

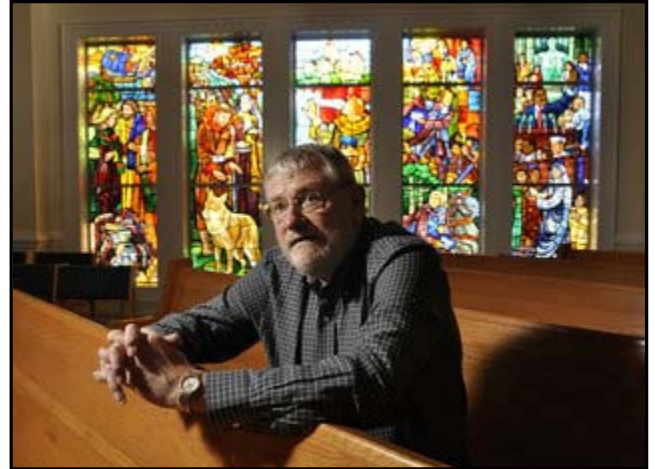
# Man-to-man on matters of faith

**Men in Balance ministry helps men open up to each on deep topics.**

By Amber Veverka  
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As men navigate relationships, job loss or other challenges, too often they don't feel they have anyone to talk with, says Jerry Hancock, who formed Men in Balance and created a workbook for groups. Workbook discussion topics include "fathers and their influence" and "career traps."



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As a pastor, Steve Kirby knows well the challenge of getting men to talk to each other about spiritual struggles. Even in men's groups or Bible studies, "anything deep, we just don't get there," he said.

But not long ago, Kirby participated in a new men's gathering at his church, Union Grove United Methodist in Iredell County. The men in the room talked about knowing God. About sex. About their own fathers, some of them loving, some of them cruel.

For many in the room, it was the first time they had ever been so frank with others, especially in a church setting. Although 61 and a pastor for decades, Kirby said even he had never talked about some of the things the group explored.

That men aren't comfortable talking about matters of the soul is accepted as truth. But a ministry called Men in Balance is proving that, given the right environment, and the right leadership, men aren't just willing to talk about deep things - but they crave it. The man behind that ministry is Jerry Hancock, someone who has made a career of encouraging conversation. Hancock is a management training consultant and longtime host of WTVI's news roundtable program, "Final Edition," which aired its last show in 2009.

"I think my main gift is bringing people out - that's what I (did) on the TV show," said Hancock, 63. "It's sort of my way of approaching the world, as a facilitator."

Men in Balance got its start after Hancock took a class through his church on discovering spiritual gifts. Small groups of men met as part of the course, and the guys were enthusiastic about talking with one another. That got Hancock thinking. Men typically don't have the kind of support networks women do, he said. They often have few friends, and even in churches, programs seem to be oriented either to everyone or specifically to women. As men navigate relationships, job loss or other challenges, too often they don't feel they have anyone to talk with, Hancock said.

So he formed Men in Balance as a nonprofit and created a workbook for groups that provides topics for discussion, such as "fathers and their influence" and "career traps." He trains facilitators at a church to lead the groups. And once men agree to come, he said, what happens next is often amazing.

"This is what's blown my mind: You get guys together, they sign a confidentiality agreement, and they just open up," Hancock said. The program has run in about nine churches and Hancock is eager to expand.

When Hancock hosted "Final Edition," a show in which local journalists discussed the news of the day, one of the things he loved most was "learning what the story behind the story was all about," he said.

Getting to the story behind the story on a spiritual level may not be easy for men, but given the right questions and someone brave enough to talk first, they're more than ready, Men in Balance participants said.

"Men actually desire to be open and talk about this stuff," said Ryan Stamm, 36, a married father of three who attended a Men in Balance group at Huntersville United Methodist. "We claim we have friends, but we keep them at arm's length. We don't tell them anything." And achieving a balanced life is something men do long for, said Stamm, especially when it comes to vocation. Without faith and the opportunity to meet with other men as he did, Stamm said it would be easy to "let your job take over and become primary in your life."

The recession sparked Carmen DiGiandomenico's interest in starting a Men in Balance group in Cincinnati. DiGiandomenico, who knew Hancock through his job at Fidelity Investments, used the curriculum to run an economy-focused program last February called "How to Deal with the Wolf at the Door." The feedback was so good, DiGiandomenico's group kept meeting.

"By far what men were looking for was balance in their lives," said DiGiandomenico, 47. "I'm not exaggerating - it's so clearly the issue guys are looking for. I think they're looking for a stronger spiritual life."

Topics for the Midwest Region Men in Balance group range from how to live courageously by following Jesus' example to how to network for a new job.

DiGiandomenico said meeting regularly with a group of like-minded guys has helped him take his faith more seriously. That group also has disproved the notion that men are uninterested in talking about serious spiritual matters.

"We have a 'hard stop' at 10 a.m. and I have not had a meeting where I've not had to stop the group at 10. You throw a topic out there, you throw some questions out there, and you get these guys talking," he said. "This is getting to people's core."

At Hancock's own church, Davidson United Methodist, Chris Feigl, 58, said Men in Balance has made him a better listener. "Chris before was a lot more focused on himself, to be honest," he said of himself. "The class and the sharing ... has given me the ability to be less self-centered."

Hancock is open about some of his own struggles to feel peace and balance. His father died when Jerry was 10. At the gravesite, a well-meaning friend of the family told the boy that it was now his job to become the man of the family. "It sets you out on a mission," Hancock said of that moment. "You carry that burden throughout life."

Hancock said that burden of self-imposed high expectations and his own defensiveness about criticism made for some hard times. Divorce and job struggles are part of his story. And keeping his own life in balance hasn't been easy on a career path that has taken him from teaching to radio to the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce to television to now launching the ministry while running a consulting firm with his wife, Emmie Alexander Hancock.

Hancock can relate to men who find it easy to neglect their spiritual life in favor of other things.

"When we were getting our (consulting) business up and running, we went to church every Sunday morning but we weren't involved in the church, we were attendees," he said. That's changed now, and Hancock tries to reach men with the message that an active spiritual life matters - to them and to their spouses.

"You can breeze through life as a student, husband, father, even president of a company," he said, "and never get in touch with who you really are, and on your deathbed, realize (you) missed out on the whole big point of life - the spiritual component."

<p><b>Jerry Hancock</b></p> <p><b>Born</b> in Concord, 1946.</p> <p><b>Taught</b> in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools; 1968-69.</p> <p><b>Worked</b> at radio stations in Charlotte and Illinois, including WBT, WSOC and WEZC; 1969-1973.</p> <p><b>Served</b> in community development for the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce; 1973-1981</p>	<p><b>Hosted</b> programs at WTVI, including "Final Edition"; 1976-2009.</p> <p><b>Formed</b> consulting/training firm Alexander Hancock Associates in Davidson with his wife, Emmie Hay Alexander Hancock; 1988 to present.</p> <p><b>Created</b> Men in Balance, a nonprofit men's ministry; 2007-present.</p>
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