



Intentional *Relationships*

—FOR SINGLES—

Prepare
Plan
Pursue
Propose



Dan Houk — Kris Swiatocho

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Kris would like to thank:

Thank you to all my friends who have been along for the journey. From those who stood beside and supported me, to those who taught me valuable life lessons through honest accountability, and to those I am still getting to know... thank you.

This book has brought me to tears at times when I have seen all that God has done in my life. Other times, I sat back laughing, remembering some incredible experiences. And other times, as James Vernon McGee would say, "The Word needs to always cut both ways; never teach it without making sure you are applying it to your own life, too."

Thank you to the hundreds of teachers, pastors, leaders, family, and friends who are a part of my journey. This journey has led to Intentional Relationships.



Dan would like to thank:

I want to say a special thank you to my wife, Teresa, who has been a big part of my journey of healing and then ministry as we served together at Bayside Church in the singles ministry. I once thought I might never experience a healthy and happy marriage, but God in His grace gave me Teresa. I am grateful for all she has sacrificed over the last two years as we wrote this book.

And to the many friends along the way who encouraged and supported me in ministry, thank you. I am also grateful for Bayside Church and Pastor Ray Johnston for their support and the opportunity to serve in ministry during my season of restoration.

Finally, I am grateful for Kris, who is a wonderful and creative writing partner. I have routinely said God used my broken life as the platform of my ministry and to Him goes all the glory.



We would also like to thank:

A special thanks to Joseph Northcut and Stephen Durkee who both spent a considerable amount of time editing the manuscript in detail. We also are grateful for our team of readers: Stacey Sample, Kim Rich, Robyn Beasman, Careena Gordon, Robin and James Mack, David Shrewsbury, Brenda Senter, Lori Reiter, and those who evaluated *Intentional Relationships* and gave us valuable feedback. Their insights and support mean the world to us. Many more of you contributed—some are quoted in the book, some are the inspiration for our "Dan and Kris says," and some are prayer warriors. Again we say, thank you!



“Kris and Dan have walked the ups and downs of singleness, friendship and dating — and lived to tell about it. Lucky for us, we get to learn from their victories and mistakes. Their immensely practical book is full of advice, strategies and personal, real-world examples that will empower you to pursue personal and relational health — and most importantly, to trust God in the process.”

— Lisa Anderson, Director of Boundless.org/Focus on the Family and author of *The Dating Manifesto*



“Every ‘us’ requires intentionality. Lots of purposeful intentionality before and during dating, and then again before and after the wedding. This guide will help you do just that.”

— Ron Deal, President of SmartStepfamilies.com and bestselling author of *Dating and the Single Parent and Building Love Together in Blended Families (with Dr. Gary Chapman)*; smartstepfamilies.com



“In a world where relationships are lost and have become a dying art too often replaced by cell phones and social media, Kris Swiatocho and Dan Houk have hit a home run. Intention takes time, perseverance, and prayer. Relationships don’t flourish without intention. Kudos on bringing practical tips and life application to the millions of singles who desire true and authentic relationships.”

— Jennifer Maggio, Chief Executive Officer, *The Life of a Single Mom Ministries*; thelifeofasinglemom.com



“Wow! What a powerful book of information and strategy for building intentional, authentic relationships! This book is so fresh, reads well, and is one of the sharpest, laser-focused tools I have ever read to help single adults build God-honoring relationships that last. Without hesitation, I recommend this book to single adults and to those leaders who work closely with single adults. Dan and Kris do a masterful job in sharing their life experiences that only brings greater authority to the content of this book. You gotta get it! You won’t be disappointed.”

— Joseph Northcut, Director of Church Resources, *ChurchInitiative.org* (creator of *DivorceCare.org* and *GriefShare.org*)

*"The problem with this picture of
'happy relationships living happily
ever after' is that fewer and fewer
singles are getting married and
far too many marriages end in
divorce. Even marriages that last
sometimes aren't fulfilling."*



Chapter 1: We Got It All Wrong

“A man must be big enough to admit his mistakes, smart enough to profit from them, and strong enough to correct them.”

— John Maxwell

ICEBREAKER

1. Introduce yourself.
2. What is your favorite movie or TV show, and why?
3. What do you hope to learn in this study?

Magazines at the grocery checkout stand give you advice on dating, sex, and relationships (including friendships, work, and family) as you wait to purchase. Every romantic movie tells us love is this magical thing that overcomes all obstacles no matter the circumstances. By the end of the movie, the couple reconciles and lives happily ever after. Of course, there is always a beautiful woman and a man, and, for some reason, a dog. That’s what we all want, right?

Then there are the reality shows, giving us a “true” perspective of what real relationships look like. Simply take sixteen model women; one tall, dark, and handsome guy; three months at a dream location, all expenses paid; and a rose, and you’ve got everything you need to find your spouse. I’m sure we can all relate. Then we discover that some of these reality shows are scripted, often creating drama so they can, in turn, solve the problems to look like they have all the answers. Whether we realize it or not, we begin to have expectations that match the shows we watch and the messages we get from our culture.

The problem with this picture of happy relationships living happily ever after is that fewer and fewer singles are getting married and far too many marriages end in divorce. Even marriages that last sometimes aren’t fulfilling. Work relationships struggle because of unresolved misunderstandings. People start friendships with the hope of finding that kindred spirit, but find the revolving door of disappointment instead. Often our friendships are like social media. We appear to have hundreds of friendships, yet how many of those are truly close? Families continue to struggle due to personal past problems, addictions, blended family dynamics, or financial issues. These scenarios, and so many others, rob us of experiencing the deep relationships God originally intended for us.

Our culture is also changing the attitude many singles have toward marriage. The single population for adults over eighteen is now over 50 percent. Many younger singles are abandoning the institution of marriage and opting to live together. The reasons for this are numerous, yet the vast majority of singles desire to be in a healthy committed relationship or marriage.

“The best time to save your marriage is before it starts.”

— Ray Johnston,
Senior Pastor,
Bayside Church,
Sacramento, CA



*“But deep in my heart,
I wanted someone
in my life who I
could love...”*

Dan says:

After my divorce I didn't know if I would ever be married again. I had a lot of pain and confusion. But deep in my heart, I wanted someone in my life who I could love and who would love me back. Someone who could share life together with me. Even though I was married before, I had missed some of this. However, my dating life didn't seem to indicate I would be married again.

When I talk with singles who have lost a spouse or have been through a divorce, many tell me they aren't interested in dating or another marriage. However, I have seen many of these same people in a dating relationship when they thought the right person came along, some within a year of telling me this.

In my experience, most people in Christian circles are open to a loving, committed marriage. It's just that they are sometimes still hurting, feeling awkward about looking again, feeling unprepared, or they have lost hope because of their circumstances. Well over 90 percent of the people I have talked to in singles ministry would be open to a marriage if the right person came along.



*“I wonder, ‘Lord,
why haven't
you brought them
a spouse?’”*

Kris says:

In my many years of starting and leading singles ministries, the most frequent question I get is, “Why hasn't God brought me someone yet?” They feel they have done everything God has asked them to do. They are in church regularly, reading their Bible, serving, debt-free, healthy, and in shape. They think I have a crystal ball and can just look into it and know the answer. But the reality is, I don't.

For some singles I meet, it's obvious what the problem is, from the way they dress and groom themselves, to how they communicate, to unresolved issues, and immaturity. But for those who appear healthy, in love with Jesus and sold out for Him, it's a tough one.

I wonder, “Lord, why haven't you brought them a spouse? They seem healthy. Wait a minute! Why haven't you brought me a spouse?”

Hmm, maybe the answer is more complex. Maybe it's about an incredible calling of sacrificing my possible, maybe, almost amazing, future marriage and family. Maybe He has called me, like most, to marriage. Has it possibly not happened because of my own junk that I haven't dealt with? Hmm, and if this is so, then what am I supposed to do about it? I had to confront it, pray, and ask God's Spirit to show me the areas of my life that still needed help or change.

This journey of personal change led to starting a ministry called “Pray for a Mate™” — a monthly prayer group for those who are serious about praying, asking the Holy Spirit to reveal issues in their own life that need to be changed so you would not only be better prepared for marriage but healthier in the process. But also allowing you time to accept the possibility that God may want to keep you single. I will share more about Pray for a Mate in chapter 10 and how you/your church can start your own group.

We were created not just for “surfacy” relationships or acquaintances, but we were created by God for deep, healthy, and mutually beneficial relationships including our family, our kids, spouses, co-workers, and friends. Our relationships were designed to transform us into better versions of ourselves. That is how God works in our lives. Our relationship with Him has the effect of making us who He always intended, first starting with Him, and then affecting every other person in our lives.



In addition to the world’s definition of what it means to be single, well-meaning Christians often miss the mark with spiritual sounding advice to their single friends. This advice may be, “God will bring you someone when you least expect it,” or “You’re lucky you’re single; being married is hard,” or “God will bring you ‘the one’ in His timing,” or “Maybe God is trying to teach you a lesson.” Though it is possible some of these sentiments are true, only God would know. Its far more likely due to complex circumstances and the broken world we live in than any single, simple factor.

These kinds of comments cause unintentional hurt to single Christians who want to be married. Like many achievements in life, finding the one you want

to marry is better approached with the right perspective and effort put toward it. We are relational beings, but relationships aren’t easy. Our primary goal is to help single Christians in their desire to be married to the right person. But we also know this curriculum can improve your family, friends, and co-worker relationships as well. The wisest man who ever lived said:

“Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase his learning.”
– Proverbs 9:9 (NASB)

—QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION—

We encourage you to rewrite the questions and give your thoughtful answer about each one. Don’t rush, take your time, and invite the Holy Spirit to speak to you. If your answer is “Yes,” write down your “Why.”

- Do you want to stop making the same mistakes from past relationships in the future?
- Do you want to experience healthy boundaries?
- Do you want to have healthier conflict?
- Do you want clarity in your family, friends, and work relationships?
- Do you want meaningful friendships?
- Do you want your expectations in relationships to fit with reality?
- Do you want to have real accountability that leads toward change?
- Do you want to understand yourself better?
- Do you want a healthy approach to dating?
- Do you want to find true romance?
- Do you want to get along better with others?
- Do you want safe relationships with the opposite sex?
- Do you want to better understand God’s desire for your life and relationships?
- Do you want to have a fulfilling marriage?
- Do you want to commit to eleven more chapters?

If you said “Yes” to these, have we got a deal for you! We will be addressing this as we go through the *Intentional Relationship* curriculum. We all are in different places in our growth and health. Some of these principles will impact you greatly, showing areas where you need significant work. Other principles might only pertain to you in limited ways. And in some areas you will say, “Wow, I’m already doing this well.” Don’t feel like you have to become a completely different person. God meets you where you are, with the goal of helping you grow into the person He knows you were designed to be.

Navigating Intentional Relationships

To travel somewhere, we may be accustomed to plugging an address into our GPS and heading out. GPS is simply a modern version of the old map and a compass. Explorers would use maps and compasses to travel around the globe. If you were to set out from England to America many years ago, you would not do it in



a life raft. You would have a ship with supplies, sails, a rudder, a helm, and nautical equipment, including a compass, to direct you where you should go.

When it comes to navigating relationships, many of us have taken a lifeboat approach. For the next eleven chapters, we have compiled topics that we have seen effectively used in deepening friendships and leading those friendships to marriage.

God continuously works in all of our lives. Jesus said to Simon Peter, “But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32). Jesus revealed to Peter that he would deny Him three times. Jesus was

invested in Peter’s success. He was praying for Him. But in spite of this failure, Jesus saw Peter’s personal healing and future ministry. What a powerful message! You may feel like you don’t measure up and your failures disqualify you, but you have a Savior who is invested in your healing, in your success, and in your future. He is praying for you. Do not beat yourself up. Take your time to learn who God made you to be and appreciate the value of the process.

In the coming chapters, you will discover some of the messages you have been told by family, culture, friends, church, romantic interests and have resulted in relational difficulties. You will also discover the principles that lead to the kinds of healthy relationships God intended for you. Some of these chapters and principles build upon each other, so we recommend going through the entire book sequentially at first. Some of you will want to go right to the chapter on dating, where the good stuff is. If you do, you are eating the frosting and leaving the cupcake.

Take your time to go through the material. You won’t be disappointed. Many people like to revisit some of the content that most pertains to them. There are personal reflection and group discussion questions in each chapter. Doing this material as a group gives you the greatest benefit as we learn from each other’s different life experiences. We have also provided short video clips for each chapter as an option to use for you individually or for your group. These can be viewed on our website at IntentionalRelationshipSolutions.org.

“The good news is that relationships do not always have to be a complex mystery. Dating can be understandable, just as singleness can.”

— Aukelien van Abbema,
Author of *Dare to Date*

This material works best in a group format where you stay with the same people each week throughout the twelve weeks. *If you don't like the people in your group, see Chapter 8 on conflict.* Groups provide better discussion, a chance to learn to trust each other, and share about your life; a place to ask questions, get support, and pray together. These discussions offer an opportunity to develop Intentional Friendships that could lead to dating and even marriage.

As you go through the curriculum, there may be times where you need additional support. We encourage you to connect with other ministries or resources such as DivorceCare®, GriefShare®, Celebrate Recovery®, Financial Peace®, Christian counselors, singles ministries, etc. Never be afraid to ask for help. God never intended for us to suffer silently or go through this alone.

*“Lack of direction,
not lack of time,
is the problem.
We all have twenty-
four hour days.”
— Zig Ziglar*

To prepare for this study, find time to spend with God daily. Find a time and place where you will be minimally distracted. This might mean you actually have to turn off your phone. Begin with prayer; ask for God to reveal His truth to you through His Holy Spirit. Be sure to answer the questions under *Personal Reflection*, journaling your answers. Plus, we encourage you to take notes along the way to help you in your intentional relationships. Read the group discussion questions and be prepared to share some of your answers with your small group.

This will be a journey of insight, encouragement, and growth. As you go through the following chapters, you will notice a flow that begins with a look at your relationship with God, then yourself, and, finally, others. This is intentional and follows a natural four-step progression of successful relationships. We call these steps: Prepare, Plan, Pursue, and Propose.

PREPARE

Have you ever gone on a significant trip abroad without preparing first? You didn't buy your airline tickets. You didn't pack your clothes. You didn't get a passport. If you had done that, you would not have gotten very far.

If a trip abroad takes preparation, certainly we need to prepare ourselves for relationships. Getting yourself ready is the first step. In Chapters 2-6, we will look at who God made you to be, why you're here, where you're going, and what tends to go wrong in relationships. You will also discover a few insights about others and who God made them to be. This will prepare you to navigate the journey of your growing relationships. A healthier and wiser person will make any of their relationships better. The more you put into preparation, the more confident you will be.

As any competitive athlete knows, it's all about the preparation. They spend countless hours, days, weeks, and months preparing for the race or game day. Moses spent eighty years in preparation for forty years of ministry. Jesus spent thirty years in preparation for three years of ministry. We're not saying it's going to take you thirty to eighty years to get married or to have a successful friendship, although it may feel like it. But the more you prepare for your relationships, the greater your chance for success.

“Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” – 1 Peter 1:13 (ESV)

—QUESTION FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION—

1. In preparing for this study, what is God saying to you?



PLAN

When we were kids, we likely didn't plan for friendships; that usually happened with children who lived next door to us or were in our class. As we age, we become like the friends we make. Having a good plan for friendships can lead to good friendships. In the *Plan* step, you will learn about the ingredients necessary to build a healthy relationship that can lead to an Intentional Friendship. We will cover this plan in Chapters 7-10.

Like anything you do in life, intention and planning are needed for success. Too often, we don't think much about our most important relationships, and we sometimes leave God out of it. We go with the flow, we avoid unpleasant things, or we settle because we really don't have a plan for growing our relationships. Your Facebook, Instagram, Tik

Tok, and SnapChat accounts may say you have a thousand friends, but in reality, you can only have so many close friends.

Evaluating new friends needs to be taken seriously. Even Jesus knew the value of this. He had twelve close disciples, and, of that group, He spent the most time with Peter, James, and John.

You will also learn what red and yellow flags to watch for and gain valuable tools for building lasting and meaningful friendships.

"The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps." – Proverbs 16:9 (ESV)

—QUESTION FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION—

1. What things in your life have you had to plan for in order to succeed?
-

PURSUE

Pursuit has become a lost art. But pursuing something of value takes effort and intention. In the third step, you learn the ideal time to move from an Intentional Friendship to a dating relationship. The Bible doesn't give us dating guidelines, but it does give us godly wisdom and numerous relationship examples. It is common in dating to get ahead of God.

In Chapter 11, we will talk about what happens when you are in a hurry, and the value of getting to know someone over time through accountability. *You had me at "hello" may not be the best strategy for dating.* We will explore the art of dating, where to find a date, creativity in dating, and when to break things off.

"So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding." – Romans 14:19 (ESV)

—QUESTION FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION—

1. When you think of the word "pursue," what comes to mind as a woman or as a man?
-
-
-

PROPOSE

In the fourth step, you will learn to take the step of engagement with confidence. The period of engagement for couples can be tricky depending on their age, backgrounds, prior relationships, expectations, wedding plans, and so much more. *No one wants to attend a wedding between a Bridezilla and Groomzilla unless you're a mother-in-lawzilla.*

We will take a look at this surprisingly complicated time in a couple's life in Chapter 12. We have some realistic and helpful tools to help you stay close to each other and God, and start your marriage on a solid foundation.

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." – Genesis 2:24 (ESV)



—QUESTION FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION—

1. Why is an engagement important to you?

—QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION—

1. Of the list of questions we asked you to answer on page 9, which one stood out to you the most, and why?
2. Share your thoughts about one of the following stages of a relationship: Prepare, Plan, Pursue, or Propose.

These overly simplistic ideas culture gives us about successful and happy relationships can lead to disappointment and failed relationships. In Chapter 2, we will study the many influences that can cause relationships to fail, but are worth guarding against.
