

# cousin camp

A Grandparent's Guide to Creating  
Fun, Faith, and Memories That Last

**Susan Alexander Yates**



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*To my husband, John, my best friend for over fifty years.*

Without you there would be no books!

*And for our children and grandchildren, I pray:*

“My spirit, who is on you, will not depart from you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children and on the lips of their descendants—from this time on and forever,” says the LORD. (Isa. 59:21)

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Thanks be to our faithful Lord.

He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

(1 Thess. 5:24 ESV)

# Introduction

I never ever imagined my life would turn out the way it did. I was the strong-willed eldest of four kids and really did not like my siblings. When my mother gave birth to a second boy, I was so mad I would not speak to her for three days. I had wanted a sister. (Later I did get a sister!) As a youngster I much preferred playing football with the neighborhood boys to babysitting. I once shot a twelve-year-old boy with a BB gun just because he made me mad. Thrilling adventures included sneaking up to a house, ringing the doorbell, and running, then returning to do it again. One day I cut my brother's hair off just because I didn't like it.

My parents were people with a strong faith, so our family went to church. It was not negotiable. I thought it was boring and slept through many services. I would never have imagined *wanting* to go to church. As a teen I was not in the “cool crowd.” I didn't think too much about marriage and family. Instead I wanted to go to law school and run for congress or even vice president. In those days, women were not encouraged to do this.

So, what happened?

God has a sense of humor. I married a man who was in seminary. He became a minister, and we've been serving in churches

for fifty years. We had five children in seven years, including a set of twins. All of our kids are married, and we have twenty-one grandchildren. And along the way I began to write books and speak on the family.

Gradually, God changed my heart. During my college years I realized that my faith was an “inherited faith” of my parents and my culture. It was not a personal faith. The summer before my junior year I asked Christ to come into my life. Although I had many questions, I also had a hunger that was new to me, a hunger to get to know God and His Son, Jesus. He began to give me a passion for young people and for families. Both my husband, John, and I had the blessing of being raised in strong families. Our parents weren’t perfect. None are. But they provided us with a strong foundation for family life. And the older I get, the more I appreciate them. No one chooses the family into which they are born. That’s God’s choice. Early in our marriage we realized that we had been given a gift—the heritage of wise parents. And we had an opportunity to steward this gift to encourage others in growing strong families.

Our growth has been gradual, changing with each season of life. In the early years we were merely trying to survive. Then within eight years our five kids got married, so now we say we have ten kids (spouses included). Grandchildren began to arrive. Our two greatest desires have always been that our kids would love the Lord and love each other. This is the legacy we want to hand down to our grandchildren and their kids and the generations to come.

We know a legacy doesn’t just “happen.” We have to be *intentional*.

That’s what this book is about.

Many things go into building a legacy. This book is just one small piece of a much larger puzzle.

It’s also helpful to think of your family as one large puzzle. There are many distinct pieces all having to fit together in order

to make one beautiful picture. The artist knows what the finished product will look like. And it is beautiful to its creator.

Years ago, we began hosting an annual “Cousin Camp.” We wanted our grandchildren from five different families living in different places to know one another. And we wanted focused time with them without their parents. You have to be age four to come to our camp. We started with five children, and the past three summers all twenty-one of our grandchildren have attended.

Last summer we celebrated our eleventh year of camp.

We’ve made lots of mistakes, shed tears, laughed uproariously, thrown out plans, separated quarreling kids, cheered when kindness overcame selfishness, and fallen into bed exhausted, but above all we’ve had a blast. Seeing two girl cousins who used to fight like cats now snuggling on our bedroom floor in sleeping bags, giggling together, makes it all worth it.

Over the years we’ve also hosted extended family reunions. Camp is only one piece of building a close family. There are many others. My hope is that this book will encourage you to be *intentional* in one way as you put together your own family puzzle.

There are three sections to this book. Each is important. So often when planning an event, we want to go straight to the daily schedule to glean ideas for crafts, for Bible study, for meals. However, it is most important to consider the *why* of what you want to do first. There are principles that need to undergird the event in order for it to succeed and have lasting value. The first part of this book deals with these principles. Part 2 focuses on the “nuts and bolts” of Cousin Camp. You can apply many of these ideas to all types of family gatherings. Part 3 will give you creative ideas for all sorts of family reunions. The final chapter provides the key ingredient that makes everything work: prayer.

Don’t skip part 1!

# part 1

## Why Have a Cousin Camp or Family Reunion?



# one

## Family Is God's Idea

I have always had great fun imagining what it must have been like in heaven when God created the world, and particularly what the conversation must have been like between the Father and the Son.

Imagine their delight as their amazing creative powers brought into being the day and the night, the sun and the moon, the earth and the great seas, and the unbelievably diverse assortment of animals and creatures. It makes me laugh to imagine them thinking up a rhinoceros or a flat-footed platypus.

However, the most astonishing thing about creation is that God created us human beings to be His children. There was nothing incomplete about God's life, and the fellowship in heaven between the Holy Trinity and the angelic hosts must have been beautiful beyond our comprehension.

So *why* did the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit make man and woman? I like to think that perhaps they were lonely. They wanted a family. Or maybe they simply wanted to share the joy of relationships by creating others with whom to interact. They wanted something more than angels, who are not made in God's image but who are "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit

salvation” (Heb. 1:14). They wanted a man and woman, made in God’s image, to enjoy God’s creation, to cultivate it, and to live in perfect fellowship with each other and with them.

The point here is that God created family, and He says it is good. We aren’t meant to be alone. *Family* has a broad meaning. We usually think of family as a dad, mom, and kids. But throughout both the Old and New Testaments we see family described as large tribes, small units, and particularly the family of the church. A family might include singles as well as married people, young people, and old people. God knows that we are not meant to be alone. We need one another. The big concept here can be summarized in a single word: *together*.

Our God is a visionary. He’s passionate about generations and who is to come. Isaiah declares,

“As for me, this is my covenant with them,” says the LORD. “My spirit, who is on you, will not depart from you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children and on the lips of their descendants—from this time on and forever,” says the LORD. (Isa. 59:21)

I believe God wants us to be passionate about future generations and about what is most important for each one.

When Christ was asked, “Which is the greatest commandment in the law?” He replied, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt. 22:36–39).

Our family members are our closest neighbors. Yes, they can sometimes be the hardest to love. But if it were easy, we wouldn’t need God’s help. He knows we are weak, and He’s given us forgiveness through His Son and the power to change through His Holy Spirit.

When we think about God creating family, we think not only about our own immediate family but also about future generations to come.

As parents and grandparents, we want to see our future generations become people who love Christ and each other.

How do we help this happen?

### **Families Are Messy**

Sometimes I picture a group of children telling the creation story. Eventually they'd also have to talk about Adam and Eve's disobedience. Of their wanting to have the one thing they couldn't. Of realizing their nakedness. (Now, that would be a hilarious children's conversation.)

The kids would remind us that God never gave up on His family. Ultimately, because He loved us so much, He gave His own Son so that we might be forgiven of our inherent selfishness (sin) and restored into relationship with Him.

Jesus Christ died for us—in the middle of our mess.

There is no perfect family. We are all a mess to some degree. Instagram, Facebook, and Pinterest are only images. Behind every perfect photo is a self-centered person. One who has used ugly words, done awful things, hurt other people, and even discovered they didn't like themselves very much.

It's easy to think, *But my family is a mess! My home of origin was strange. My kids fight, my marriage is shaky, our parents don't understand or support us, and our extended family is very dysfunctional.* Or we think, *I'm a single parent or a single person. Is there a place and a vision for me? How can I even begin to think about shaping the next generation?*

It helps to remember that God is not shocked by your situation, by your wounds, or by your history. He's seen it all. And there's nothing He can't forgive, nothing He can't change, and no one He can't heal. As Luke says, "For nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37 ESV).

So, no matter where you come from or your current marital status, you can be the first generation of a healthy family.

How can this happen?

Well, to begin with, you have to become *intentional*. And you have to become *dependent* on the Lord.

Building a strong family and shaping future generations will not just happen. It begins with prayer and planning. Strong families grow when bonds are developed through the nurturing of relationships.

This book is about one way to influence future generations for good: hosting a Cousin Camp or another type of family reunion.

It is important to understand several ingredients before we make a plan.

### **Let Grace Rule**

You may have a difficult relationship with your daughter-in-law. You wonder if she likes you. Or your son may be in a hard place, and you feel him withdrawing from you and the family. Cousins may not have much in common or may even dislike each other.

Decide now to set aside your assumptions and choose to let grace rule. This may involve choosing kind words (Prov. 16:24) or remaining silent when offended (Prov. 17:28).

Solomon said it this way: “A person’s wisdom yields patience; it is to one’s glory to overlook an offense. . . . Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones” (Prov. 19:11; 16:24).

### **Be Quick to Forgive**

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve had to go to my husband and to my children (and friends too) and say, “I need to ask you to forgive me for \_\_\_\_\_. Will you please forgive me?”

I can’t remember a single time I’ve *felt* like doing this. I’d much rather chime in with, “But if you had or hadn’t . . .”

We go to one another to ask for forgiveness not out of feelings but out of obedience. God has called us to do this. Feelings and trust take time to be healed and restored, often a long time. But asking for forgiveness opens the door to allow healing to take place and trust to begin to be rebuilt. Asking for forgiveness is different than saying, "I'm sorry."

Saying, "I'm sorry" doesn't demand a response. We might say, "I'm sorry" for backing into the telephone pole and denting the car, for breaking a lamp, for forgetting to do what was asked. Our child might say, "Sorry," dripping with sarcasm as she stomps out of the room. Sometimes, "I'm sorry" is appropriate, but when we wound another person, we need to confess and ask for forgiveness.

We are also to forgive others, even if they don't ask for forgiveness. When Jesus taught the disciples how to pray (the Lord's Prayer) he told them to say, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). *Debts* translates into sins. Note: Jesus doesn't say *if* that person who hurt you asks to be forgiven, then forgive. Instead, He calls us to take the initiative. To forgive anyway. No matter what. Forgiveness does not automatically bring good feelings or restore trust. These take time and the help of the Holy Spirit, and often good counsel.

I believe that forgiveness is the most important ingredient in the family. God willing, we are raising future husbands and wives. How will they know how to forgive their own spouses and family members if we don't practice this in our homes?

### **Assume the Best**

You'd like to host a Cousin Camp or a family gathering; however, there's one family with whom you aren't close or with whom there are unresolved issues. Should you invite them? Yes.

We must be *intentional* in assuming the best. That person may be struggling with something that has nothing to do with you. Don't take it personally. And don't assume the worst. Assume they

need your love and that this opportunity may bring healing to their wounds. Extend grace. If appropriate, have other family members reach out to them.

I know of two adult siblings who were at odds with one another. Both had children. A family gathering wasn't particularly appealing to them, but because they wanted their children to know each other, they came. As the cousins built friendships, the adults began to experience healing in their relationships. Sometimes it takes the next generation to lead the elders.

A Cousin Camp is not the time to confront issues. It's a time to celebrate the good in what we do have. Choose another time and place during the year to deal with difficult issues. Paul reminds us, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Rom. 12:18).

### **Avoid the Comparison Trap**

One of the challenges for us as we try to raise our families and to plan an event is that we look at *that other* family, which seems so perfect. Of course, the word *seems* is key.

There is no perfect family. No one has it all together. Just like Adam and Eve, we want what we don't have. Looking at another family can either inspire us or discourage us. It depends on our lenses.

I wear contacts, and each of my eyes needs a different contact lens. It's important that I get the correct lens in the appropriate eye, otherwise my vision will be distorted. My eyes won't see clearly. I will become discouraged and grouchy. I'll stumble around. I'll get tired.

We need to look at other families not through lenses of jealousy and envy but with eyes of grace and thanksgiving.

Choose to learn from other families. Adopt what they have done that might work for your family. Leave out what does not relate to your family.

## Cultivate Your Vision

What is your vision for your family? Think about your dreams, wishes, and hopes. What matters most to you?

With this in mind, ask yourself, *What is my vision for a Cousin Camp? What do I most want to see happen? What do I hope the results will be?* For example:

- I want my family members to really know one another.
- I long for reconciliation within my family.
- I want my family to know Christ.
- I hope the next generations of my family will support one another when I am no longer there.

John and I have a very simple vision for our family. We long for each member to love the Lord with all their heart, mind, and soul and to love and care for each other (see Matt. 22:37–39).

We pray that our grandchildren will come to know Jesus at an early age and determine to walk with Him all their lives. We pray that if it's God's will they marry, they marry believers. And we are praying for the parents who are raising their future spouses, just as we did for our own children. I hoped there was someone out there praying for me as I raised my kids. I needed those prayers! We pray that our grandchildren will develop friendships with each other and support one another always. We pray that those blessed financially would support other cousins in need.

It's a fun project to discuss these questions together as a couple. If you are a single parent, join with another single parent or with another couple in your same season of life and dream about this together.

**Questions to Consider**

1. When you look at your family members, what are you thankful for?

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2. What would you like God to do in the coming years in your family? (Be as specific as possible.)

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3. How can you encourage the strengths and gifts of different family members?

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