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COLUMN ONE

Learning to Write Their Love

Men in church workshops express themselves, word by painstaking word, in an unlikely medium: the humble letter.

By STEPHANIE SIMON
Times Staff Writer

McKINNEY, Texas — After 26 years of marriage, Charles Batson says his wife means everything to him. He just wishes he knew how to tell her.

"We're always going in a million different directions and when we talk, it's almost like a text message: Hey, I love you. Gotta go." That's not enough, he said. Not for the way he feels.

So Batson enrolled in a church workshop to learn how to write a love letter.

The course has become a surprise hit in scores of churches across the nation this fall, promoted by pastors who hope the old-fashioned letter can strengthen the frazzled modern family.

Intent on writing not only to their wives, but also to their children and their parents, more than 5,000 men have joined support groups to help one another put their feelings to paper.

The groups — led by men trained at an evangelical church here in suburban Dallas — are springing up in California, South Carolina, Oregon and Alaska; in a rural parish in Little Axe, Okla., and a mega-church in Jacksonville, Fla.; in congregations of Quakers, Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans and Southern Baptists.

Participants get a list of recommended adjectives, sample letters to crib from, even a CD with a 60-minute tutorial on "The Lost Art of Letter Writing."

Still, many say the Letters From Dad program is the toughest challenge they have ever faced.

"This isn't something I do," said Steve Weller, 69, a retired software developer.

His two daughters are grown, with children of their own, but Weller never told them he loved them. Then he took on a mentoring role in his church; he felt he should push himself to open up.

Weller started with a letter to his oldest daughter. The tone was a bit distant, with praise for her "sensible, mature outlook" and her "focus and growth."

But he ended with this: "You are a daughter I am very proud of. I love you, Maria."

He planned to present the letter.

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'YOU EXCEL THEM ALL': After sharing a love letter to his wife, Charles Batson wipes away a tear at a Letters From Dad session at McKinney Fellowship Bible Church in Texas. Steve Weller, left, read the letter to the group because Batson was too emotional.

COURTESY PERRY FOR THE TIMES

Letter Writers Help Each Other Overcome Fear

[Letters, from Page A1]

ter at her 40th-birthday dinner. "The whole time, I was wondering: Will she see it as foolish? Will she accept it? I was really afraid."

After dessert, he took out his three paragraphs, neatly typed. As he read them aloud, Maria's eyes misted; she put her hand on his knee. He reached out and rested his hand atop hers.

"That was a great, great day," he said.

Weller described the moment to his writing support group at McKinney Fellowship Bible Church. The love-letter movement began with congregation member and veteran video producer Greg Vaughn, who thought the writing workshops could be his biggest venture yet — and his most rewarding mission.

Vaughn, 57, found his inspiration while doing a chore. Cleaning out the garage one summer day three years ago, he came across a rusted fishing tackle box belonging to his late father. He went to toss it out, then stopped, realizing that the tangled lures inside were all he had left of his dad.

Vaughn cursed his father for not leaving him anything more meaningful. Then he asked himself whether he had done better. If he died right then, what would he leave his four children and three stepchildren?

Vaughn had made a point of always telling his kids he loved them — something his own father had never been able to do.

Vaughn had even written them sweet notes from time to time; his daughter Brooke cherished a "Love You" that he'd scrawled on the paper wrapped around a wire hanger.

But as he held the tackle box, Vaughn knew a hanger wasn't the legacy he wanted to leave. He resolved to give his children letters expressing his pride and his faith in them; his hopes for their future; his memories of joy they'd shared.

He didn't have the slightest idea how to go about it.

Vaughn is dyslexic and has always hated writing, so he scoured his address book for friends he thought might be able to advise him. A dozen agreed not only to help, but also to write letters of their own.

Their first efforts were ready by Christmas 2002.

Dana Hansen was 15 that year and sure she had disappointed her father forever by quitting basketball to take up cheerleading.

Under the tree, she found a mahogany box — and inside, a letter from her dad, Dirk Hansen, one of Vaughn's friends.

He wrote that he was proud of her for making her own choices. He told her he loved her even when he couldn't understand her.

"I didn't always know he felt that way," said Dana, now a freshman at Texas Tech University. Her dad has continued to write her, and she saves every note.

"He's more expressive in letters than he is in everyday," she said.

Carol Regehr, 50, received a letter that December from her husband, Clint. "My husband is a math guy, analytically oriented, not all that touchy-feely. So for him to have articulated the cherishing, the love, the depth, the commitment — all those words really touched me," she said.

Such comments spread quickly through church barbecues and PTA meetings, and soon Vaughn was besieged with requests to teach more men to write.

A producer of Christian videos on topics such as parenting, marriage and morality, Vaughn felt sure he could sell the Letters From Dad concept to many of the 85,000 churches on his mailing list. So he set about developing a curriculum that he could license to pastors. He launched it this summer with the publication of his book, "Letters From Dad."

In five months, Letters From Dad has become the primary focus of Vaughn's 20-employee business, Grace Products Corp.

At least 80 pastors have come here to take Vaughn's \$595 workshop. Next month, dozens more will listen in on training he plans to broadcast over the Internet.

Once pastors take Vaughn's course, they're free to offer the program in their home churches. Each of the pastors' students pays Grace Products \$95 in tuition, which buys him Vaughn's book, the writing tutorial, a packet of linen stationery and a leather binder for storing his drafts.

In four monthly sessions, the men watch motivational videos and discuss good writing, then break into small groups to share their work.

"The pain these last few months has been excruciating," Jim Pitcher told his group at the McKinney church.

He stared at a scribbled-over

page that was supposed to be a love letter to his wife. "We've been struggling in our relationship," he said.

He and his wife were fighting so often, he had trouble sleeping. Pitcher, 47, said he resented her efforts to make him "a better man" but he also knew she was right.

"If I had it to do all over again, I wouldn't change a thing," he said.

"Now, that's the way to begin a letter!" Evan Miller, 45, told him. "That's the opening line."

Pitcher's early efforts had been far less personal: "As a mom, you are selfless. . . You listen and care. . ."

"Give your wife your heart," Miller suggested. "Show how you want it to be better. If you can picture a good future with her, maybe that's a way to get past this pain."

Sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox calls Letters From Dad an effort to "domesticate men in the pews."

He's not surprised it took off. With divorce rates steep — even among faithful churchgoers — religious leaders have long sought creative ways to engage men in family life.

The Christian movement Promise Keepers holds boisterous sports-stadium rallies to urge men to be more attentive husbands and fathers. Many congregations assign men "accountability partners" to keep them on track in love and life.

Men's ministries at churches large and small offer regular seminars — or at least inspirational videos — on connecting with loved ones. "They realize. . . that men are often the weakest links in families," said Wilcox, who studies such programs at the University of Virginia.

The activities that draw the most men, however, tend to be the ones that demand the least emotional commitment.

There's always a good turnout for bowling night. "But when

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Churches Glad to Find Way to Engage Men

you get down to the soul stuff, men kind of sneak out on you," said Dave Fortuna, 55, a pastor in Shreveport, La.

Letters From Dad seems to be different. The course draws men of all backgrounds: carpenters, lawyers, oil-field workers, chefs, newlyweds and grandfathers, executives in business

suits and guys in "Fear Factor" T-shirts. Vaughn says he's on pace to expand the program to 1,000 churches in the next 12 months.

In the meantime, he's still leading workshops at his home church in McKinney.

A session last month was supposed to focus on writing to elderly parents. But most of the men were still stuck on the previous assignment: the love letter to their wives. "I've wore out more than a few legal pads on this," Charles Batson said. "I gotta tell you, I was going to quit tonight."

He pulled out a single typed page. "It doesn't communicate what she really means to me," he said, blinking away tears. "I'll let you guys read this. I can't."

Slowly, Steve Weller read the letter aloud.

Batson, a 48-year-old salesman, had praised his wife's wis-

Letters From Dad excerpts

These are some of the sample letters men in the program receive; they're encouraged to take them as models. They were written by some of the earliest participants in Letters From Dad.

My Precious Mary,

On April 28th, 1972, in a small church auditorium in Crescent City, California, my life began. I was already 16 years old, but I hadn't begun to LIVE... until that Friday evening when I first met you....

I know no other way to express to you my deepest love than to try and live it each day through my words, my actions and my prayers for you. Even though there have been too many times when I haven't shown you my best... still, there you are... always loving and forgiving me with open arms....

I pray you find the joy in me as I do in you. For you are everything and everything is you.

Loving you more today than yesterday, but less than tomorrow.

My Dearest Carol,

Did I ever tell you that I am the most blessed man on earth? God has given me the most precious wife of all time....

Not only are you my best friend, lover and companion, but an incredible mother to our children. It's amazing how often you have made me look good in front of our kids.... Thank you. I have no idea of how they would have turned out without your never-ending love and devotion to them.

You are truly an amazing woman that I clearly do not deserve. I never want to take out

incredible gift of love from God for each other for granted. Therefore, this letter is the first of many that you will be receiving from me to share my love for you. I pray that these letters will be a blessing to you.

Dear David,

As I write this letter you are a senior at Texas Tech and I'm sure that you must now be sick of Lubbock and dreadfully tired of delivering flowers and pizzas. As you look to the future, I know that you will continue giving life your best.

Always remember that we, your family, will always be there for you, applauding the great things God will accomplish through your life.

This Christmas I wanted to give you something more than the "stuff" that usually rests under our Christmas tree.... I decided to give you something I always wanted but never really got from my father — A BLESSING.

The first thing I want to tell you is how very much I love you and how deeply I treasure our relationship.... Now, as I see you growing up to be such a man of character, I find my joy even greater. I often find myself telling others what a wonderful person you have become and how the world is a rich place because you are in it. Oh how very proud I am to be called your father.

So my Christmas gift to you this year is these genuine words from my heart.



COURTESY PERRY FOR THE TIMES

THE PROGRAM: For \$595, Greg Vaughn trains pastors in his Letters From Dad curriculum. Then they can offer the program in their churches, where students each pay Vaughn's company \$95 tuition.

dom, kindness and grace. He closed with a quote from King Solomon: "Many daughters have done nobly, but you excel them all."

As he finished reading, Weller put his hand on Batson's. "You take this home and you read it to her tonight, as is," he said. "This will mean more to her than you

ever could imagine."

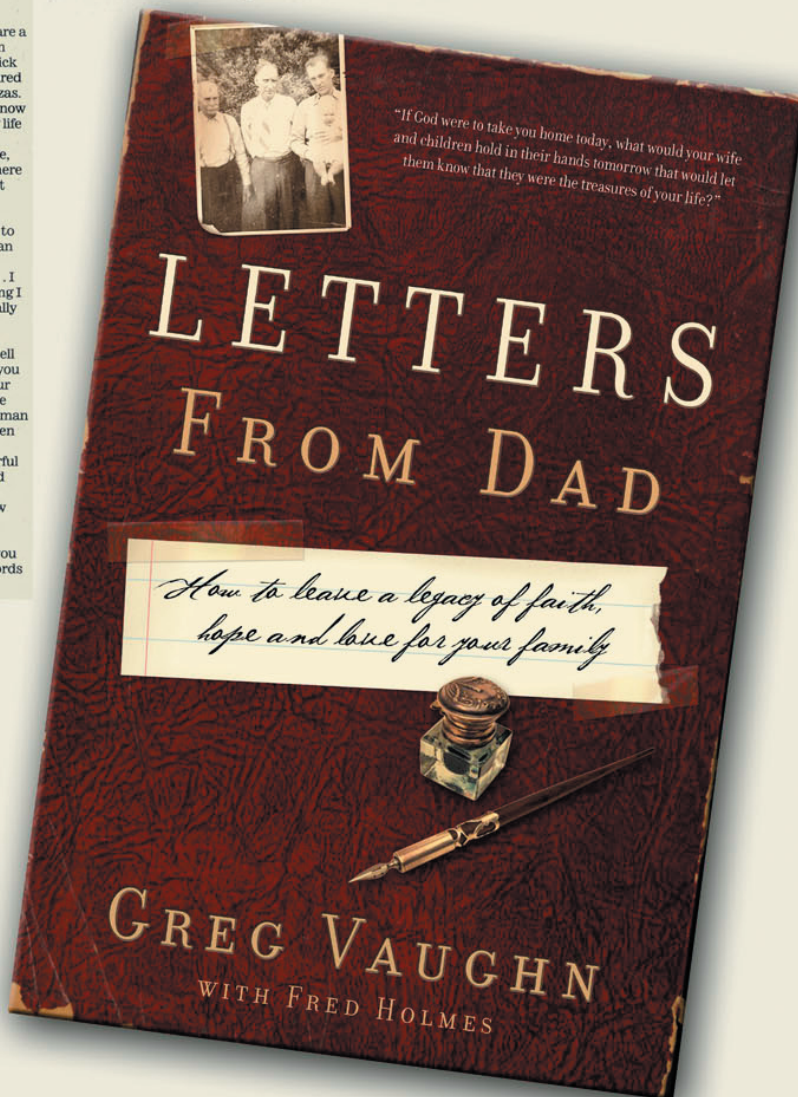
Batson slid the letter into his binder, unconvinced. His words seemed so inadequate.

Vaughn hears that a lot. His response: Relax.

"Just say two things: I love you and I'm proud of you," he advises. "There's no way you can botch it."

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