DESIGNING THE FORGIVENESS MATTERS COURSE: AN A TO Z GUIDE

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ABSTRACT

To create an effective course is a complex task. Course designers are faced with a plethora of challenges, choices, tasks, and deadlines. They also need to consider screeds of potentially helpful resources and the gaps in their knowledge. Accordingly, many courses are never birthed. This is a tragedy, as effectual courses can lead to positive changes in people's lives and the process of creating new courses can be most invigorating, especially when helpful guidelines are available to follow. In this paper, I discuss how I created and facilitated the Forgiveness Matters course,[1] a theologically and psychologically integrated and validated approach to help churchgoing adults process their parental wounds. This entails engaging with the seven points common to most course design taxonomies, the role that pilot courses perform in the refinement of courses, and the challenges involved in recruiting course participants. The feedback from the participants pertaining to course design and the implications of the study conclude the article.

I. INTRODUCTION

A little over a decade ago while talking with my therapist, I discovered that I had forgiven my father. Much to my surprise, I realised that my feelings of resentment and anger towards him had evaporated, and all that I felt was love concerning him and sadness for the pain and losses that we had experienced. It was not that my father was an awful man. To the contrary, he was a wonderful man on multiple levels who had always loved me. The problem was that he had an undiagnosed obsessive compulsive disorder that had damaged our family in too many ways.

A few years later, I was invited to speak at a number of Christian healing conferences around New Zealand. Other presenters would first elaborate on how parents wittingly and unwittingly wound their children (of all ages) and then I would conclude the conferences by sharing on the concept of forgiveness. Following the organisers' lead, I ended my talks by inviting the attendees "to come forward to confess their sins, receive forgiveness, and/or obtain prayer."[2] In every instance, the vast majority of listeners responded. While people's willingness to step forward was in many respects encouraging, their eagerness also troubled me. I began to doubt if effective forgiveness could be obtained in a few minutes of ministry. I also questioned if all of the churches that hosted the conferences were adequately resourced to assist persons to continue on their forgiveness journeys after our departure.

1 Philip J. Halstead, "The Forgiveness Matters Course: A Theologically and Psychologically Integrated Approach to help Churchgoing Adults Process their Parental Wounds," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 14 (2012): 85–110.
2 Ibid., 87.

I eventually concluded "that the respondents and the churches at which we spoke might have been better served if we had offered a more in-depth, long-term, and proven course in forgiveness."[3] This decision raised a problem: I could not locate any forgiveness courses in the wider New Zealand church, yet alone any that were specifically designed to help adult churchgoers process their parental wounds effectively via forgiveness. Consequently, I determined to fill this gap and create a course in forgiveness. But this resolution gave birth to a further dilemma: It dawned on me that despite my extensive involvement in church ministry and academic institutions I had no comprehension of how to design an effectual course that could facilitate the process of forgiveness in wounded people. I was also not aware of any literature that could assist me in this endeavour. How was I to proceed?

The purpose of this article is to describe how I worked through these challenges in order to create the Forgiveness Matters course.[4] By sharing my experience, I hope to motivate individuals and groups to embark on the meaningful journey of developing their own courses. I also wish to assist them to do this as expediently as possible.

II. COURSE DESIGN

There are seven overlapping concepts that are common to most course design taxonomies. These notions serve as reference points to assist designers in navigating their way through the complex task of creating new courses. They include generating initial ideas; conducting needs assessments; crafting course goals, learning outcomes, and learning objectives; developing course resources; conceptualising course content; developing a positive course environment; and determining how to evaluate the course.[5]

Generating Initial Ideas

Bouma and Ling assert that the research process commences when people's curiosity is stirred.[6] Tolich and Davidson concur, and point researchers to their personal interests to find inspiration for their projects.[7] From this standpoint, it could be argued that I had been (initially inadvertently) generating ideas for the Forgiveness Matters course for at least a decade before I officially started to create it.

Fortuitously, throughout much of this time I had developed a personal data base on the themes of forgiveness and parent/child relationships. This process involved my filing the various ideas that I had on

3 Ibid., 88.

4 The creation of the Forgiveness Matters course comprised part of my successfully completed PhD studies through the University of Auckland, New Zealand. The data used to validate the success of the course was drawn from the 43 participants who took part in five separate Forgiveness Matters courses.

5 See for example Ian Forsyth, Alan Jolliffe, and David Stevens, *Planning a Course: Practical Strategies for Teachers, Lecturers and Trainers* (2d ed.; London: Kogan Page, 1999); Kathleen Graves, "A Framework of Course Development Processes," in *Teachers as Course Developers* (ed. Kathleen Graves; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12–38; George J. Posner and Alan N Rudnitsky, *Course Design: A Guide to Curriculum Development for Teachers* (5th ed.; New York: Longman, 1997).

6 Gary D. Bouma, and Rod Ling, *The Research Process* (5th ed.; Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2004), 25.

7 Martin Tolich, and Carl Davidson, "Starting and Restarting the Research," in *Social Science Research in New Zealand: Many Paths to Understanding* (eds. Carl Davidson, and Martin Tolich; Auckland: Pearson Education New Zealand, 2003), 89–101.

these topics into different repositories along with newspaper clippings and articles that I discovered.[8] These ever-evolving files served as memory prompts and guidelines throughout the entire course development process.

Part of this work involved locating literature on how to design courses.[9] What I read was sometimes encouraging and at other times decidedly discouraging. To illustrate: Posner and Rudnitsky rightly argue that course builders need to familiarise themselves with the ways that other practitioners teach the topics that they are investigating.[10] A search of the literature identified 34 extant forgiveness modalities.[11] While none of these models specifically connected the theological facets of forgiveness that I was exploring with the psychological aspects that I deemed critical, many of them provided helpful insights for my course. Conversely, Forsyth, Jolliffe, and Stevens' recommendation that course designers determine from the outset of their construction work what tasks need to be accomplished in order to prepare and finalise their courses was disheartening for me.[12] This was due to the overwhelming number of tasks that ostensibly needed to be undertaken and my uncertainty surrounding the relevance of each task.

As my initial ideas developed the rationale that underpinned the course slowly came into clearer focus. It can be summed up as follows:

1. Innumerable persons have been wounded by their parents.
2. The potential ramifications of these offences are incalculably destructive.[13]
3. Forgiveness can assist people to process the effects of their parental wounds and to alter positively their relationship with their parents, others, themselves, and God.[14]
4. Despite the likely benefits of forgiveness and the fact that it is a central tenet of the Christian faith the concept remains a mystery to multitudes of churchgoers.
5. To the best of my knowledge there are no extant forgiveness courses that explicitly explore people's relationships with their parents *and* incorporate teaching on transpersonal-, self-, intrapersonal-, and interpersonal- forgiveness that are emphasised throughout my course.

Around this time, I also settled on the central research question that directed the project. It asks, "What constitutes an effective church-based forgiveness course in the New Zealand context for adults who wish

8 Posner and Rudnitsky, *Course Design,* 22.

9 See for example Forsyth, Jolliffe, and Stevens, *Planning a Course;* Kathleen Graves, "A Framework of Course Development Processes," and Posner and Rudnitsky, *Course Design.*

10 Posner and Rudnitsky, *Course Design,* 5–6.

11 See for example Nathaniel G. Wade, Everett L. Worthington Jr., and Julia E. Meyer, "But Do They Work? A Meta-Analysis of Group Interventions to Promote Forgiveness," in *Handbook of Forgiveness* (ed. Everett L. Worthington Jr.; New York: Routledge, 2005), 423–39; Donald F. Walker and Richard L. Gorsuch, "Dimensions Underlying Sixteen Models of Forgiveness and Reconciliation," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 32 (2004): 12–25.

12 Forsyth, Jolliffe, and Stevens, *Planning a Course,* 6.

13 See for example Robert D. Enright and Richard P Fitzgibbons, *Helping Clients Forgive: An Empirical Guide for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000), 71–75; Marie M. Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 3; Philip J. Halstead, "Have My Parents Sinned against Me? Exploring the Concept of Sin in the Pastoral Context," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 12 (2010): 43–62; idem., "Clearing the Way to Forgiveness: Acknowledging Parental Offences and Theological Misinterpretations," *Colloquium* 43 (2011): 229–52.

14 See for example Enright and Fitzgibbons, *Helping Clients Forgive*, 3; Halstead, "The Forgiveness Matters Course," 94–104; Michael E. McCullough, Steven J. Sandage, and Everett L. Worthington, Jr. *To Forgive Is Human: How to Put Your Past in the Past* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), 190.

to explore their relationships with their parents?" On numerous occasions, I returned to this question for clarification when I got bogged down in the process of creating the course.

Unexpectedly, the spontaneous feeling that emerged within me when I first reread the course rationale and central research question together was one of relief. It seems that the clarity of these statements helped me to own at a deeper level that the idea to create a course was in fact valid. It is not that I had realised that I was unduly anxious about the validity of the project prior to this emotional break through. To the contrary, I had assumed that the idea of creating a course was sound. My confidence was based on my personal and ministry experience described above, my passion for the project, the encouragement of my PhD supervisors, the affirmation I received from my wife, and a dream in which I felt God had assured me that there was a divine component to the project. What alleviated my unrecognised anxiety, it appears, was the development of the academic foundations that undergirded the course.

Needs Assessments

A second principle common to most course design taxonomies is the notion of needs assessments.[15] Designers carry out needs assessments by using questionnaires and other methods to gather data on people's existing knowledge, capabilities, and/or circumstances, and to compare this data with wished-for levels of knowledge, capabilities, and/or circumstances. The information derived from these appraisals assists course constructors to develop strategies that can help participants to bridge the gaps between the two levels.[16]

Several techniques were used in the design phase of the Forgiveness Matters course to assess the course members' views of their parents' offences and forgiveness. One entailed my crafting a pre-course questionnaire, which was trialled on a number of colleagues. It included questions such as "How do you define forgiveness?" Interestingly, replies to this question seemed to identify that no two persons define forgiveness the same way. In response to this discovery, I resolved to stress more clearly in the courses the distinction between the separate components of forgiveness (e.g., intrapersonal–and interpersonal–forgiveness) and between forgiveness and a number of related concepts such as reconciliation. This emphasis helped to encourage persons to engage with the aspects of forgiveness that were most relevant to them and to respect other people's choices to do likewise.

The pilot course (described below) also provided me with helpful information concerning how best to assist the course participants to progress their forgiveness work.[17] This feedback identified that some individuals preferred being told what to do throughout the course, as opposed to my pre-course expectation that all persons prefer being able to determine for themselves how to respond to the teaching they received. In considering this feedback, I decided not to alter the course philosophy of self-directed learning, because

15 See for example Graves, "A Framework of Course Development Processes," 12–13; Johan Uvin, "Designing Workplace ESOL Courses for Chinese Health-Care Workers at a Boston Nursing Home," in *Teachers as Course Developers* (ed. Kathleen Graves; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39–62.

16 Graves, "A Framework of Course Development Processes," 12–13; Uvin, "Designing Workplace ESOL Courses," 40.

17 Uvin, "Designing Workplace Esol Courses," 45–46.

many adults in my context equate autonomous learning to sound pedagogy, respect, and safety.[18] What I did do, however, was to spend even more time in the individual course sessions walking the participants through various ways that they could apply the teaching. I also expanded upon the advantages[19] and disadvantages[20] of exerting one's will in the forgiveness process. My hope in doing this was that each individual would find a way to continue with their own forgiveness explorations.

A number of erroneous expectations and hopes were identified in this phase of the development of the course.[21] This information helped me to prepare strategies to temper people's unrealistic goals such as their desire to experience complete healing for all of their parental wounds during an eight week course. Similarly, I realised that I would need to refer some participants on to other caregivers for more in-depth therapy post-course.[22] Consequently, I began to develop relationships with a small network of professionals before I needed to refer individuals on to them.

The chief advantage of taking the time to learn where each group member was at on their respective forgiveness journeys was that the process forced me to concede that I could not predict what every person would need or want on the course. As ridiculous as this assumption now sounds, I had largely assumed that my personal experience and education had equipped me to foresee what people needed. As a result of this learning, I included more open-ended questions in the pre-course questionnaire to cue me to possible needs. For instance, one question asked: "What do you hope to get out of the course?" I also resolved not to second-guess the participants throughout the courses; oftentimes, this resolve was difficult to keep!

Course Goals, Learning Outcomes, and Learning Objectives

The efficacy of courses can be greatly enhanced through the development of specific course goals, clear learning outcomes, and explicit learning objectives. Course goals refer to the overarching purposes and/or aims of courses.[23] Insightful questions help to identify key goals. For instance, Fisher asks, "What are the chief purposes of the course?"[24] Surprisingly, questions of this nature are often left unasked, or the answers they generate slip from focus during the busyness of course development. Unsurprisingly, these errors affect the quality of courses. The overarching goal of the Forgiveness Matters course was: "To create an effective church-based forgiveness course for adults who wish to explore their relationships with their parents." Goals were also prepared to summarise the purpose of each course session. When setting goals, Fisher

18 A. W. Bates and Gary Poole, *Effective Teaching with Technology in Higher Education: Foundation for Success* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 43–44; Gill Nicholls, *Developing Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2002), 14-16; Peter Taylor, *How to Design a Training Course: A Guide to Participatory Curriculum Development* (London: Continuum, 2003), 27.
19 See for example Don Basham, *Deliver Us from Evil* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 1972), 125.
20 See for example David Augsburger, *The New Freedom of Forgiveness* (3rd ed.; Chicago: Moody Press, 2000), 48.
21 Laura Hull, "A Curriculum Framework for Corporate Language Programs," in *Teachers as Course Developers* (ed. Kathleen Graves; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 176–202.
22 Adapted from Uvin, "Designing Workplace ESOL Courses," 46.
23 See for example Forsyth, Jolliffe, and Stevens, *Planning a Course*, 26*;* Graves, "A Framework of Course Development Processes," 16–17; Posner and Rudnitsky, *Course Design*, 8–10.
24 Pat Fisher, "Designing a Seventh-Grade Social Studies Course for ESL Students at an International School," in *Teachers as Course Developers* (ed. Kathleen Graves; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 63–85.

exhorts designers to keep Einstein's dictum in mind: If you can't explain something to a ten-year-old, you don't understand it![25]

Specific goals help designers to structure their courses and to divide the immense undertaking of creating a course into smaller, achievable tasks.[26] Goals also help persons to visualise their courses and sessions as whole entities. In this way, the course goals I formulated helped me to stave off despair, as at times it felt like I was merely going in circles throughout the design phase of the course. They also provided me with a sense of progress, direction, and inspiration.[27]

Learning outcomes refer to statements "of how learners will behave or what they should be able to do after successfully completing a course or learning experience."[28] Thus, learning outcomes relate to ends, not means.[29] They encompass skills and comprehension.[30] They also guide instruction.[31] Taylor encourages designers to structure learning outcomes around the acronym SMART; that is to say, they should be *s*pecific, *m*easurable, *a*ttainable, *r*ealistic, and *t*ime-bound.[32]

Bearing these points in mind, between two and five learning outcomes were developed for each of the eight sessions that comprise the Forgiveness Matters course. For instance, a learning outcome for Session Three stated: "By the end of the session the participants will be able to name at least two factors that might have consciously and/or subconsciously inclined their parents to wound them."

Learning objectives were also fashioned. They express how learning outcomes and course goals can be achieved. Participants typically receive a copy of the learning objectives. Since their primary aim is to provide people with a sense of orientation, learning objectives do not delineate the specific expectations of course learning outcomes. The learning objective relating to Session Three's learning outcome delineated above illustrates these subtle yet participant-friendly distinctions. It read: "The primary purpose of the session is to explore some of the influences that might have shaped our parental experiences. Accordingly, we will identify several factors that might have consciously or subconsciously inclined our parents to wound us."

My reading of the participants' narratives reveals that every group member appreciated being made aware of the learning objectives and course goals. (See below for further discussion.)

25 Ibid., 66.
26 Graves, "A Framework of Course Development Processes," 16–19.
27 Fisher, "Designing a Seventh-Grade Social Studies Course," 83.
28 Taylor, *How to Design a Training Course,* 94.
29 Forsyth, Jolliffe, and Stevens, *Planning a Course*, 72.
30 Yvonne L. Callaway and Sue A. Stickel, "Introduction to Counseling: A Preliminary Construction of the Professional Reality," in *Teaching Counselors and Therapists: Constructivist and Developmental Course Design* (ed. Karen Eriksen and Garrett McAuliffe; Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2001), 13–39.
31 Posner and Rudnitsky, *Course Design*, 100–101.
32 Taylor, *How to Design a Training Course,* 95.

Course Resources

All course design taxonomies accentuate the critical importance of designers including quality content in their courses.[33] Plainly, if the subject matter included in the course or the pedagogy that underpins the course is lacking, the value of the course will be compromised.

Many sources were consulted to determine which educational practices and resources might best assist the participants with their forgiveness explorations.[34] Extant forgiveness models provided one point of reference.[35] While they offered little in the way of explicit teaching guidelines, as mentioned earlier, they offered a great deal in the way of course content.

In order to enhance the course resources I also e-mailed 16 friends and asked them, "Can you think of any creative input that might enhance an adult/parent forgiveness course?" Thirteen responded with suggestions such as the song *The Living Years* by Mike and the Mechanics[36] and/or DVDs like *Light in a Dark Place.*[37] Consultative steps of this nature help designers to counter the common tendency of adopting lone-ranger mentalities as they strive to do everything themselves.[38]

To balance (a) the necessity of developing a range of teaching methods and resources to enhance learning[39] with (b) the reality that some individuals prefer predictability over excessive variety,[40] it was decided to formulate several course rituals. In Uvin's view, rituals enhance learning and offer participants a measure of orientation.[41] Paradoxically, rituals also serve to liberate the creativity of course constructors.[42] One course ritual that I developed was the-round-the-room-game. Each week the game would be announced and a volunteer would share a story, raise a question, or simply say 'pass' to express that she or he had nothing to share at that particular moment. This procedure would then continue in a circular pattern until every individual had either shared or passed. It is noteworthy that within the space of a few weeks the participants from each group had learned to appreciate and anticipate the game. Course designers who seek to uphold the principle of freedom of speech and yet who simultaneously wish to create opportunities for persons to share may find such activities particularly helpful in their groups.

I chose to adopt Graves' matrix teaching approach on numerous occasions throughout the course.[43] This meant that I organised the sessions with specific goals in mind, as well as a number of strategies that I

33 See for example Forsyth, Jolliffe, and Stevens, *Planning a Course*, 27–28*;* Kathleen Graves, "A Framework of Course Development Processes", 19–20.
34 See for example Forsyth, Jolliffe, and Stevens, *Planning a Course;* Graves, "A Framework of Course Development Processes."
35 See for example Wade, Worthington Jr., and Meyer, "But Do They Work?;" Walker and Gorsuch, "Dimensions Underlying Sixteen Models of Forgiveness and Reconciliation,"
36 Mike Rutherford and B.A. Robertson, "The Living Years*,"* on Mike and the Mechanics, *Living Years* (CD: WEA International, 1988).
37 Pilgrim International, "Light in a Dark Place" (Video: Sydney: African Enterprise Australia, 1997).
38 Bates and Poole, *Effective Teaching with Technology in Higher Education*, 139–140.
39 Callaway and Stickel, "Introduction to Counseling," 17.
40 Ann Beales, "The Special Considerations in Selecting and Sequencing Content in Workplace Courses," in *Teachers' Voices: Exploring Course Design in a Changing Curriculum* (ed. Anne Burns and Susan Hood; Sydney: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research, 1995), 45–50.
41 Uvin, "Designing Workplace Esol Courses," 48.
42 Hull, "A Curriculum Framework for Corporate Language Programs," 192.
43 Graves, "A Framework of Course Development Processes," 29.

could call on to help people move towards these objectives. My choice of which resources to use at any given moment was based on the dynamics that I encountered at the time.

The following example illustrates a small part of this diversity. Lukin claims that topical events can facilitate learning.[44] Accordingly, I sometimes referred to the feud between New Zealand's David Tua, the onetime contender for the world heavyweight boxing title, and his former coach, Kevin Barry. Tua publicly forgave Barry for an unspecified wrong. Barry responded by saying, "We will never have a personal relationship ever again. For him to be so condescending and say he forgives me. What is he forgiving me for?"[45] This example along with others was prepared to illustrate a learning objective of Session One, which read, "To begin to realise what forgiveness is and is not." It also demonstrates the perils of unsolicited spoken forgiveness!

Conceptualising Course Content

Optimally, course goals, learning outcomes, and learning objectives ought to determine what should and should not be included in courses; reality, however, suggests that many factors influence these decisions.[46] Consider the impact of practical considerations.[47] The choice to restrict the Forgiveness Matters course to eight 1.5 hour sessions offers an illustrative example. It was motivated by my desire to find a suitable timeframe that on the one side would grant people enough time to begin to process their forgiveness issues, yet on the other side would not represent too large a commitment that might prevent persons from signing up to the course. A further reason was that eight week courses fitted nicely into New Zealand's ten week school terms. The chief problem with restricting the course to 12 hours of direct contact time was that it limited the amount of material I could include in the course and the course handouts. This tension spotlights that course designers are regularly forced to make choices and compromises.

Designers also need to resolve how they wish to sequence the content of their courses.[48] I chose to shape the course around the HEART forgiveness schema. The schema equates to my adaptation of Lartey's five-phase pastoral cycle.[49] It also represents a helpful and memorable method for persons to process their parental wounds via forgiveness. The acronym HEART reflects Christ's call to forgive from the heart (Mt. 18:35), which is supposed to identify the importance of both volitional and emotional forgiveness.[50] The five phases are:

- *H*eeding people's parental wounds (Part of Session One and Session Two).

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44 Annabelle Lukin, "Functional Grammar in the Classroom," in *Teachers' Voices: Exploring Course Design in a Changing Curriculum* (ed. Anne Burns and Susan Hood; Sydney: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research, 1995), 53–65.
45 Chris Mirams, "Barry Comes out Swinging," in *Auckland Sunday Star Times* (February 20, 2005): B4.
46 See for example Forsyth, Jolliffe, and Stevens, *Planning a Course,* 17–28*;* Graves, "A Framework of Course Development Processes," 19–20; Taylor, *How to Design a Training Course,* 103.
47 Graves, "A Framework of Course Development Processes," 26; Hull, "A Curriculum Framework for Corporate Language Programs," 181–182.
48 See for example Forsyth, Jolliffe, and Stevens, *Planning a Course,* 17; Taylor, *How to Design a Training Course,* 103–104.
49 Emmanuel Y. Lartey, "Practical Theology as a Theological Form," in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (eds. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 128–34.
50 Adapted from Everett L. Worthington, Jr., *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Theory and Application* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 25.

- *E*xploring the influences that might have inclined people's parents to wound them (Session Three).
- *A*cknowledging some of the key Christian traditions that inform people's understanding of forgiveness (Sessions Four and Five).
- *R*eviewing people's comprehension of forgiveness in the light of their parents' offences (Sessions Six and Seven).
- *T*argeting future forgiveness goals (Session Eight).[51]

As it turned out, the HEART schema also became the spine of the course's content-rich handouts. The handouts served as the key instructional tool throughout the course and they provided the participants with a fertile resource for future reference and reflection. When individual group sessions seemed to stall, the handouts also offered me a place of refuge, in that I would overtly ask for a volunteer to read a paragraph from them, so that I could covertly regather myself and decide how best to proceed. To the best of my knowledge, my ruse was never discovered. Stated differently, I deem that the time spent developing the HEART schema and the associated handouts was very well spent.

The Learning Environment

Since positive learning environments enhance the effectiveness of courses,[52] numerous steps were taken to ensure that the Forgiveness Matters courses were held in participant-friendly atmospheres that were conducive to learning, the sharing of stories, and safety.

The work of cultivating a positive course ambience started months before each course commenced. Prayer comprised an integral component of this labour. Eighteen supporters committed to pray regularly for the courses. These people were thanked for their collaboration (and thereby reminded of their commitments) at pre-course, mid-course, and post-course junctures.

Similarly, Kiser states that first impressions have a major impact on the credibility of course facilitators and therefore the value of courses.[53] This necessitated that the innumerable interactions that I had with potential applicants were steeped in the qualities that I hoped would be palpable in the course sessions themselves—namely, the notions of respect, acceptance, and love. I trust that I achieved this lofty goal.

Many steps were also taken to create a positive ambience and rapport on the first night of each course. The participants were welcomed, offered supper, and pointed to a prepared meeting room. Organising the room entailed heating it, as well as ensuring that the resources and technology needed for the session were primed for use. It also involved arranging the seats in a circle to exhibit a non-hierarchical

51 For a fuller description of the course content please refer to Halstead, "The Forgiveness Matters Course," 88–93.
52 Callaway and Stickel, "Introduction to Counseling," 22; Carolyn Oxenford, "Discovering Assessment," in *Teaching Counselors and Therapists: Constructivist and Developmental Course Design* (eds. Karen Eriksen and Garrett McAuliffe; Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2001), 93–112.
53 A. Glenn Kiser, *Masterful Facilitation: Becoming a Catalyst for Meaningful Change* (New York: Amacom, 1998), 4.

teaching structure and encourage group sharing.[54] Part of this process called for me to position my chair in such a way that I would not look directly into people's faces, or sit between them and the door. If steps of this nature had been overlooked, some of the participants might have felt intimidated or trapped, which clearly would have jeopardised their learning. These practices were repeated for every session.

To enhance further the concept of safety I explained on the first night of each course that there would be no overt praying for persons during the course sessions. In the light of the members' diverse and unknown backgrounds it was considered that this form of prayer might lead to misunderstandings and could compromise the safety of some participants. Interestingly, only one participant challenged this stipulation. The apparent accord of the other group members seems to imply that many churchgoers have been disappointed or wounded via the prayers of others; and in the end, who can doubt that prayer sometimes resembles little more than the projections of the people doing the praying. (See below for further discussion.) Confidentiality was also talked about at the first session of each course.[55] It follows that any personal information that was shared in the group needed to stay in the group.

It was considered that groups of six to ten participants would create the best learning environments. In courses of less than six participants, group members might find the groups to be too threatening to share in. Then again, courses with more than ten people might not provide enough space or a sense of connectedness for individuals to share their stories.[56] In hindsight, I consider that groups of eight to twelve would have been better. Slightly larger numbers help to provide a momentum that stimulates sharing and they also mitigate the likelihood of persons feeling cornered, especially when absenteeism reduces group numbers to less than six.

Clearly, course facilitators also play a major role in establishing positive learning environments.[57] Since the accomplishment of this goal is largely dependent upon the knowledge, values, priorities, and attentiveness of the facilitators, it is critical that they have an adequate and growing awareness of their roles and themselves. The role that I hoped to adopt was that of an informed midwife.[58] "The word informed indicates that facilitators are supposed to be highly conversant with the goals, learning outcomes, learning objectives, and content of their courses."[59] They should also be familiar with concepts such as group theory and people's different learning styles.[60] The term midwife expresses my desire to support the birth and growth of forgiveness within the participants' lives as *they* explore the topic of forgiveness.[61] (The steps that I initiated to enhance my self-awareness are described in the Evaluation section below.)

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54 Callaway and Stickel, "Introduction to Counseling," 22; Julie A. Gorman, *Community That Is Christian: A Handbook on Small Groups* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1993), 129–130.

55 Judy Emmett, "A Constructivist Approach to the Teaching of Career Counseling," in *Teaching Counselors and Therapists: Constructivist and Developmental Course Design* (eds. Karen Eriksen and Garrett McAuliffe: Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2001), 139–67; Ivan Snook, "The Ethics and Politics of Social Research," in *Social Science Research in New Zealand: Many Paths to Understanding* (eds. Carl Davidson and Martin Tolich; Auckland: Pearson Education New Zealand, 2003), 69–87.

56 Gorman, *Community That Is Christian*, 127–128.

57 Nicholls, *Developing Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 45-46; Taylor, *How to Design a Training Course,* 105.

58 Barbara Fujiwara, "Planning an Advanced Listening Comprehension Elective for Japanese College Students," in *Teachers as Course Developers* (ed. Kathleen Graves; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 151–75.

59 Halstead, "The Forgiveness Matters Course," 93.

60 Garrett McAuliffe, "Introduction: Guidelines for Constructivist Teaching," in *Teaching Counselors and Therapists: Constructivist and Developmental Course Design* (eds. Karen Eriksen and Garrett McAuliffe; Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2001), 1–12.

61 Fujiwara, "Planning an Advanced Listening Comprehension Elective for Japanese College Students," 164–166.

By establishing parameters like these, it was hoped that every participant, every story shared, every church background, and every culture represented in the groups would be honoured. It was also hoped that these steps would help to diminish the resistance that persons frequently bring to groups.

Evaluation

Course evaluation is the seventh feature common to most course design taxonomies.[62] The principal reason for evaluating courses is to assess and improve their effectiveness. Given the importance of this task, it is critical for researchers to resolve *what* needs to be assessed and *how* they plan to accomplish the appraisals.[63] Courses can be evaluated in many ways. The context of each course will help to determine the best methods of evaluation. In my case, since forgiveness generally takes time and as change needs to be sustained if it is to be labelled genuine, it was decided that a key indicator of the success or failure of the course would be a psychometric comparison between (a) people's pre-course views of their parents, themselves, and God, and (b) the views that they held two months after the completion of the course. Consequently, the *Enright Forgiveness Inventory* was used to measure the participants' forgiveness of their parents.[64] The State Self-Forgiveness Scales were utilised to measure people's forgiveness of themselves.[65] And The A God Scale was employed to examine if and to what degree people's participation in the Forgiveness Matters course might modify their cognitive perceptions, affective experiences, and activities in relationship with God.[66]

On another level, the course was always meant to be more about people with their unique stories and circumstances than nameless resources that prove or disprove certain learning goals and outcomes. For this reason, it was also decided to obtain the participants' narratives before, during, and after the course.

The performance of facilitators should also be evaluated.[67] Given that the presence of external moderators or technology in the groups might have impeded some people's forgiveness work, it was decided that the evaluation of my performance would be restricted to three alternative strategies. The first entailed designing a series of junctures throughout the course where the participants were invited to comment on their perceptions of the course, the course content, and my role as the course facilitator.[68] The second involved my attending regular supervision meetings with a licensed supervisor, who kept an emotional overview of the course groups and of the fit that existed between the groups and me.[69] Supervision also

62 See for example Forsyth, Jolliffe, and Stevens, *Planning a Course,* 4–5*;* Graves, "A Framework of Course Development Processes," 30-31; Posner and Rudnitsky, *Course Design,* 186.

63 Adapted from Mercedes Fisher, *Designing Courses and Teaching on the Web: A "How To" Guide to Proven, Innovative Strategies* (Lanham, MD: ScarecrowEducation, 2003), 127.

64 Robert D. Enright, Julio Rique, and Catherine T. Coyle, *The Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI) User's Manual* (Madison, WI: The International Forgiveness Institute, 2000).

65 Michael J. A. Wohl, Lise DeShea, and Rebekah Lynn Wahkinney, "Looking Within: Measuring State Self-Forgiveness and Its Relationship to Psychological Well-Being," *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* 40 (2008): 1–10.

66 Philip J. Halstead (with Michael Hautus), "Defending the God Beyond: The Development of the a God-Scale—A New Instrument for the Assessment of People's Perceptions, Experiences, and Activities in Relationship to God—and Its Initial Use in a Forgiveness Study," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* (forthcoming).

67 Karen Eriksen and Garrett McAuliffe, "Constructing the Helping Interview," in *Teaching Counselors and Therapists: Constructivist and Developmental Course Design* (eds. Karen Eriksen and Garrett McAuliffe; Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2001), 41–70.

68 Eriksen and McAuliffe, "Constructing the Helping Interview," 55–56; Graves, "A Framework of Course Development Processes," 32.

69 Philip L. Culbertson, *Caring for God's People: Counseling and Christian Wholeness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 293-295.

enabled me to establish a routine to reflect, deal with conflict, and explore complex relationships.[70] My reflection on my own performance as the facilitator equated to the third strategy of evaluating my role.

Eventually, there came a point when I needed to move on from my endless attempts to improve what was up until this point a theoretical model and trial the course. Interestingly, I was tempted to omit this step in the course design process, as I thought that the course was in good shape, and because I was running out of time and energy. As will be seen, it is fortunate that I overcame this temptation, followed the advice of the experts, and piloted the course.

III. THE PILOT STUDY

Piloting courses can greatly enhance their efficacy.[71] Several reasons account for this. Pilot studies force designers to step out from behind their computers and gain a firsthand, working knowledge of their courses. They provide a platform for facilitators to trial the different components of their studies. The learning gained from these experiences and the participants' feedback can assist coordinators to identify issues within their courses that need to be omitted, added, or improved.[72] And the confidence that facilitators obtain from these steps will engender hope in individuals who participate in subsequent courses.

Consequently, I invited six friends who I thought could identify with the theme of the study to take part in a course. Five readily signed up. The course was run over eight consecutive Wednesday evenings in our home.

Overall, I was pleased with how the pilot course unfolded. The sessions seemed to flow together well. The participants appeared to enjoy the course and embrace the process of forgiveness. Every individual reported positive and/or miraculous occurrences in their lives as a result of taking part in the course. And the results from the psychometric analyses were encouraging, though given that they were drawn from only five participants it was not possible to draw any conclusions of note in regards to the efficacy of the course.

Unsurprisingly, I also learned a number of lessons via running the pilot course. Examples include:

1. I concluded that it was probably a mistake to pilot the course in our own home. Not only did I find it difficult to prepare myself adequately for the sessions amidst the bustle of family life, but the course disturbed our household far more than I had anticipated. It was therefore decided to run future courses in neutral, safer, and more professional environments.
2. In the third session, a participant challenged me concerning my focus on historical parental offences as opposed to present-day ones. This perspective motivated me to adjust the balance slightly between these two foci in the remaining sessions. It also prompted me to explain in future courses that the early course sessions focus more on formative child-parent experiences and the latter ones on contemporary issues.

70 Callaway and Stickel, "Introduction to Counseling," 14.
71 See for example Forsyth, Jolliffe, and Stevens, *Planning a Course,* 28; Franco and Maria Estela, "Designing a Writing Component for Teen Courses at a Brazilian Language Institute," in *Teachers as Course Developers* (ed. Kathleen Graves; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 119–50.
72 Forsyth, Jolliffe, and Stevens, *Planning a Course,* 28; Uvin, "Designing Workplace Esol Courses," 45.

3. I had prepared and begun to dispense bi-weekly questions to the participants in order to conduct overt formative evaluations of their knowledge of parental offences and forgiveness issues throughout the course. However, since the participants clearly had enough to work through without the additional burden of this task, the procedure was abandoned mid-course.
4. I realised that the extent of the participants' biblical, theological, and psychological knowledge was on occasions not as advanced as I had anticipated. Subsequently, I added a number of bridging explanations to the course handouts.
5. Similarly, the process of working through the handouts in a live setting helped me to identify numerous points that needed to be modified. The majority of these were minor. The largest entailed replacing an entire section on relational sin from Session Four's handout with Volf's masterful description of the topic.[73] The first depiction failed to resonate with the participants and in hindsight appeared to miss the essence of the theme.
6. Two people commented at the end of the course that it may have been better if I had adhered more closely to the handouts during the sessions; however, the others mentioned that they had greatly appreciated the malleability of the sessions. Weighing both perspectives, I decided that there was no easy way to rectify this dilemma. I would simply have to trust my own discretion concerning how to balance people's different learning styles in upcoming courses. I also determined to state explicitly that one of the purposes of the handouts was to provide people with the opportunity to revise the content of each session and take it a step further. Reflective learners would clearly benefit from this.

IV. RECRUITMENT PROCEDURES

Having created, piloted, and refined the course further, I then needed to recruit people to take part in the courses that would be used to assess the efficacy of the Forgiveness Matters course. I had anticipated that this would be a straightforward and easy procedure. The theme of the course was important. To my knowledge there were no forgiveness courses operating in the New Zealand church. The pilot study had gone well and the course was being offered for free. Surely, I thought, churchgoers would queue up to join the courses and church leaders would leap at the opportunity to host them. I was so confident of quickly locating the people needed to generate sufficient statistical power to investigate the effectiveness of the course that I expected to use control groups to manage additional participants and to test the course's efficacy.[74]

My plan to find the group members was to place an advertisement in the leadership newsletters of two of New Zealand's largest denominations. Since I had been granted permission to do this and as the

73 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 74–75.
74 Wade, Worthington Jr., and Meyer, "But Do They Work?," 423–439.

combined readership of the newsletters was over 1000 church leaders, I thought I would be shortly inundated with calls.

How wrong I was. The plan utterly failed. Two persons responded and neither of them was interested in hosting or taking part in a course. Similarly, a friend offered to advertise the course in her church's bulletin, but no one contacted me from this congregation of over 200 people.

I can only surmise why the advertisements failed to attract interest. One conceivable explanation is that I had written them poorly. Another is that church leaders are too busy to read the newsletters from their denominational offices. Or, perhaps the leaders' silence confirms Symington's contention that some church leaders are psychologically blind towards their own inner realities and their parishioners' lives;[75] consequently, they failed to extend the opportunity to their flocks to take part in a course in forgiveness.
A participant from the pilot study offered another explanation: She insisted that people will not take part in a course where they do not know the facilitator and added: "So you need to get out there and sell your great product in person." I followed her advice and contacted eight pastors over the next months. I explained to them the nature of the course and asked them whether I could personally advertise the course to their congregations and run a course in their churches should enough interest be generated. The four pastors whom I knew agreed in principle. The four who did not know me did not say no, but since they did not get back to me or return my calls, nothing further eventuated.

The next phase of the recruitment procedure was protracted and complex. Two of the four pastors who had tentatively approved my request asked me to meet with their leadership teams in order to gain their approval to advertise the course. Both of these meetings went well. I then had to negotiate a suitable timeframe and platform to promote the course with the different churches. These negotiations led to me giving 11 separate public addresses (e.g., at church services, meetings in houses, and at a church camp) to advertise the course.

To *sell* the free course I shaped the 11 talks around Forman's selling-cycle.[76] As a matter of fact, I felt somewhat fraudulent adopting a selling-cycle to enlist persons for the course, but by this time my desperation to locate participants had risen to the point that I was able to overcome my internal and perhaps unwarranted resistance. Thus, I proceeded to:

1. *Establish a need*: This entailed speaking about the inevitability of parental offences and raising the critical question that all people ought to ask themselves; namely, "Have I processed my parents' offences adequately?"
2. *Create Want*: To engender a desire within the listeners to participate in the course and to reiterate the question directly above, I listed several problems that often stem from parental offences that forgiveness may help to improve. One example is where parents seem to reside in their children's heads. Another is when persons realise that they unwillingly behave in an incongruent manner when they are in their parents' presence.

75 Neville Symington, *The Blind Man Sees: Freud's Awakening and Other Essays* (London: Karnac, 2004), 2–18.
76 David Forman, *The Selling Model Based on the Buyer's Cycle of Motivation* (Auckland: David Forman Excellence in Business Performance, 2000).

3. *Present method*: I then explained how the forgiveness course will address these issues and summarised the practical details of the course such as its length.
4. *Resistance barrier*: Next, I tried to pre-empt and disarm people's resistance barriers to the course. For instance, I encouraged people to approach me to discuss their particular situations and see whether taking part in this course might be of benefit to them.
5. *Close for action*: To persuade persons to turn their interest into action I invited them to sign an *Expression of Interest Form* (see below) and/or talk with me after my presentation.

I estimate that at least 1100 people heard these talks. Perhaps 70 of these spoke with me after the services and 50 filled in an *Expression of Interest Form*. The purpose of these forms was to provide these persons with additional course details and me with their contact-details and preferred timeslots for the course.

Next, I chose a night and starting date for the course in accordance with the people's favoured timeframes and the availability of the church premises. All interested persons were sent a notification of these times and copies of the study's Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms.[77] This information enabled them to make an informed decision as to whether they wished to commit to a course. Twenty-eight participants were recruited in this way.

All of these tasks took time. The briefest period between the initial conversation with the pastor and the first night of a course was 13 weeks; the longest was 30 weeks; and the average was 19 weeks. I found this waiting extremely frustrating.

During this time, I also adopted a snowball approach to recruit course participants.[78] This technique entails researchers using their own social networks to find people who might wish to participate in a course. Fifteen participants were enlisted via this approach. Moreover, one participant from an earlier course told her pastor about the course, who in turn contacted me and asked if I would be willing to host a course at their church. I readily agreed.

Of the many lessons that were learned through the arduous and time-consuming process of recruiting participants, two stand out: I simply underestimated the length of time it would take to organise each course and I had not accounted for the reality that some pastors would neither commit to the course nor say no to the course. If I had been awake to these eventualities, I would have approached many more pastors from the outset instead of trying to anticipate how I could accommodate all of the courses that might come together. In this way, I might have saved myself much consternation and been able to lead more people through the courses.

Still, 43 participants eventually took part in the five courses that were used to assess the effectiveness of the Forgiveness Matters course. For these individuals, I am extremely grateful.

77 The Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms comprised part of the application I submitted to the University of Auckland's Human Participants Ethics Committee to run the courses. Ethics approval was successfully obtained.
78 Bouma and Ling, *The Research Process*, 117–118.

V. EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS AND IMPLICATIONS

I set out to create an effective course that would assist adult churchgoers to process their parental wounds via forgiveness. The study's findings suggest that the Forgiveness Matters course assisted over 90% of the participants to explore their relationships with their parents; enhance their comprehension and application of forgiveness; and improve their relationships with their parents, themselves, and/or God. Statistical significance was reached on every scale employed in the study and many miraculous stories emerged from the participants' narratives.[79] Five overlapping concepts relating to course design emerged from the narrative inquiry—specifically, the importance of the course structure; the positive learning environment; the role of prayer; the responsibilities of course facilitators; and the importance of storytelling.

The Course Structure

The results of the narrative inquiry reveal that every participant appreciated being made aware of the learning objectives, the course goals, and course guidelines from the outset of the course. Betty,[80] for instance, reasoned that because the facilitator "clearly knew where he was leading us, I could relax." And Talia stated that she "had no confidentiality concerns whatsoever, because they were clearly spelt out in the beginning." In other words, the learning objectives and course guidelines acted as scaffolding that supported the participants' forgiveness explorations. And the course goals provided people with a sense of direction and a path to forgiveness.[81]

Comments like these suggest that the small amount of time that it takes facilitators to clarify learning objectives and goals at the beginning of the courses may well save all parties much time and heartache in the latter course sessions. These steps also serve to create an atmosphere of safety and acceptance.

Most of the participants also appreciated that each session followed the same main structure. Jemma expounded: "I liked the predictability of the sessions – beginning with music (though some of it was certainly not my style), prayer, sharing, a video clip, and" the facilitator's "gentle way of dealing with people." This consistency also helped people to relax, question, take risks, learn, and forgive.

The participants were asked to comment on the length of the sessions in their post-course round-one forms. Seventy percent favoured the 90 minute time frame while the remainder thought that two hours would have been better, because the additional time would have allowed more time for discussion. Jemma reported that "most times" she "was shocked that the hour and a half had gone by so quickly"; many others echoed her sentiments. No one considered that the sessions were too long.

When responding to the question of the length of the sessions, half of participants added that they were delighted to encounter a church-based course that actually started and finished on time. Mercy

79 For further details see Halstead, "The Forgiveness Matters Course," 85–110.

80 Pseudonyms have been employed for all the participants in this article. Part of the Ethics approval involved obtaining the participants consent for their stories to be written up in articles. Quotation marks are utilized whenever people's exact words are cited.

81 Graves, "A Framework of Course Development Processes," 12.

emphasised "I really, really appreciated the facilitator's care in keeping to time without any sense of pressure being conveyed." The fact that so many people stressed this point indicates that concise sessions and accurate time keeping comprise important yet much overlooked components of effective courses, because they engender certainty, security, and trust.

To develop a relevant course that encompasses theology, psychology, and practice also requires the bringing together of numerous other factors. The primary way I achieved this was to create a set of content-rich course handouts, which were shaped around the HEART forgiveness schema. This offered the group members opportunities to reflect on and integrate the material at home.

Most group members appreciated the freedom and encouragement to engage with the course material in whatever ways felt congruent to them.[82] Betty liked "having choices." Ivan appreciated "the non-threatening way in which the material was presented." Clark connected "the space that was always available to ask questions" to the positive course environment. And Tim reported that "it was great to be always presented with options, because it meant that" he "was never cornered." Statements like these imply that many adults equate autonomous learning to sound pedagogy, respect, safety, and effective courses in forgiveness.

Similarly, the group members reported that they benefited from the variety of teaching materials that were utilised in the course to accommodate their different learning styles and advance their forgiveness.[83] Consider their views on the course videos: Zach "didn't enjoy" them "at all", though he "loved the discussions centred on them." Mia stated that the videos "were helpful to reflect on as were the other people's interpretations of them"; most of the participants echoed this view. And Lia expressed that the video *Light in a Dark Place*[84] was "life-changing, because it put" her "story in perspective."

Observations like these accentuate that there is not only one way to teach adults. Some adults are classical self-directed learners.[85] Others learn best in communal settings.[86] Some thrive on deep-learning strategies and still others benefit more through alternative teaching methods.[87] Moreover, Taylor encourages course facilitators to access the wealth of experience that adults typically bring to meetings by creating opportunities for these learners to share their thoughts and interact with each other.[88] What matters most, then, is that participants are encouraged to engage with the course content in whatever way serves their learning and processing best. To contextualise this theory, course designers will need to think carefully about how they encourage the participants in their courses to engage with the course material.

Similarly, most participants appreciated being informed about the many different ways that scholars viewed forgiveness. When Samantha learned of some of these distinctions, she exclaimed: "You cannot

82 Bates and Poole, *Effective Teaching with Technology in Higher Education*, 38; Nicholls, *Developing Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 38–39.
83 McAuliffe, "Introduction: Guidelines for Constructivist Teaching," 202.
84 Pilgrim International, "Light in a Dark Place."
85 Taylor, *How to Design a Training Course,* 35.
86 Brita L. Gill-Austern, "Pedagogy under the Influence of Feminism and Womanism," in *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology* (eds. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Brita L. Gill-Austern; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 149–68.
87 Bates and Poole, *Effective Teaching with Technology in Higher Education*, 39–41.
88 Taylor, *How to Design a Training Course,* 27.

believe how liberating it is to hear someone say that forgiveness and reconciliation are distinct concepts!"[89] And Fran reflected that "it was immensely helpful to learn of interpretations of forgiveness that are different from" her "pastor's ideas", as they helped to "release" her from a number of "religious expectations such as the demand for instant forgiveness and the need to confront others."[90]

Comments like these appear to challenge the notion that the average churchgoer cannot cope with and/or should not be exposed to conflicting points of view. The participants' diverse backgrounds and positive psychometric shifts over the course support this contention. Additionally, the comments reiterate how the words and edicts of church leaders can have long-lasting detrimental effects on congregants. For this reason, leaders should encourage their listeners to prove their teaching; and the leaders and listeners should always strive to further their education in order to reduce the propagation of narrow and non-effective teaching.

The Positive Learning Environment

The results of the narrative enquiry also accentuated that creating a positive and safe course setting is critical to the running of a successful course. To begin with, positive environments encourage transparency, story-telling, questions, respect, love, growth, and forgiveness; whereas, negative atmospheres can all too easily stifle these forgiveness promoting characteristics.

Further, the participants' willingness to explore the notion of forgiveness and personalise the input was partially dependent upon their feeling safe. Their backgrounds help to explain this essential need. To be a victim of parental offences is to have experienced wounding at the core of one's being.[91] To have known deep shame as a result of parental offences is in all probability to encounter difficulties in trusting others. To express interest in taking part in a forgiveness course is for many churchgoers akin to admitting defeat. And to enrol in a course that invites open sharing with unidentified others and an unknown facilitator is to risk. It is therefore necessary to feel safe in order to move beyond one's natural defences and protective behavioural patterns.

Prayer

Prayer was another factor that helped to create a safe course atmosphere. In one sense, this was surprising, because the only overt prayers that were prayed during the meetings were the ones used to open and close the sessions. In another sense, it was not surprising, given the number of people praying for the course, the priority that prayer is afforded throughout Christendom, and the reality that there are numerous expressions

89 Enright and Fitzgibbons, *Helping Clients Forgive,* 41–43.
90 Augsburger, *The New Freedom of Forgiveness*, 48.
91 Elan Golomb, *Trapped in the Mirror* (New York: William Morrow, 1992), 35-44; Halstead, "Clearing the Way to Forgiveness," 230–241.

of prayer such as becoming open before God in regards to forgiveness issues.[92] For example, Celina articulated: "I felt an amazing presence of God in the group last week, which stayed with me for a long time after the meeting. How many people did you say were praying for us?" Other persons used expressions like prayerful, peaceful, and God-filled to describe the ambience that they encountered on the course.

Payne argues that it is the presence of God that enables individuals to forgive.[93] The prayers of the course supporters and the participants presumably helped some of the group members to experience God's presence on the course and as a consequence to forgive their parents, others, and themselves.

Rose testified that God via prayer helped her to feel safe and find forgiveness on the course. Rose was sitting in church with a chronic stomach ache on the day that I was scheduled to advertise the course. During the service in a time of open prayer, a church member spoke out: "There is someone here who has a terrible stomach ache. I believe that God wants that person to know that although you have come a long way it is now time for you to forsake the burden that you've been carrying for years". I was then invited to talk. As Rose listened to me describe the course, she later reported that God told her to enrol in the course, because she would "learn how to forsake" her "burden on the course."

Rose arrived at the first meeting with a mixture of expectation and trepidation. Fortunately, she quickly "felt at home" and worked hard to forgive her parents intrapersonally. By mid-course she joyfully reported: "This thing that has defined me for ages, this physical burden, this crippling burden, has completely gone. I am amazed. I feel great. I cannot believe it. I don't actually know what happened, but I know it's gone." Rose also mentioned at the end of the course that she was "shocked to realise that" she had "begun to think about helping other people who have been hurt in the same way as" her. Up until that point, she had not been able to entertain the idea, because her decade-old wounds were too raw.

An addendum to Rose's story is that I received a note from her several months after the final quantitative analyses of the study had been completed. She wrote, "the big thing for me is that I don't need to talk about it (i.e., her parents' offences) as I once did … I don't feel isolated anymore. I don't trust my parents, but I am no longer tied to them. Praise God."

In the light of Rose's opening and closing words, one could say that the Forgiveness Matters phase of her forgiveness journey was framed in prayer.

The stipulation that there would be no explicit praying for individuals during the course sessions also helped to create a safe course environment. Mercy appreciated the directive, because she did not want to be "the focus of attention" and she did "not want other people to touch" her. (Some individuals' theology and/or customs of prayer necessitate that they place their hands on the persons that they pray for in order to invoke the Holy Spirit's presence.) And Tim valued the stipulation, because he was "tired of people's attempts at magic" and "their bandaid approaches to healing" where they "try to resolve a history of abuse with a one-off prayer." Interestingly, Tim's appraisal resonated with every participant in his group. Their accord implies that many churchgoers have been disappointed or wounded via the prayers of others.

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92 See for example Leanne Payne, *Restoring the Christian Soul: Overcoming Barriers to Completion in Christ through Healing Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1991), 84.

93 Payne, *Restoring the Christian Soul,* 84.

This suggestion is not meant to belittle the value of prayer, or the fact that prayer and forgiveness are on occasions closely linked (e.g., Mt. 6:9-15; Mk. 11:25); however, it is meant to highlight that some forms of prayer in some contexts are not helpful.

McMinn expands upon this point, and argues that it can be dangerous for counsellors to pray for their clients on a regular in-session basis.[94] His rationale is compelling. For instance, he reasons that some caregivers pray as a defence mechanism to hide their own lack of insight and self-understanding. He also suggests that prayer can be used to placate the expectations of clients instead of trying to understand the origins of their expectations. And some individuals tend to abdicate any sense of self-responsibility for their healing when their counsellors pray, because, after all, it is the counsellor's job to pray!

Accordingly, McMinn asserts that *the* question that people such as caregivers and course facilitators need to ask themselves is: "*Which* forms of prayer should be used with *which* clients and under *which* circumstances?"[95]

Talia was the only participant who openly questioned the decision not to pray explicitly for individuals during the meetings. In my view, her story reveals some of the reasoning behind her question. Many years earlier, Talia was deeply betrayed by her mother and despite Talia's repeated attempts at reconciliation the two women have remained estranged. The pain of this separation has been particularly difficult for Talia to bear, as her mid-course statement "if I start to cry I may never stop" appears to reflect. Thus, Talia longed for a miracle that would remove her pain and reconnect her with her mother; and she had hoped that the prayers of the group members, as opposed to her own forgiveness efforts, would instigate these changes. A comment she made in her post-course round-one forms seems to verify this: "I didn't read one word from the course handouts and I didn't think about forgiveness at all between the sessions."

Given Talia's situation and patent distress during the meetings, my clinical supervisor and I concluded that I had a responsibility to encourage her to seek professional care. As it turned out, Talia approached me on this very topic at the end of the course. I trust that she pursued the leads that I offered her and managed to find appropriate support.

Since it is impossible for people to resolve all of their parental issues via an eight week intervention and as it can be extremely difficult for some persons to acknowledge their need of professional assistance, I view Talia's decision and the few others like it as an affirmation of the course's efficacy. The significance of the decisions is that they denote that the participants have moved on in their forgiveness journeys and have become aware of their need to work on their issues in a more in-depth setting.

94 Mark R. McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1996), 81.
95 McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling,* 81.

The Responsibilities of Course Facilitators

Course facilitators contribute directly to the safety and efficacy of course.[96] While this claim is beyond dispute, it needs to be remembered that every participant who completed the post-course forms knew that I would read them; hence, their comments may be affected by response bias.

Virtually every participant emphasised that the sharing of my own forgiveness story had a positive influence on the course environment and their own forgiveness journeys. For example, Martha reasoned: "Your forgiveness journey gives people hope to carry on with their own journeys." And Rose declared that "hearing" the facilitator's "story and observing his openness about his own journey into forgiveness was for me a critical aspect of being able to tell my story. There is a great deal of difference between somebody standing up in a pulpit and telling me that I have to forgive and someone who can understand just how difficult it is."

The implications of these statements are far-reaching. On one level, they appear to indicate that persons who have not processed their own forgiveness issues should not lead forgiveness courses. On a broader level, they seem to suggest that church teachers should specialise in the fields that they have firsthand experience in. For instance, perhaps the caregiver who can offer the most effective help to an individual who is struggling with depression is not the person who has never experienced depression, but rather a person who has been through depression and gained significant insights into the topic.

A number of participants also mentioned that my knowledge of forgiveness contributed to the positive course atmosphere and aided them in their forgiveness journeys. Petra said that "what I appreciated most of all was" the facilitator's "insight and understanding in the whole area of forgiveness" and Warren nominated that "hearing" the facilitator's "responses to other people's questions" was "one of the most enjoyable aspects of the course." Observations like these underline Graves' belief that course facilitators should always strive to increase their knowledge on their given topics.[97]

Several group members declared that they felt safe on the course due to the way that I related with the participants and managed the emotional environment of the groups. Harriet put it this way: "I liked" the facilitator's "gentle, caring way of handling us all. He was careful to make us all feel valued when we made comments."

My clinical supervisor's insights greatly assisted me to fulfil these roles. That is to say, she helped me "to analyze the "fit" between" my "personality, memories, fears, hopes, gifts, and inhibitions" and my "conduct of ministry, including all interactions with others and the reactions to those interactions."[98] To illustrate: At one point, I realised that I was feeling considerable ill-will towards a non-churchgoing participant. My clinical supervisor enabled me to realise that part of my tension was due to the fact that I had shifted my focus from being a course facilitator to that of a missionary, who wanted to convert the

96 Nicholls, *Developing Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 45–46; Taylor, *How to Design a Training Course,* 105.
97 Kathleen Graves, "Teachers as Course Developers," in *Teachers as Course Developers* (ed. Kathleen Graves; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–11.
98 Culbertson, *Caring for God's People,* 291.

participant in order to validate the course. By becoming aware of this shift, I was better able to refocus on my primary role as a course facilitator and thereby support the participant as opposed to tussle with the course member from a psychological point of view.

Storytelling

What seemed to result from the safe course environment was a liberty amongst 90% of the participants to share their stories openly during the sessions. Interestingly, several individuals reported that they chose to talk, because they felt free not to talk, which relates to the course ethos of freedom.

Talking about one's parental struggles in appropriate settings can be extremely helpful. Eric was "humbled" that other persons were willing to pay attention to his story and said "one would usually pay huge money to have someone listen to all of that. Thank you so much for listening." Dowrick reasons that the act of listening to people's words and the meanings behind their words shows the speakers that their inner worlds matter.[99] This seems to have been Eric's experience, because unlike his father "who always pushed" him "away", the group's interest conveyed to Eric that he mattered.

Deborah was met by silence when she finished talking about her parents' offences. Savage contends that silence is a skill and in my view the group's response of quietness was entirely appropriate.[100] Deborah shared her story in the context of Session Three's exploration of the factors that might have inclined parents to wound their children. If persons had responded to her narrative by using the destructive words *yes* you have been wounded, *but* look at your parents' terrible circumstances,[101] they may have weakened Deborah's ownership of her wounds and terminated the possibility of her healing.

Eventually, I verbalised to Deborah that I felt sadness for her parents, yet also horror for what they had done to her. Deborah responded: "Yes, those two factors coexist and then added thank you for understanding." Culbertson notes that before the church can respond to people's needs effectively, it must first hear and understand their stories.[102] Perhaps Deborah was able to continue with her forgiveness explorations, because she felt heard and understood by the group. Her post-course round-two comment appears to reiterate this: "I can now name and "see" the present situation with my parents more clearly and am less emotionally attached to them, which is healthy."

Every person who completed the post-course forms expressed that they enjoyed and benefited from listening to the other participants' stories and struggles. Uwe appreciated "learning that other children were traumatised or neglected in similar and sometimes worse ways than" he was. This awareness enabled him to realise that he was "not alone in" his "struggle for wholeness." Mid-course, Kevin expressed that he was "finding the course increasingly difficult in a good way, because" he had "never stopped to consider

99 Stephanie Dowrick, *The Intimacy & Solitude Self-Therapy Book* (Birkenhead, Auckland: Reed Books, 1993), 196–197.
100 John Savage, *Listening and Caring Skills in Ministry: A Guide for Pastors, Counselors, and Small Groups* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 98.
101 Johnella Bird, *The Heart's Narrative: Therapy and Navigating Life's Contradictions* (Green Bay, Auckland: Edge Press, 2000), 150–151.
102 Philip L. Culbertson, "'The Things We Do!' Nurturing the Authority of Men in Ministry","in *The Spirituality of Men: Sixteen Christians Write About Their Faith* (ed. Philip L. Culbertson; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 221–43.

the issues that everyone" kept "on revealing." And Martha said that it was "inspirational to hear how people were being helped by the course and to learn of the changes that were occurring in their lives."

Statements like these illustrate how stories can connect people, convey instruction in a non-threatening manner, inspire, help the storytellers and listeners to get in touch with their own issues,[103] and accelerate people's forgiveness. They also speak of the efficacy of the Forgiveness Matters course.

VI. SUMMARY

To design and deliver a new course is a very creative and challenging task. It entails a great deal of effort. It involves working through the seven points that are common to most course design taxonomies, piloting the course, and finding suitable persons to take part in the course. Accordingly, course designers need to be highly motivated to accomplish these tasks successfully. As alluded to above, part of my motivation stemmed from the lessons I had learned and the healing benefits I had experienced during my own forgiveness journey. My ministry experience, my wife's endless support, my supervisors' encouragement, and God inspired me as well. Other designers will need to find their own sources of motivation.

In the reading of this article, I hope that many others will be encouraged to craft their own courses and share their learning. If this were to occur, multitudes of hurting people could be assisted and fellow course designers would learn from one another.

Just as many stories have unexpected twists at their conclusion, so too has this one. In the writing of this article I have noted the emergence of a desire to create another course focusing on an entirely new theme. Who but God knows where this journey may lead me over the next decade?

103 McCullough, Sandage, and Worthington, Jr., *To Forgive Is Human*, 147–150; Mary D. Pellauer with S.B. Thistlethwaite, "Conversation on Grace and Healing: Perspectives from the Movement to End Violence against Women," in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside* (eds. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 169–185.