picture of some ‘face’ loving Singaporeans:

Families here are saving face but not cash by insisting that their sick parents go into higher class wards.

Children who do not want to ‘lose face’ with their relatives put their parents into A and B1 wards which they cannot afford, say hospital business managers here.

‘They want to show that they are filial and don’t want their parents to see that they cannot afford to put them in a higher class,’ said Mr Michael Chong, manager of the business and admissions office at Singapore General Hospital.

A spokesman for Tan Tock Seng Hospital said the decision often works the other way around as well, with parents choosing high-class wards for their children.

‘They do not wish their children to “suffer” the discomfort of a subsidised ward - namely, no television, no air-conditioned comfort and no telephone.’²⁰

Indeed, in a ‘face’ culture, the dishonour is perceived not in one’s folly or deficiency, but in losing ‘face’ by admitting one’s folly and deficiency before others. For example, Asians find it generally difficult to apologise openly and publicly one’s wrong doing because to do so is to lose ‘face’ which is seen as perhaps a greater wrong. In this sense, ‘face’ is not the same as honour since keeping ‘face’ may just be a way of covering up one’s dishonour.

While a person works at keeping his ‘face’, the other side of this ‘face’ culture is not embarrassing someone by making him lose ‘face’. These two sides together can bring about damaging effects to family and community relationships in an Asian society like that of Singapore. For example, a husband may refuse to admit his wrong because he wants to save

²⁰ *The Sunday Times* 9 September 2001. Choosing hospital wards: A question of ‘face’, p22.

his 'face'. On the other hand, his wife is reluctant to make him lose 'face' by confronting him with the truth. For the same reasons, parents do not see their need to admit their wrong to their children, and the latter restrain from speaking their minds. Hence, in the name of 'face' and harmony, many problems are not resolved but simply 'swept under the carpet.' The reality then is that family relationships lack truth speaking, and become very superficial because of suppressed feelings and lack of openness.

Perhaps, if Christians and the Church in Singapore are to make greater impact on a 'face' culture, one thing to do is to say what is true rather than what sounds nice; to 'speak the truth in love' (Eph 4:15). And if the family is the basic unit of community, then Christians are to impact society by practising truth telling in love to one another, beginning in the home.

Wayne Johnson, former Dean of School of Theology at Singapore Bible College and currently Dean of Chapel at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (USA), once wrote on Christian ministry in modern Singapore. He (Johnson 1997:247) challenges Christians who are to be 'salt and light' to develop an atmosphere of truth telling in love this way:

... it takes hard work to develop a community which not only affirms the truth but speaks the truth in the context of loving relationships ... We must be committed to telling the truth and being faithful to that truth.

If we are not willing to call each other to the truth and the clear commands of Jesus we will soon lose any idea of how the Christian life is to be lived

Hence, the ongoing task of the Christian and the Church is to honour Christ in such a 'face' culture. This implies that while Christian teachings and practices are to be expressed in ways that are socio-culturally sensitive and appreciated, one's actions and lifestyle must not be dictated by socio-cultural norms and values that are not Christ honouring. The implied suggestion is that *the Christian and the Church must be prepared to do that which honours Christ even if it means losing 'face'*. For example, Christianity is often viewed as a 'prestigious' religion in Singapore because most Christians are English-educated, and belong

to the higher-educated and higher-income category. Why is this so? Could it be that Christians and the Church here in general are not as fervent as they should be in reaching out to the marginalised and down-and-out in society for fear of losing 'face'? Is keeping 'face' an act of exalting the pride that Christians have in their socio-cultural respectability rather than expressing Christ's humility by identifying with the lesser in society?

These are relevant questions if Christians and the Church in Singapore are to make breakthroughs in being pro-family in a meritocratic society - that is - to help build strong families in society through active involvement, and to challenge the Christian family to be an example of healthy family life for others to consider. Indeed, the stories of some of the conversational partners (M3, M5 and M6) testify that they have experienced certain breakthroughs in honouring Christ in their respective family situations because they dare to adopt what works best for the good of their own family even if it means losing 'face' in the light of socio-cultural conventions.²¹ In this sense, they are not rebels without a cause, but only being practical though not necessarily popular with what they have decided to do.

In summation, with strong families very much a concern on the national agenda, Christians individually and as the Church can now work not in isolation, but in collaboration with the nation's efforts to make strong families a pillar of Singapore society. The suggestions proposed are meant to stimulate further thinking on how Christians can work hard not only for the sake of doing well in a meritocratic society, but more importantly, for the purpose of being pro-family in a meritocratic work culture. Indeed, it is hoped that as Christians in Singapore reflect and explore further on the implications of these suggestions, they can find ways to show themselves as worthy citizens of God's kingdom and that of their earthly country.

²¹ M3 once declined a promotion prospect because it would allow him little time with his family. M5 could have done better if he has been willing to spend more time at the workplace in order to hobnob with his superiors. M6 has been a full-time 'househusband' for many years in order to allow his better-paid wife to continue her professional work.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

6.1 Review of Present Study

The theme of this study is: 'The success culture in Singapore and its challenges to the Christian man in building a strong family'. In recent years, it has been increasingly visible that the Singapore family is becoming more and more stressed and strained. With demanding jobs today, many men tend to reduce the needs of spouses and children to only the material, thereby neglecting their non-material and emotional well-being. And with women being highly educated and professionally qualified these days, the men in Singapore will also need to rethink about the traditional male role in the family.

With this overarching concern, the expressed aim of this study is: To critically correlate insights from the normative Christian sources and other disciplines so as to formulate a pastoral counsel on building strong families for Christian men in Singapore as they live out their faith and interact with others in a success-oriented society.

The study begins with a recounting of Singapore's past. This helps one to appreciate that the economic orientation in her success culture does not come about overnight. The British came because they saw the economic potential in Singapore. The Malay rulers were willing to release control to them because of handsome compensations. The early immigrants who came from China and India to settle and work in Singapore, also had making money uppermost in their minds - they hoped to give a better life to themselves and loved ones back home in their lands of origin.

Then, there was the trauma of the Japanese occupation in World War II (which also exposed the tentativeness of the British in defending Singapore), the fight against the communists after the war, and the pain of separating from Malaysia after a brief and contentious merger.

In the midst of overwhelming odds, the nation's leaders rallied the people together to persevere, excel and compete as an independent city-state. Self-belief, unity and diligence were emphasised and became the hallmarks of Singapore's rise from poverty to prosperity.

However, this preoccupation with economic success has made many Singaporeans today adopt a narrow, materialistic and individualistic perspective of life. As a result, social neighbourliness is weak and families are increasingly stressed. And since Singapore exists not in isolation, but in lively interactions with the outside world, the influence of secular success ideas have greatly affected the psyche and thinking of the people, for better or for worse.

This study then moves on to attempt a Christian-secular dialogue, giving the normative Christian traditions a platform to interact with other disciplines of learning and knowledge. Out of such an interaction, some biblical-theological formulations have been proposed. Of these, three are worth repeating here:

- i. There should be mutual dependence and cooperation in home life without blurring the distinct roles of headship and submission that God has ordained for husband and wife respectively. However, care must be taken when using Scripture to argue for these role distinctions as they may only be so because of the socio-cultural setting during a particular period in biblical history. Hence, the reason for such distinctions may be to reflect the identity of God's people in a positive way. Simply put, these distinctions may be just descriptive of desired/existing Israelite, Jewish or Christian home life at a time in biblical history, rather than prescriptive for all times. In the final analysis, man and woman need to observe their roles at home not as keepers of God's laws, but as lovers after God's heart. They find their worth in God's grace, and relate to Him and each other in love. Their willingness to play their respective role at home is evident of this transformation in them - they do not fight for equity in order to elevate their own self, but they desire an other-centred, loving life in all that they do.

ii. The realisation of a man's potential does not only mean that he has achieved something materially because what he has achieved relationally is just as important. This emphasis on both the material and relational implies that a man must balance his pursuits in life so that these are in line with God's values and purpose. The relational dimension further implies that a man's potential is not so much about his independence of others, but his interdependence with others.

iii. Enjoyment is not only personal as it also embraces the responsibility to love God and others with one's material blessings. The materially successful man has the spiritual responsibility to be holy before the Almighty and the moral responsibility to be gracious to the less fortunate.

The study then moves into the 'real world' and some Christian men have been asked to voice their views on a questionnaire and/or through a time of conversational partnership.¹ Without insisting on being definitive in the findings here, these views on work-family complexities faced by the men have helped to draw out some features that profile the average Christian man in Singapore:

- i. He accepts competition as inevitable in a meritocratic society.
- ii. He works hard so as to develop to his best potential and to provide well for his family materially.
- iii. He often has little time to bond with his family relationally unless he makes a deliberate effort to do so.
- iv. He does not equate male headship with sole leadership at home. Hence, he shares or delegates family responsibilities, including that of breadwinning, housekeeping and parenting.
- v. He discusses rather than dictates decisions related to major family concerns. Hence, he is pragmatic enough to seek and adopt alternatives that are most beneficial to the family. These include choosing options like dual-income, child care centre, maid and grandparent to meet the breadwinning, child caring and housekeeping needs of the home.

The Christian faith has much to teach in favour of working hard, caring for one's family, and loving others. These emphases have been embodied in the suggested biblical-theological formulations (see Chapter IV, pp274-78). Measuring the features that profile the

¹ Each conversational partnership lasted about an hour.

average Christian man in Singapore against these formulations, some concerns stand out to be addressed:

- i. Though the man is to do all things well for the glory of God, competition today can dull his compassion for people.
- ii. Though the man is to work hard in developing his God-given potential and providing well for his family, the meritocratic culture today can lure him into elitism and materialism.
- iii. Though God does bless the deserving man with success and achievement in this world, the passion for results and recognition today can blind him to the importance of relationships and recreation, especially with loved ones.
- iv. Though God has made man to head his family within a framework of shared leadership, the busyness of working life today can lead him to knowingly or unknowingly shirk his responsibilities and push them to others, especially to his wife.
- v. Though man is answerable to God as to how well he manages his family, the pragmatism today can tempt him to use people and things as means to safeguard only his personal and family well-being, and thus, promoting self-centredness and individualism rather than other-centredness and community.

To help the individual Christian and the Church in Singapore explore options and alternatives in addressing these stated concerns, the study concludes by proposing five suggestions (not solutions):

- i. Work hard so as to earn enough to turn limited time and energy into actual pro-family events.
- ii. Adopt an extended family member into one's own home.
- iii. Enhance pro-family facilities and services by establishing, giving and volunteering more.
- iv. Emphasise family life education in the Christian faith in order to advance it in the Church, home, workplace and society at large.
- v. Be prepared to do that which honours Christ even if it means losing 'face', beginning at home.

The closing call is aimed at challenging Christians not only to do well in a meritocratic society, but to be pro-family in such an environment without undermining the value of working hard.

6.2 Recommendations for Further Study

It must be admitted that this study is very narrow in scope. The primary focus is on the Protestant Christian men, and not more than 15 % of the population are followers of Protestant Christianity in secular Singapore.²

Another thing to note is that the family under study is the nuclear family - that is - man, wife and dependent child(ren) staying in the same household. Again, this is restrictive because the Singapore family is becoming increasingly complex due to various sociological factors. With an ageing population, many nuclear families face the 'pressure' of looking after at least one elderly member of the extended family. With divorce on the rise, the number of families that have become single-parent homes has been markedly increased. There are also those homes in which couples are childless either by choice or by circumstances.

In view of these limitations, this study does not pretend to address the concerns of all Christian families, let alone all families in Singapore. But it is hoped that it will generate greater interest in thinking, examining and writing about the Singapore family from a Christian perspective. Hence, the following recommendations are made so that progressive and comprehensive studies can be undertaken to help Christian families:

- i. In the Christian family today, the man is not the only one who has to handle work-family complexities. The wife also has to face the same challenges, especially if she is a co-breadwinner. Moreover, children are not spared as well - they can be so caught up in their schoolwork and activities that they too have no time for the family. Hence, the complexities of roles, responsibilities and relationships apply not only to the man, but also equally to the wife and child. Hence, *a study into how women and children view and respond to these complexities in Christian homes is recommended.*

² 15 % of the population in Singapore are categorised as *Christians* (Catholics and Protestants) - Ministry of Information and the Arts 2001. *Singapore 2001*. Singapore: MITA.

ii. This study has revealed that Christian men generally have no strong objection to a maid or grandparent helping with child caring and/or housekeeping. However, the presence of such a person in one's home will bring about a whole new set of relational dynamics which can upset the family equilibrium if not wisely handled. Hence, *a study into relational dynamics with non-next-of-kin persons (like grandparents and maids) in Christian homes is recommended.*

Indeed, these recommendations are made not merely for the purpose of adding more to the body of knowledge. More importantly, it is to further help Christian families think through the implications of being 'salt and light' as subjects of God's kingdom here on earth.

To God be the glory!