

## BALANCING FAITH, FAMILY & PRACTICE<sup>SM</sup>

### ***A Ministry of Our Own***

***Wives of physicians practicing at the Mayo Clinic have formed a vibrant Christian outreach***

by Carol Shrader

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I found out about the special demands of being a physician's wife when my husband, Wade, made a career change from aerospace engineering to medicine. For the previous eight years of our marriage, Wade had been my best friend, confidant and co-parent of our young children. But during the first year of residency, his rigorous schedule gave us little time to be friends, much less confidants. Date nights were brief and often interrupted by his pager.

For all practical purposes, I became a single parent. I needed women who understood these unique challenges. As a first-time mother of triplets, I needed wise mentors who could show me how to be a godly mom. As a growing Christian, I needed spiritual nourishment to deepen my faith walk. As a woman, I needed sisters in Christ who would walk beside me, offering practical assistance or a word of encouragement.

I found exactly what I needed at the Medical Spouses Bible Study, a multifaceted ministry reaching out to wives of physicians either in training or on staff at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn. What began in 1988 with six women and eight children now serves more than 80 women and 90 children.

The study offers support and fellowship for Christian women, while also evangelizing many who have never studied the Bible.

Our weekly meetings at First Baptist Church open with food and fellowship before moving into worship. Afterward we break into small groups of 10 to 12 women with two co-leaders. Diverse curriculum choices allow seasoned believers to deepen their faith and address the needs of new believers. Beyond Friday morning meetings, we provide meals, child care and social activities.

A newcomer to the study, Lee Ann Tebben, a young mother of two, had been part of numerous Bible studies before moving to Rochester last year.

"Trying to explain this 'life' in medical residency to a person on the outside is just about impossible," Tebben says. Her husband is an endocrinology fellow at the clinic. "I have been in Bible studies and support groups for years. But until I came to the Medical Spouses Bible Study, I had not yet experienced what it was like to be perfectly understood by a stranger when I walked in the door."

Gina Elkins, a family practice doctor herself, moved to Rochester when her husband began his urology residency and she opted to stay home with their firstborn child.

"Medical Spouses Bible Study was a godsend for me when I moved to Rochester," Elkins says. "Hundreds of miles from family and friends—and my husband tired and stressed from 100-hour plus work weeks—I found understanding and friendship at the study."

Outreach and support are key elements of the study. Women come for an initial visit for various reasons; those who remain do so because of the family they find within the group. From the beginning, the study has been both international and multid denominational. Women from Japan, Singapore, Germany, South Africa and other countries have joined women from all across the United States to study the Bible.

"Many women will come to our study only because their friends are coming," says Avery Wolff, one of the study's leaders. "Others will check us out because we are not a church-affiliated ministry. I have even been told of one woman who came simply because she heard

## BALANCING FAITH, FAMILY & PRACTICE <sup>SM</sup>

page 2

we bring meals to new mothers. Whatever the reason, we try to step in and be family to one another—bringing meals, watching each other's children, gathering to pray. Whatever the needs, we try to meet them as a family would."

Some of those needs relate to the continual transition many medical families encounter. Each summer, the study experiences high turnover as residents and fellows complete their training and move to various parts of the country and world. During a farewell brunch, these women are commissioned as missionaries with our prayers that they will take the concept of the study's hands-on ministry and start a similar one in their new communities.

"It is our hope that every woman married to a doctor would have the support and love of a community like Medical Spouses Bible Study," Wolff says, "a place where other women understand what she is going through, where she finds friends and surrogate family members."

"I have found a great security, an oasis in the desert, knowing this body of believers," Tebben says. "We have come together from our unique backgrounds but bonded through our common strand of medicine and relationship with Jesus."

*Carol Shrader helps organize the Medical Spouses Bible Study. Her husband, Wade, is an orthopaedic surgery resident at the Mayo Clinic.*

Note: Since this article was first published, Medical Spouses Bible Study has become an official ministry of the Christian Medical Dental Associations and gotten a new name, Side by Side. We have nearly 20 chapters nationwide with more starting soon! For more information on Side by Side or how you can become involved, please visit our website at [www.cmda.org/go/sidebyside](http://www.cmda.org/go/sidebyside).