**Section D: Observations of behaviour**

**D1: Waiting for Mr. Perfect or Miss Right**

Looking for, waiting for and expecting a ‘**knight in shining armour**’ or ‘**princess in golden chariot**’ is, in my opinion, the major problem hanging over male-female interaction. Not only do the chances of finding a fulfilling marriage partner diminish, but behaviour towards those who do not meet the hoped-for criteria deteriorates.

 For the most part if someone fails to be what is wanted, it is not their fault and there is nothing they can do about it, so one must be careful to affirm and encourage in this situation. **God never** **labels someone a disappointment to the opposite sex**; everyone has something to offer. And often it is the company of the opposite sex that will most likely help, if anything will, turn someone into the ‘desired’ person and it is that which is denied as a consequence of holding on to such perfectionist ideas. Some unattractive qualities in people are unchangeable, but with many others there is at least a chance they could change. A Christian woman might look at a non-Christian man and think ‘*if he was a Christian he would be my knight in shining armour*’. And she will bring him to church and friends will go ‘ooh’ and people will think that at least he is coming to church and pray intensely for the miracle of his salvation. While the same woman will look at a Christian man and look for a convenient excuse such as ‘He does not even have any dress sense’, when she could easily go up to him and say ‘*I think you could do with a new look. Can I take you clothes shopping and perhaps we could grab a coffee afterwards?*’ and I do not think it would take a miracle to make a positive change to his appearance. It may not succeed, but ‘*I* *tried changing a man ten years ago and it did not work*’ is not a valid excuse not to try. Such a change may not help make him attractive to her, but at least it may help his confidence and so may make a difference for another woman. Would not that be great? Instead of looking to make little improvements to help people along the way people tend only to be interested in the finished article. They want to find someone that has everything they want and they almost feel that they have a right to expect such a person to come along, that they are perhaps special and deserving where others may not be.

 Few Mr. Perfect or Miss Rights actually exist and when they come along there is a lot of competition for them. Most of these types of people know that they are hot property and this can facilitate undesirable character traits in them. And anyway to be blunt, someone’s definition of their dream partner may not be exactly the same as God’s. Many of the appealing qualities in people are really quite worldly and not at all similar to the humble, vulnerable and graceful qualities marked out by Godliness. Looks, status, achievements through one’s own efforts, ability to perform in public, lack of apparent weaknesses and being in control are qualities that may not be so important to God. Particularly, from a man’s point of view part of the attraction of a beautiful woman may be a sense in which she is ‘forbidden’ fruit. This can unrealistically affect his discernment and perspective of her as a person. **It is easy to put a desirable woman up on a pedestal** and this is not helpful for her or the man doing it. The behaviour of both of them may become un-natural and when the pedestal is brought down, especially if it crashes down, it can be very harmful. The man can also over-focus on one woman and distract himself from more realistic opportunities to meet and get to know other women, but this can also be a passing phase which he may need to go through in order to relate better to women in future and so it is important that he is not hurt more than is necessary and the situation is cleared up as soon as is convenient. Another problem is that after a while waiting for the right person perhaps four difficulties can arise:

1. One can feel that after waiting so long one should not give up now and so get more desperate, ‘*surely the right person is out there for me*’, and turn down even more opportunities by sticking to one’s ‘standards’.
2. One can change one’s tune with the opposite sex, which may not go down well: *‘one minute she dismisses me, the next she’s interested in me and we haven’t even spoken between times.’*
3. One can believe that one’s Mr. Perfect or Miss Right has arrived and, partly because of the lack of experience with less attractive prospects, one can be too hyped up and make a mess of the opportunity.
4. One can give up entirely perhaps thinking erroneously that one is called to be single or knows what a Mr. Perfect or Miss Right is like and know that they do not exist or they would choose someone else if they did.

 All these states leads to unease, missing out on friendships and not opening the heart to opportunities God may give to enhance life and be fruitful. **One lady had seven boyfriends all of whom were in or ended up in full-time Christian work, but finally she married a man with a secular job whom she now says is so right for her.** She was lucky; it is wise not to have a narrow expectation of what a marriage partner is going to be like.

**A deeper look at the problems associated with expecting a Mr. Perfect or a Miss Right**

It is difficult to exaggerate the deep rooted sense in which many people feel that the awesome God they believe in surely has a ‘perfect’ person out there for them to marry, and that God will clearly and smoothly reveal who this person is and they will then marry and effectively live ‘Happy ever after’. God deigned to become man, suffer acutely, die and go to hell, but many Christians feel that it is also God’s duty to provide them with a ‘perfect’ marriage partner. Marriage is not a fatalistic pre-ordained enactment of divine will, any more than finding the perfect job or role at church. **People have a free choice, which they can make wisely or unwisely.** For most people there is usually a much more numerously populated constituency of suitable marriage partners with a much broader range of different qualities than they think and they may have several options between which God has little preference. There is a climate of comparing oneself against others and in believing a respected marriage partner is affirmation that one is special to God. Sadly this belies an atmosphere where many people do not automatically feel special to God and some roles are seen as more important than others, but scripture says we are all part of the same body and that Christ has died equally for each of us and so by implication we are all worthy marriage partners. The main consequence of this error is not the validity of the choice to wait for such a partner, but the poor way in which people relate to those deemed not up to standard with increasing frustration, distance and disappointment.

 Saying that most people have a much wider range of people they could wisely marry than they realise does not mean there would not be some that would be inappropriate, unwise or not good to marry. **But God will accept and bless any Christian marriage.** It is only a matter of making a wise or unwise choice. Too much pressure is put on initial interaction if one party is feeling that this could be the person their parents have prayed for since before they were born and God ordained for them before creation. To dismiss someone just because the first few meetings, perhaps in crowded situations, do not go well is surely short sighted. Equally one can get too emotionally involved getting to know someone well and then have a problem reconciling the disappointing reality to one’s previous expectations. There is also too much placed on Christian marriage being wonderful. Loss of freedom, hard work and the bearing of each other’s burdens bring difficulties to any marriage. A vicar invited Christian couples whose marriages were breaking up in his church and he broke down in tears when they said that they did not feel there was anyone in the church they could talk to. Unfortunately in the era of church leaders implying in services that they do not make mistakes or experience struggles it is difficult for anyone to share their feelings about anything especially if they are struggling in their marriage and they go to church and hear how wonderful God is and that you just have to love and trust Him which can be acutely painful. So a false sense of the wonder of marriage is not helpful, though one should remain an optimist. The real tragedy as far as missed marriages though is the hierarchical nature of people pigeon-holing others according to perceived status and spiritual maturity. Most men and women if they were described to anybody of the opposite sex say prior to a dinner party, would sound an interesting prospect, but being in the same church prevents relationships starting that would happen if the couple were in different churches. Women particularly want on their wedding day people to feel they are making a good catch and their man is up to the standard expected by say the Ministry team, their friends and their family. ‘*I haven’t waited so long for a knight in shining armour to marry the man who makes the coffee and is not even a leader.*’ The mind is too dominant over the heart and falling in love with another Christian it seems is not criteria enough. The opportunity cost is too great; ‘*If I stay single I can leave open the possibility of marrying the curate or someone similar and I am able to continue to believe I am being very virtuous; by contrast being married, particularly to a man in secular work, does not sound so virtuous.*’

**D2: Going out with a non-Christian**

Many people are tempted to ‘go out’ with a non-Christian and perhaps up to 50% of the time the non-Christian, usually a man, becomes a Christian, 30% of relationships work out ok and 20% go wrong. (By contrast if a Christian couple break up it is often much worse.) You are free to take the biggest risk with the most important decision of your Christian life, but I believe it is against God’s will. The larger truth is that if Christian women could get more comfortable with men, focussing on witnessing to non-Christian men they do not fancy, then in co-operation with their Christian brothers more men might be converted. Christian men can’t attract company as easily as Christian women can and it is easier to maintain the boundaries of the relationship than one might think. **Ultimately many Christian women have married a non-Christian man and produced children mightily used by God;** such a dynamic seems to work well, but for this one must properly be thankful for God’s Grace.

**D3: The preacher and the pretty virgin**

A true story about an evangelical curate in the Midlands goes as follows: He is beginning to wonder about his relationship with his wife and so he discreetly starts reading the well-known book, ‘*Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*’. He gets to the passage which gives guidance on what to do if your wife comes home and says she has had a bad day, which says **the male tendency is to try to be a Mr. Fixit:** ‘*What was it about your day that was bad? Have you talked to your boss about your workload? Is there a colleague you can delegate to? Are you able to get a proper lunch hour? Would it help if I called you at work? Would it help to bring some work home? Is it time to consider a different job?*’ whereas **what women want is sympathy and empathy**: ‘*Oh, how terrible! You do not deserve that! How unfair! I am really sorry to hear that, and you try so hard to do your best! Well, I am sure it is not your fault. How mean of your employer to let this happen. How could this happen to you?*’ So he thought, ‘*I could try this out*’ and so he waited patiently for his wife to have a bad day. Sure enough his wife came home one day complaining of having had a bad day and so he followed the advice given in the book. At first he just sympathised as she talked about her day, but then as he continued to be empathetic, she started crying and threw her arms around him: ‘*You do love me*’, she exclaimed, at which point he clenched his fist and shouted ‘*It works!*’ When the dust settled he explained what he had been doing and she was very cross.

 There is a lot going on in this story but essentially it is true that evangelical leaders of both sexes have not got where they are to day by loving one another in empathy and sympathy but by ‘fixing’ with Bible verses and doctrinal interpretation. Of course they fulfil a great purpose in providing Bible teaching but they do not properly understand that people see them as role models in many if not all aspects of their character - living out their faith seems a lot less important to them than it should be. **The risk/reward equation applying to a choice between spending time writing a Christian book or preparing a Bible talk, compared to extending themselves to build relationships and meet needs, perhaps by just ringing people up for a chat, wrongly sways heavily towards the former choice in the mind of an evangelical leader.** Their comfortable self-affirming public discourse often contrasts markedly with time spent engaging with people, which can be uncomfortable, not immediately rewarding and burdening/distracting from ‘ministry’. The ordinary church member follows this example seeing little merit in initiating and sustaining relationships by such as making or returning phone calls and sending letters or emails, unless they want something in return often dismissing those without ‘ministry’.

 So these ‘idyllic’ marriages may not be all they seem, the preacher has little free time for his wife who usually cannot talk freely about personal issues in the parish and life can often be intense making relationships difficult. As mentioned above the clergyman may more likely be a fixer rather than listener and **the woman could feel second-class at times as it is very difficult to balance the needs of the congregation with those of one individual however much she is a priority.** Often being in full-time Christian work can mean being relatively short of money which may not seem a problem at the time of emotional excitement in a couple getting together but over the years ahead financial constraints could have a significant impact on the relationship. In fact either or both of the couple could experience a shock or a hard dose of reality of some kind not long after the marriage.

 Invariably the preacher seems to have listened to the Old Testament verse in the Bible that says a leader should marry a virgin and further than that seems to consider the political statement he is making in his choice of wife in the tendency for her to be also pretty, not unusual in shape and with a middle-class feel. **Whatever the reality, too many people get caught up in fancying the preacher**, when no amount of Bible study, prayer, obedience, love etc. is going to give them any chance of marrying him. And when a man in the congregation is trying to woo one of these women he can do nothing if she has set her sights firmly on such a trophy. Thus the spiral of exaggerated expectation extends downwards with everyone wanting to go one better. It is also true, I would understand, that a woman who marries a minister should be independently called to a life of ministry and this is not generally practised. Some of those waiting for their desired partner avoid taking risks because they are concerned for their reputation which may leave them with a minimal comfort zone or a narrow experience of life, neither of which is positive for marriage. A man who performs well in public is not guaranteed to be a good marriage partner, while a man who would like to make a woman feel really special, loved and fussed over is seen as a bit of a loser compared to someone with ministry, when this attitude is perfectly Biblical and married couples in the body of the congregation can be very useful. It is very difficult for singles to gain perspective on married life anyway, but especially if couples are busy in ministry. The old adage that in clergy marriages, the man wears the trousers, but in other Christian marriage’s the woman wears the trousers, is still largely accurate today and so there are a lack of ‘balanced’ marriages with accessible role models depicting a joint loving dependent union.

**D4: Chemistry**

After expecting a Mr. Perfect or Miss Right, the second biggest mistake one can make in male-female interaction is to rely too heavily on initial ‘chemistry’ as an indicator as to whether someone is an intended life partner. More and more I am convinced that having ‘chemistry’ is not a reliable guide to compatibility for what may be half a century or more of married life together and that lack of ‘chemistry’ in the early stages of getting to know someone is not an accurate indication that the relationship should be halted at that stage for it is quite possible that ‘chemistry’ may occur later. ‘Chemistry’ of some kind at some stage is important, but **the danger is that we take the stories we hear of two people meeting, then quickly ‘going out’, getting engaged, marrying, and living happily ever after, as the general rule rather than the exception that they are**. Many people get badly hurt from unfulfilled expectations that have been fuelled by ‘chemistry’, and we will not know until heaven how many missed opportunities have arisen, just because initially ‘*he or she did not give me the right feeling*’. And both of these situations can give rise to ‘emotional baggage’ that can compound the difficulty in building relationships in the future. Do not ever forget that marriage is not a bed of roses and that people will not generally talk about their marriage so there is no real way of telling whether, in general, couples who rush in have better marriages than those who take time to become friends first.

 The danger though is not just in the reliability of chemistry as an indicator, but also in the fact that it causes us to behave in odd ways. Indeed falling in love has been likened to a form of mental illness, a kind of compulsive obsessive disorder which is certainly not restricted to those who would be good life-partners. Practical compatibility is very important and it can be a shock when incompatibility arises after ‘chemistry’ seemed to indicate suitability. ‘Chemistry’ by its very nature gives a false impression of who you are, many people immediately become ‘gooey’ on meeting someone they find attractive which is very likely to be off-putting. It is not good to vary to such an extent between a normal state and an excited state, rather it is better to develop a normal state which varies more moderately when upon excitement or disappointment. **It may appear that someone has a switch in his or her brain that flips on or off according to ‘interest’, and this ‘decision’ is not based on proper Christian perspective** (evidence of the other person’s faith or character)**.** Generally it is better to try to rein in your emotions and get to know someone as a friend as this provides a better foundation and you can then observe someone’s normal behaviour in a variety of situations. However the church environment makes it nearly impossible to do this. If you rely on group situations it could take forever, nobody is entirely his or herself in a group and if you try to meet up one-to-one it is usually immediately seen as making a pass. Nevertheless it is worth persevering and following through your intention to be friends. Unfortunately you may then have to manage the other person’s emotions as they often ‘want to know where they stand’ from the first meeting as discussed elsewhere. Build up confidence and experience such that, even if you fancy someone who might reciprocate, you are able to behave cautiously avoiding unnecessary bad experiences if and when you find key differences in outlook. The golden rule is to try to keep the relationship open for as long as possible and then any offer or decline of a relationship is no more dramatic than it needs to be and is based on friendship and a wise discernment of the other person’s merits. It may seem a tall order as people do not like uncertainty, but patience is character building and allows greater understanding and experience of God. Ultimately it is wisest to marry a person you can live without (and once married assume that the decision to get married has total approval from God) rather than a person whom one has become emotionally or otherwise dependent upon.

 ‘*I will know, there will be a feeling, I had successful relationships before I became a Christian, I know what I want.*’ Unfortunately I do not think these sentiments are very valid. As discussed above I do not think a feeling is a reliable indicator, and I do not think relationships that one has had before one becomes a Christian are all that relevant. It is a whole different ball game when you are a Christian with Christian priorities and beliefs. And I do not think it is wise to be too prescriptive about what you want from a life partner, it is easily within God’s capability to surprise you with someone you would not have expected to find attractive and so it is important to be open to this. How do you know that when kissing and cuddling etc. start or God intervenes then perhaps you will not see someone in a different light and get the right ‘feeling’? **In arranged marriages in Nepal, it usually takes around seven days for the couple to fall in love, and many such marriages are happy**, although not all. Obviously we are not in that culture, but it does demonstrate that we could put our own mental block on someone that we could be happily married to. And for the opposite sex who thought their self-worth was related to their prayer-life, Bible study and Christian living, not inspiring the right feeling could be dispiriting. Also if the ‘feeling’ was right and the relationship broke up it would be more painful to become reconciled and know the right feeling the next time and most likely ‘feelings’ change over time, which could be difficult to cope with.

**D5: The Prosperity Gospel**

There can be a great belief that a marriage partner is very important to us and therefore to God so He has the matter in hand and will bring His divine powers will to the situation enabling that person to appear. In reality we should recognise that we need to play our part expecting difficulty and suffering along the way. Many people are quick to make judgments on the suitability of others: ‘*If it was meant to be him/her it would be clearer, there would be no difficulty and he/she would be more exactly what I am praying for.*’ There is no reason why God would not have a more elaborate plan for finding someone a marriage partner that involves a lot of ‘wrestling’ with Him and engagement with people that He might think are suitable for you. **We should not necessarily expect to meet a mature, attractive, and prospering person, in a hassle-free way,** rather just as in any answer to prayer the process may not be straight-forward and may take time for the desired result to become apparent or indeed something better.Often we find little excuses to back off because someone does not fit the scenario we have been imagining, both in what they are like and the way they have become known to us. God has our maturity in Christ at heart and so struggling or suffering in this area may well benefit us. Those who hang back, then move in and hit it off quickly may be losing out in the long run from the Blessings that arise from experiencing discomfort and the ability to empathise in this area. It is important not to react prematurely and then to pass on the benefits of the wisdom that you have gained not least so that people do not buy the idea of a fairy-tale meeting of instant attraction as the only divinely approved way for two people to find true love and marriage.

**D6: Sexuality**

It would be very difficult to say anything generally astute about something no one really talks about, but it must be stated that necessarily where large groups of (hopefully) chaste people are congregated there will inevitably be an underlying sexual tension. **As with other aspects of character, people are on a path and both to some extent they can improve, and to some extent it is not their fault where they are.** The Christian perspective is roughly that there is a balance to be had between admiring the human body as divinely created in His image and wanting inappropriately to take possession of another person as a sex object that one does not own. There is also a balance to be held in avoiding the two extremes of being over-zealous in your sex drive and seeing sex as disgusting when it is in fact such a God-given glorifying symbol of reconciliation. As usual living life with appropriate focus and appropriate balance, risk and safety-net and so on can help with either extreme. Obviously it is not easy in this area to point out any error in another, but it is good to hang in there and wait to see if there is an opportunity to advise someone of any false perspective. Sexuality is normal even in those called to be single and it is up to everyone to get comfortable with the idea that it is not inappropriate for another person to have the desire to ‘make love’ to them or at the other extreme to hate the idea of ‘making love’ to them, but with the proviso that it is vital that these desires are appropriately channelled. However one must not be judgmental particularly as no one can know what it is like for the opposite sex to experience a ‘crush’. Unless there is blatant verbal or physical bad behaviour, someone in this state deserves sympathy and respect and it does not pay to try to keep such a burden within oneself just as it does not pay to unleash emotions inappropriately. The best advice is to try to moderate your sexuality such that you are not in denial or over-drive but do not expect to reach this appropriate balance over-night. If you recognise yourself in either extreme state then do talk it over with friends, you will often be surprised how they may well respect you for mentioning the topic and want to talk also.

 Good companionship is much more valuable in a relationship than sexual attraction as such excitement does not last; it is important to have some ‘chemistry’ between you but purely ‘sexual chemistry’ is not required as it is almost guaranteed should marriage follow. **Perhaps fifty years or more of married life is not going to be sustained by sexual attraction**, but rather by love and companionship and therefore these attributes are much more important in a developing relationship. Those who rush into a relationship may have their view of their suitability for companionship skewed by the excitement of sexual attraction. It is better to test companionship through a variety of situations, such as when you are emotionally both ‘up’, both ‘down’, one of you ‘up’ or one ‘down’ and so on, having an argument, being upset with each other, being competitive or sharing in success. Those who disdain sexual motivation may think differently about sexual activity later in marriage. One-in-four pregnancies results in a miscarriage, people can struggle to have children and get tired or stressed, so sex can easily become artificial and mechanical. Sex should not be seen as naughty, funny or routine, it is the symbol of the holy union together as a new person in Christ just as Holy Communion symbolises spiritual union with Christ; you would not be casual or disrespectful in taking the bread and wine of communion, so likewise sexual intercourse deserves time, energy, freshness, a committed and serious attitude and sincere covering in prayer.

**D7: Hypocrisy**

Unfortunately, most Christians fail when the going gets tough and behave in keeping with their beliefs only when it is comfortable to do so. I am sure that men are involved in much more hypocrisy than women given their predilection for power, but being a man myself I do not so easily notice it. I offer some examples of hypocrisy by women in a semi-jocular tone, just **so that we are all aware of how hypocritical we can be, often without realising it and sometimes in denial of it.**

 Which two things do women fear most about Christian marriage? An educated guess might be that they worry he is really more interested in her body than her heart and that he will change after he marries her. So what is their response, to make themselves hard to get to know, encouraging him to make a pass at her before he knows what she’s like based more on her physical attraction and her superficial ‘performance’ in groups! If she makes herself easy to get to know like Christ did then she gives herself the best chance of avoiding these worries. **A man is most likely to change his behaviour with a woman if he finds that she uncovers layers of her personality that are different from those he imagined when he first got to know her.** Good communication is what really helps in the long run, so it is best to begin as you mean to go on and be yourself from the start.

 Women complain that someone they do not fancy finds them physically attractive, when they would want their husband to love their body. **If you want to be attractive to the ‘right’ man, you can hardly complain if you are then attractive to the ‘wrong’ men**. Be flattered and encouraged, you may not appreciate fully what it is like not to be given attention by the opposite sex. Men have similar tastes so it means you will more likely be attractive to the ‘right’ man when he comes along. And how can you blame God or men if it is the ‘wrong’ men that keep fancying you, you are entitled not to reciprocate the attraction, but not to be fed up with God or the man for finding you attractive. Be attractive, polite and trust God, friendly admirers should be positive for you. Do not go for the inferior line of aiming not to be too attractive in for example your dress sense in order to ward off undesirables. It is better to be attractive as God would wish you to be and learn to cope, particularly through having male friends that can intervene if necessary if problematic situations do arise.

 Men are so bad at understanding women; why can’t there be the same quality and quantity of Christian men as there are women? Well, whether it is being a Christian, understanding women or making love, I have always found the argument that if women were men then they would be a lot better at being men than men are, very thin. **How can anyone complain to God about His choice of which men are Christians?** Could it be that women want so many worldly qualities in a man – in control of his life, successful, lacking in weaknesses or struggles, good looking – qualities which contrast so much with those of Christ such as vulnerability, open-ness, honesty and the ability to withstand suffering? Could it be that the qualities women are looking for would become apparent if the men who are in the church were affirmed, encouraged and matured by the women as well as the rest of the church. Women are in a more realistic and a better position to properly get alongside men in such a way for the benefit of those individuals, the church and in ultimately reaching out to more non-Christian men. (As long as they do not do so with a non-Christian man they fancy.) And then in the long run there would be more men with the desired qualities in church. (If you took the daggy, geeky, Christian man shopping, then improving his dress sense would not require the miracle that would be necessary for that hunky, charming non-Christian man finding salvation!)

 I remember when a curate got married women saying ‘she’s beautiful it’s disgusting’ and a number leaving the front row of the church they had sat in whenever he was preaching. Personally I felt disgusted, probably sinfully, when a female leader got engaged. First I heard that she had told him repeatedly no, but he had continued to write to her. I had happy visions of some average looking church member with a simple glowing faith winning her over with love, but no of course he turned out to be a very handsome preacher. What pain and disappointment! **If an ‘ordinary’ Christian man had behaved this way, he could easily have been labelled an outcast, a pest, sexually motivated, a loser, and having no integrity in not understanding where he stood.** But of course it was incredibly romantic, just you get to know God that well and it could happen to you!

 As an aside it often happens that Christian parents, though they have publicly expressed the view held by All Souls that a Christian should not ‘go out’ with a non-Christian, they secretly quite hope for a Christian girlfriend/boyfriend for their non-Christian daughter/son, which pains church members who receive offers of a relationship only from non-Christians, reluctantly turning them down. Finally consider what would happen, (with respect to male-female interaction,) to a **less than good-looking unemployed carpenter arriving at church in his mid twenties just wanting to love people and not yet ready to get involved in leadership.** The mind boggles.

**D8: The effect of church ‘baggage’ on undermining male-female interaction**

Central to the problem of relationships is the culture of church meeting being a substitute for discipleship. Church meetings are not where real business is done and can even become a place where people survive until the next fix, rather than becoming better able to love one another and prepared to evangelise. Ever greater commitment to church has become a common currency for a ‘spiritual’ conversation, but in contrast commitment to one another is very low. The temptation to put on a large-scale event rather than the creation of space to be vulnerable and free from the expectation to conform or perform is great. A prayer meeting can be a specific cultural experience that does not appeal to all and there is a demand for ‘unity’ that somebody’s culture be subsumed or dominated by somebody else’s as part and parcel of acceptance of the Gospel. If only there wasn’t the need to stress out and hype up, but rather come in calm confidence to the throne of the Father in prayer and then provide an environment where one can follow the Lord’s command to love one another. **The experiences in the lives of most attendees at a prayer meeting do not easily match the experience that is offered.** And the carrot is subliminally dangled that you too if you could get your life in order could move God to intervene through prayer to the same extent that is implied from selective reporting of missionary and other church leaders activities. An individual cheers inside when a missionary has a safe journey or funds are raised for a building that they have prayed for, ‘*I took part in moving God*’, and then has to cope as their own prayer life does not seem to provide the same benefits. The shallowness of many people’s relationship with God does not measure up to the sermon they hear; what should be an empowerment to think Biblically and take responsibility for one’s walk with God can subside into a reliance on the power of the preacher. Prominent Christians have usually become so, because of their preaching. How often have you been asked to pray for whether someone has the gift of preaching? But how often have you heard someone asking for prayer for a ministry of hospitality? Hospitality or gathering for fellowship is not seen as ‘church’. Many people attend a meeting because of the name of a speaker; indeed afterwards it is asked much more often ‘*Who was preaching?*’ much more than ‘*What was preached?*’ The preacher is cast in the role of hero and centrality of preaching has risked becoming centrality of the preacher. Much of what is thought of as teaching is not getting through, the ‘talk’ has become an art-form or theatre and people remember a tiny fraction of the spoken word, but being more visually orientated remember the picture of hundreds of people listening to one man (or woman), leading to the despising of their own ability by comparison.

 Yet the church in history has grown fast and even dramatically independent of preaching meetings. There is no evidence that Jesus preached to the disciples on the Old Testament verse by verse, and Peter, Paul and John certainly did not do so. In particular in the 2nd and 3rd Century growth was gradual, careful and slow. Later revivals prospered as people already had grounding in the basics of the Christian faith and so were open to conversion by a sermon, unlike today where people know little. Amongst evangelicals today a good majority cannot name the day they became a Christian and so feel devalued in their ability to evangelise by not having had the momentary conversion experience themselves. It does not help if they are told if only they did x, performed y more faithfully and got rid of sin z then good things would happen. But people continue to invest time energy and emotional effort in meetings, when the focus should be on praying, loving, sowing, explaining, listening and responding at home, at work and at play. People are too busy at church, when radical decisions are needed to make time to build relationships. Meetings are of course good for cohesion, opportunities for enforcement of faith and teaching is an important priority in the first two years of faith, but forgive me for quoting John Stott again: ‘*All so-called ‘*missions*’, because they are sporadic in character and professional in leadership can actually discourage genuine ‘*mission*’ which is the non-stop responsibility of ‘non-professionals.*’

 Evangelistic events pre-suppose we have friends we know well enough to invite, when all the commitment to meetings and personal discipline make this very difficult to achieve and it is a vicious circle as we feel even more nervous and second-rate when the limited opportunities for witness do arise, but are keen to improve and go even more to church. If a 1000 people each found 4 people for Christ during their lives and taught them to do the same a world population of 6 billion could be reached in 3 centuries, but our average success is very low. With such a background it is not surprising that male-female interaction is difficult with all the difficulties in relating to non-Christians plus all the particular difficulties of emotion, sexuality, expectation and the general feeling that somehow one’s own desires are such a side-issue compared to what is important to God. **Biblically, discipleship clearly takes place in the context of relationship, yet anyone with a sense of vision and ideas for reforming meetings, and impressing upon people that they overcome their inhibitions in forming relationships, is seen as trouble and the questioning of what goes on tantamount to questioning God.** Change is resisted as it would be seen as an admission that what had gone on before was not right.

 "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*” Perhaps the most famous Bible verse, but how many Christians fail on the first six words? We are called to love the world - other people and secular activities. **Jesus was relational and integrated with the world, but we can easily opt out of both those aspects of Christian living.** Christianity at heart is about encounter with a person so we need to live and be in the world just as much as we are not to be of the world. People need their hand held to gain confidence in this area; too often being at work, at home, at play with others or even being alone is not seen as properly valued, whereas being at church gives a feeling of satisfaction, of duty fulfilled and permission to follow ones own wishes and choose comfortable decisions the rest of the time.

 If a church realised the potential for tremendous natural growth from looking after singles well then their commitment to relationship would be a lot higher. Singleness gives a freedom to follow Jesus, a freedom to show God’s love, a freedom to experience personal growth, a freedom to find healing and wholeness, a freedom to marry, and a freedom of childlessness, but singles are more likely to leave church, more likely to fall away, more likely to be stressed, more likely to lack self-worth and confidence, more likely to be distracted by the search for a partner, have less accountability, are less well-balanced, are more likely to be striving and have more unexplored gifts available. **If people see contentment amongst singles at a church then it is very attractive to outsiders, the mark of a Christian stands out to others.** By contrast it can easily appear very unattractive to single non-Christians wanting marriage and children. Yet the church appears indifferent or patronising to those searching for a partner and people can easily be labelled desperate and opportunities for Christian growth are missed. Leaders and married people can say many unhelpful things such as ‘*Why do not you pray about it? Have you thought about service? You’ll meet someone when you least expect it.*’ And there are few sermons about practical issues such as singleness and relationships, because there is no suitable single Bible text on the subject. Ministers have very little perspective on those with little attention from the opposite sex because it is likely they themselves are or were deluged with interest. Leaders tend to have some ignorance and embarrassment on discussing male-female interaction and would have a fear of giving bad advice. There is no theology of romance available. The church encourages individualism, which is the enemy of the covenant of marriage and can also be dangerous in the covenant with God. Assertiveness is seen as desirable and this can be used superficially to dress up lack of confidence in playing hard to get. There can be a commitment-phobia from men and the need to be in control from women and as people become fond of each other they become dependent and lose control and can react against this not allowing the relationship to flourish. An environment where marriages take place and grow is difficult in a dysfunctional community. Getting married liberates emotional energy and time spent ill at ease in the marketplace. Better information and education about the reality of single life would ease the tensions of being single and provide a platform for more and better relationships. And the presence of such as attractive women saying in their mid-twenties that they will become an old maid can only stultify opportunities in the market-place.

 Church can deceive people into false assumptions. People can make no effort to form male-female friendships because they have heard that people who have married did not make any or because they have been led to believe that it is God’s job to sort them out with a marriage partner. Because of this they also assume that if they fall in love then that means they have met the right person, when such chemistry communicating at one level does not mean communicating at all levels which would be very desirable. **People do not want to admit failing at relationship formation,** and can exaggerate to themselves that they are not likely to and/or do not want to be married, when really they would like to be so. The preaching of a God who is in control makes people feel they are not entitled to feel angry or disappointed that they are not married. If someone is not married and wants to be, it is seen as their problem not God’s who actually has a deep concern for their desires and yearns to answer their prayers perhaps through other peoples who ought to be able to help, prayerfully, practically and emotionally.

 Why did not God come to earth, play for Arsenal, talk about Himself and then take us off to heaven? (Not an unreasonable question?) Well primarily because he needed to suffer and pay the price for our sin. Jesus won the right to preach to us not because of his great intellect, but because of his willingness to go to the cross. **At church too little notice is taken of those who have overcome suffering, and the value in the richness of their experience.** People depend too much on the intellect of those who have not really suffered, when they should listen more to the voice of experience. As far as male-female interaction is concerned the position of leaders is fairly unique and they are not as qualified to speak about it as they are to give a Bible talk. People want to believe in a person and so will take the view of the leader, because they see a better understanding of the Bible as being closer to God. But in reality some leaders are no more necessarily qualified to give wisdom on male-female interaction than they are on plumbing or IT.

 A group of us were in a motorway stop on our way to a sporting weekend when it was agreed ‘*The top accolade in church is to be mentioned in the pulpit.*’ We chatted on and I said sarcastically something like, ‘*Yeah, every day I wake up and hope that what I am doing will mean that one day I will be mentioned in the pulpit.*’ Some time later I mentioned something not too serious that did not quite fit the church line. ‘*You will not be mentioned in the pulpit if you are like that*’ said one lady. After a pause someone else said ‘*He was being sarcastic*’. The lady had not been able to believe I was being sarcastic, that I could think such ambition could be a wrong and stifling to motivation! **The hierarchical way one Christian is set higher than another, causes much fruitless comparing of oneself with others, discourages individuality, causes more stress than is necessary** when disagreeing with the party line and allows the perception to exist that the love one receives from others depends on toeing that line and being successful rather than from unconditional blessings. On the other hand competitiveness is motivational and the party line is mostly Biblical, but differences of behaviour and thinking loom too large in people’s minds and so people continually worry about not measuring up and can feel they haven’t arrived if they haven’t got the badge of leadership and opportunities for obtaining such positions are few and narrow - nothing really equates to being able to lead a Bible study or give a Bible talk. (The consequences of this hierarchical attitude was also highlighted by a study which repeatedly randomly assigned two groups of 1,000 entities to each other firstly assuming a totally random order of preference for each entity amongst the other group and secondly with an element of clear general greater ‘attractiveness’ for some over others in each group. In the first test almost everyone almost always got someone amongst their top fifty choices and rarely did anyone get somebody less than their 200th, whereas in the second few got anyone amongst their top choices and a large majority were almost as likely to get their 900th choice as their 200th. So as soon as we start ranking the opposite sex, particularly in a uniform way, we exponentially deteriorate our ‘chances’.)

Through such factors and others after a year or two the church career path usually falls into perhaps four groups:

* 1. The sizeable group of over-burdened leaders lacking availability and an attitude of welcoming at church.
	2. A sizeable minority who in spite of their lack of personal growth feel they have no better place to go.
	3. A minority who still hope for affirmation and recognition one day.
	4. A minority who haven’t the intellect or the time and energy to contribute and are ‘happy to hang on to the coat-tails’ of the esteemed leaders and renowned church.

 This adds up to a church not growing in size or overall gift discovering and enhancing, it does not seem to recognise the benefits of putting effort into affirming and maturing people and the benefits in the long run from investing in people. In the city companies hardly ever recruit in some areas, then at a later date they will complain of shortages and then happily pay way over the odds for the right people. The church can be seen to be copying this worldly style and not willing to back people for fear of being seen to make miss-judgements and the desire to retain control. Nothing is lost in the Christian world when people find they are not up to fulfilling a church role, and they will be much better able to bring non-Christians into the church if they feel loved unconditionally, have been given a chance and not been given a black mark for failure. But more than that if non-intellectual gifts are admired and respected confidence in going out into the world would greatly increase bringing rewards in the long run, likewise concerted efforts to help people love each other, irrespective of how much they admire or like someone, would also bring much long-term reward. Other people are seen as odd rather than Christ-centred and so male-female and other interaction is immediately on the back foot. **You cannot teach love, only exemplify it, and so the requirement to practice love has to be emphasised by the church as a top priority for its members.** The church is not short of people who can tell the Gospel adequately, it is short of those who are comfortable with all types of people and in particular non-Christians and so can develop opportunities to witness.

 People’s social confidence is undermined as the church does not train its members in how do deal with people. A course in understanding people may contain very good material but unfortunately people need practical help not theoretical doctrine. For many people such material goes in and out of their brain and as with many church meetings they do not end up more able to ‘love one another’. **Commitment is the buzzword at church, but commitment to each other is low, and our lifestyles demand we travel light so we need to push people to come alongside each other**; strangers could be brought together and asked to have a conversation to show that it is not so difficult and should not be a fear for people. (People look too much to leaders in this area, and can actually ask ‘Who are you?’ as ordinary church members try to be friendly and make points during course intervals.) Practical training in the art of conversation would be very helpful. The importance of this background to male-female interaction is that as non-intellectual gifts are not so appreciated, therefore most people bring a skewed sense of their own value and the value of others. They also have a stereotyped appreciation of what people do in the church and are quick to pigeonhole them accordingly. Since ‘success’ in church is so merited there is pressure to succeed in relating to the opposite sex. No one feels they can afford to be seen to ‘fail’, which heightens the tension in any interaction. People are not relaxed about fancying someone and it is wrongly seen as failure if a relationship does not transpire; in reality, as in much of the Christian life, the past counts for almost nothing.

 **The church induces a tendency in people to relate to each other intellectually rather than with their heart, and in the balance between accepting and not condoning, people tend much more not to condone rather than to accept.** Thus a platform of acceptance is not created from which hearts can explore the possibility of a relationship. (Particularly as expectations engendered by the church can be high.) In extreme cases potential marriages do not take place because of the wedding day hurdle; a couple might live a long, happy and fruitful life together, but particularly for those who have been in the church a long time, they could not face the Ministry Team, their friends and perhaps their family privately thinking that they could have done ‘better’, given their contribution to the church. The feeling is that success, as exemplified in the provision of a marriage partner, is reward for good Christian living, fruit for gifts well used, or an affirmation for those looking for an escape route for a life not particularly going anywhere. People know that married people are treated much better in church - a man might go from being a walking, talking social problem to being a heroic gift from God for womankind by marrying. Women also can greatly increase in confidence once they have found a partner. It is greatly inhibiting for the Holy Spirit to work in someone if they have a problem with self-acceptance. The church seems to have difficulty in affirming people and there can be a climate of fear, loneliness and under-achievement.

 Once when some over-night gear I had left by the toilets in church was stolen and the offender was caught, I felt sorry for him thinking he should have been forgiven and invited to Christianity Explained rather than banned from church. I will not explore this further, but many people feel that they are not unconditionally loved at church and are only a misdemeanour away from being isolated. The parable of the lost sheep says something rather different: God concentrates on bringing back the lost sheep primarily because He promises to, but also because they will then be very useful to the other ninety-nine sheep. In church a lapse can mean being barred from leadership, but in the parable of the Prodigal Son the master puts on a banquet for the returning son. (Note that there was no fatted calf for the other son who meanwhile had perhaps been ‘faithful at church’ and that without the excuse of the returning son there would have been no banquet.) Unfortunately when someone admits to struggling others tend to push them further away, rather than get behind them and drag them back into the fold. Actions such as going to a night-club/18 film, sharing a flat with someone of the opposite sex or telling white lies to protect someone’s feelings can all be seen as acts of disobedience. But even in small issues unnecessary guilt can hamper peace of mind and personal growth. People can even feel guilty when they miss their Fellowship Group, because they are on holiday! It is awful that the church almost pats itself on the back when a person leaves: ‘*we gave him/her the Gospel and they could not hack it, we have done God a service and we are better off without them.*’ It is too simple to say the person never was a Christian; no one falls away from lack of doctrine, rather lack of love and ability to resist to temptation. Strong, loving and accountable relationships are the key to solving both problems and the church is too busy feeding the brain and guarding the sensibilities of the ninety-nine than being concerned for the individual. People see this attitude and copy it in their male-female interaction effectively putting the other person on trial rather than accepting them. Also marriage prospects are a real factor in motivation and holding to the Gospel and for those who have little prospect of finding a marriage partner are more prone to misdemeanour. If the church could address this by making the person feel loved and wanted, a lot of pain could be avoided. It is very poor that books by John White or Roy Clements can no longer be recommended reading because of what happened to the author after they were written. **Possibly the major reason a leading preacher would fall away is the drip-drip affect of the church putting them on a pedestal, and admiring them rather than loving them.** Leaders are not perfect and there can be serious consequences when they let people down. A church can seem to want people to have an exaggerated reputation of it and its preachers and succeed to the extent that people can fall into the trap of believing that the church is the meaning of life. We must desist from seeing admiration as a substitute for giving and seeking love, it is nowhere near as real or valuable.

 Church can be a safe environment, where it is not easy to take risks in relationships and they are expected to happen smoothly. (We do not live in an ideal world where a man will fancy a woman when she wants him to and not otherwise in which case he deserves a good slapping for getting it wrong since surely all the requisite signals were there). Fellowship is under-rated compared to Bible Study, priority on reputation means being seen with the right people and there is a sizable divide between leaders and others; because people do not make calls they do not return them. **People need to know they will not be less loved if they do not do good things like read the Bible or attend a church meeting.** People appear to go along pretty happily and much is lost in others not seeing them muck up. Prayer is too focussed on missionaries, rather than church members; answer to prayer is described as success deserved, and rare failure as ‘Isn’t the devil awful?’ People get the wrong idea of prayer feeling good that they have been part of moving God to intervene and think if they became a better Christian they could get God to intervene more often, including in their private life, which does not at present resemble accomplishing the same results. The church does not seem to be doing any favours for those aiming to build relationships.

**Section E: A vision for a church culture**

The old saying goes if you find the perfect church do not join it, but what would be a utopian vision for male-female interaction in a church? Of course it would be based on Christ’s command to love one another, meaning particularly being sacrificial and concerned for the big picture of the other person’s life and their future interactions. Everyone would be taught to be a good listener and to catch up with friends in the week, so there would be no need to let eyes wander around church as someone was speaking to you and after church people would concentrate on those they do not know well. Everyone would reply to emails, letters and phone calls as soon as convenient at least within a few days and so, because they knew this was the case, would be much more prepared to contact a wider range of people and do so more often. Certainly, it would be very normal to contact someone just for a chat, not just when one wanted something and for it to be normal to do so across sexes, ages, cultures, intellects, statuses etc. The culture would be that people really knew each other, trusted each other, and did not read too much into isolated incidents of verbal or behavioural indiscretion. It would be expected that single men and women met up as a matter of course, no one would have to fight for attention and everyone would feel valued. People would feel that they belong and others care about their individual concerns such that they can open up about their feelings without fear of gossip. **If a man sits next to a woman in church they are assumed to be just good friends or acquaintances, and if a couple are having a laugh and a joke together then no one starts the rumour mill going behind their backs.** A man may enquire if a woman sees their relationship going further and the woman gratefully accepts, asks for a discussion or time to pray, or politely declines. In no circumstances does the friendship deteriorate or anyone become bothered if the conversation becomes public knowledge, it is just assumed to be natural. If anyone is hurt then they are comforted and if anyone is tempted to avoid or ignore someone they are easily persuaded to become reconciled for the greater good. The assumption is that more desirable people will not keep to themselves rather they would wish to pass on the affirmation of their company to the less attractive. Because the less attractive are included in the dating scene, they are much more balanced and mature in their approach to the opposite sex and in their Christian life generally. No one gets stressed or intense in church about a possible relationship because they know their next date is not far away. Everyone knows a number of members of the opposite sex and is able to balance being with those they like and those they can be most useful to. Because they know what the opposite sex are like there is much less ‘us and them paranoia’ between the sexes and people get a good idea of what is available and their priorities in looking for a marriage partner. Everyone talks about each other with respect and that does not diminish when strengths and weaknesses are identified in someone. Whatever one is doing in church one is treated the same; from the homeless person to the preacher one is treated with equal love and appropriate discernment. People are willing to go out of their way for each other and keep space available in their diary so they can meet up with someone at short notice. Because they know others might be free, they would be much more tempted to try to arrange a social gathering at short notice, not just booking their close friends into next month’s diary.

 People would be good at probing deeper, not just asking ‘*How are you?*’ but more meaningful questions such as ‘*Do you feel you are getting enough fellowship?*’ ‘*Is there any issue I can pray about for you?*’ or ‘*How are things going at church?*’ and then not just being ambivalent and uninterested in the answer, but empathising and focusing on seeing if there is anything to say or do that could help. People would be happy to re-arrange their diary if necessary or sort out a time to talk and since they would work hard at their jobs they would not mind making the odd quick email or phone call from work even just to leave a message on someone’s home answer-phone. People would know who from church worked near them and would try to meet up at lunchtime. People would freely introduce people to each other and not fear how things might develop. People would be in groups of open huddles, welcoming to others joining and easily allowing people to approach. On the other hand people would not be downcast if someone was too busy to talk to them on a particular occasion, knowing that they were generally available and not indirectly trying to send them a message. **People would feel relaxed and able to be themselves.** If there was a tension in someone’s personal life people would feel the whole church would be on their side supportive of them and not judging them. There would be no politics. Service and opportunities for personal growth would be shared out and people would not be afraid to fail. People would have an expanded comfort zone and make friends in the world not feeling it is what they do at church that gives them credibility. People would be concerned for their relationship with God, but know their acceptance by Him and the church. Well, I could go on and I am sure you will not get a perfect church but if we all made efforts to make little improvements great strides could me made. Of course it would be a struggle as others would not tend to cooperate!

**Section F: Example prayers**

**1) A man praying for a woman to whom he is attracted**

Dear Lord and Sovereign Father, I can hardly know the unbounded depth of your love for me and the scope of your guiding hand as you oversee my future and what you are able to do through me. I am not at all deserving of any, let alone all, the fruits of the enormous sacrifice you made for me on the cross. Nevertheless, I come to you as one of your own, whose prayers you promise to listen to and hold close to your heart, and so I lift up to you now your servant [her name] whom you know and love and ask that you may in your own time allow us both discernment as to the nature and extent of our future relationship as members of your church family. Most of all Father I pray that you keep her close to you in faith and love unto eternity. I pray with respect to her: Philippians 1:9-11 - **And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.** Lord and Father, keep her safe and protect her physically, mentally and emotionally. Give her strength to withstand suffering, become strong and be a shining light for you in this world. Keep reminding her of your love for her daily in her walk with you. Do not let her either shrug off or dwell too much on any struggles she or her friends may encounter. Above all Lord develop in her a good heart, such that she can easily give and receive love from others. May she have empathy in her heart for others and exude integrity and dependability without being judgmental or distant. Give her a good sense of perspective, a restful and a relaxed nature and a good sense of humour please Lord. In all things Lord give her prayerful wisdom, in making choices and in her behaviour. Give her a loving and caring nature, and a flexible and open-minded attitude to life. Prevent her from falsely interpreting her previous experiences, but show her the wisdom that she can learn from them. I now pray for our relationship, might you bless it Lord and smoothly allow us to get to know each other better. Please give us heart-felt trust and peace in one another and a balance, that we would not give ourselves a distorted impression of each other, either better or worse as a result of chemistry, dynamic, mood or reputation. Keep us from playing games and signals and misunderstanding each other. Let not the difficulties of being in the same church, any gossip or pre-conceived expectation hinder the path on which you want us to tread. Let her see the real me in the best light and be willing to show in time some vulnerability and emotional depth towards me without fearing for the consequences. Let her know that I will always be her friend and that the best way to avoid bad experiences is to trust and to co-operate. Give us opportunities to relate to each other, without pressure and clear any obstacles in our diaries so that we can keep the momentum going in our relationship and do not let time be the factor deciding the extent of it. Give me strength to continually put her relationship with you first beyond any vested interest I may have and may she know that I have her best interests at heart. Let us be willing to give each other unconditional love, whatever tragedy or disappointment may occur, and not have a conditional agenda. Let her understand that she is not the only woman I have been attracted to, but neither do I indicate interest in every woman I meet. I pray she respects me as someone you have died for and does not treat me according to my status.

 Give me wisdom as to how to express myself to her honestly and effectively. May we find some interests and have some views in common, but also some which are different and then be mature when we disagree. Give her peace that should marriage ultimately result we will not disagree over the interpretation of what submit should mean. Let her not turn down this offer I am making to love and serve her through exaggerating the difficulty of any perceived gap in spiritual maturity. Please curb any impression that I am behaving as a sexual predator, while allowing us both peace in the knowledge that sexual attraction is normal, but not necessary at this stage. **May she see the potential in me and not just consider whether I am exactly what she wants here and now.** May we get on well with each other’s friends and family. Give us wisdom to properly evaluate each other’s previous personal experiences and curriculum vitae as well as intelligence and practical abilities. Might I not induce her to reject me too quickly and cause tension between us in the future. Give me time to show that I can be considerate and not selfish, but do not let me be taken advantage of unduly. May she understand that I am not perfect and tolerate my weaknesses. Grant us minimal difficulties relating to the spending of money; dispel any feeling that I am trying to buy her affection, but allow me to spend my hard-earned cash for our enjoyment or benefit. Let her react to situations honestly and be straight with me. May we treat each other comfortably and respectfully when in a group neither ignoring each other nor implying to others that there is more between us than there actually is. Lord in your mercy, let not anything of this world stop us fulfilling any joint purpose you have for us, but please clearly and calmly show us if it is your will that we should be just friends. And in that event may we demonstrate to others and to you that we did not evaluate each other just as a potential conquest, all or nothing, and continue in us a visible appropriate friendship. I lift up to you this prayer in Jesus precious name, Amen.

**Example prayer 2) A man praying for a woman to whom he may or may not be attracted**

Lord and Father I lift up to you your servant *[name]* whom you know and love. Most of all Father I pray that you keep her close to you in faith and love unto eternity. I ask that you may in your own time allow us both discernment as to the nature and extent of our future relationship as members of your church family. Would you safeguard our friendship and not allow the situation to come to a head at this time. **Please let me be useful to her as a friend and not over-interpret my friendship.** Let her not be distracted from considering other men who may be interested in her. May it not be necessary for me to spell out the situation, but if it is necessary then may I be honest and clear in explaining the neutrality of my feelings. Might I be able to explain diplomatically that my prayerful intuition is not to move much further forward at this stage but that I trust God and so the situation may change in the future. Please let her understand that I would wish to know more about her and appreciate her, that she can continue to be a friend without fear and that she can trust me. Please provide an early opportunity for me to demonstrate that nothing has changed, after our discussion, in our friendship. Please look after her if this is a disappointment, remind her of your love and that you have great plans for her. Keep her safe and well and bless her richly. May we both be able recommend each other as sound Christians and help network people and possibilities for each other. Let not gossip or change in reputation result from our friendship and in particular do not let others be inhibited from approaching us. In Jesus name, Amen.

**Example prayer 3) A man praying for a woman to whom he is not attracted**

Lord and Father I lift up to you your servant *[name]* whom you know and love. Most of all Father I pray that you keep her close to you in faith and love unto eternity. I ask that you may in your own time allow us both discernment as to the nature and extent of our future relationship as members of your church family. Would you safeguard our friendship and not allow my behaviour to suggest either that she is not worthy of my love or that I am considering wanting to be her boyfriend. Please let me be useful to her as a friend and not misinterpret my friendship. Let her not be distracted from considering other men who may be interested in her. May it not be necessary for me to spell out the situation, but if it is necessary then may I be honest and clear, but not patronising or dismissive. Might I explain diplomatically that I do not wish to move further forward at this stage, but that I trust God and the situation may change, though I do not expect it to, in the future. **Please may she not feel ‘rejected’** but indeed validated in making the enquiry, but that in future ask for wisdom whether it would be better to leave it to the man. Please provide an early opportunity for me to demonstrate that nothing has changed in our friendship and re-affirm my respect and affection for her. Please look after her if this is a disappointment, remind her of your love and that you have great plans for her. Keep her safe and well and bless her richly. Let not gossip or change in reputation result from any discussion we have had. In Jesus name, Amen.

**Notes on example prayers**

We are called to be lofty in prayer, so one can be idealistic when praying for someone as a potential marriage partner. But do not be a results merchant, if she then turns up at church with her new boyfriend beside her do not be surprised or cross with God – He heard you, trust Him and do not persecute yourself either for being hurt or frustrated, which is only natural. Note that the prayers for those you are not really attracted to and those that you definitely are not attracted to could be roughly the same. Do not be too persistent in prayer for a woman as this can affect your behaviour when you meet her and do keep up friendships with other women. Try to discern your motivation. **If praying for her is peaceful and comfortable then you are more likely to be in tune with God’s will** than if you are desperate and concerned about your vested interest in the outcome. It is worth noting that prayer is taken very seriously by God and that even the most unattractive person can pray to God in a serious fashion about the most attractive person and God knows and understands the blessings that would result from such a marriage. Therefore it is again important to be respectful to others who may be praying for you, however unattractive they are. You may think it is clear that a marriage would never work, but the other person may need time for God to make this clear to them and much can be gained in living out the relationship meanwhile.

**People joke about the man who says he is going to marry a particular woman except that God has not told her anything about it, but they do not tend to joke when a woman has made up her mind that a man is not worth meeting up with, or continuing to meet up with, except that God has not told him anything about it.**