

The Many Dimensions of Openness to Life

By Jennifer Drees

Pro-life. Open to life. Welcoming life. These are all descriptions about my marriage with my husband Michael. Although Michael and I didn't know it when we married in 1995, God would call us to be open to life in an unconventional way.

Michael and I married after taking a series of Natural Family Planning (NFP) classes offered by our diocese. Our NFP teachers were terrific. We appreciated how they took the time to thoroughly explain the method in our classes. Once married, we happily planned our first pregnancy which unfortunately ended in miscarriage. Our second child was born in 1997, and our next two children were spaced every two years, because I breastfed them into toddlerhood, as we had studied in our NFP classes.

Practicing NFP in our marriage so inspired us that we joined our parish's Pre-Cana team. We have been happy to speak to the engaged couples about NFP. We also found great pleasure in rearing our babies in a life-giving way. We found that this pleasure spilled over to our toddlers as they enjoyed the addition of each new baby.

As our youngest turned five, the call to give birth again wasn't as clear as it had been in the past. In fact, my husband and I sensed that we felt a different calling. We looked into international adoption. We prayed that if God wanted us to welcome children whose parents could no longer care for them, He would "open the doors" and show us the path. As we discerned, we saw that every step to take was laid in front of us. In just about a year after we began our paperwork, we left for Ethiopia to bring home a wonderful, spirited, creative, ambitious three year old boy. Since arriving in our family, our three older children have surrounded their baby brother, Ejigu, with unconditional love, patience and joy. Michael and I had greatly underestimated their capacity to love and accept a sibling that looks very little like them. Today, Ejigu tags along to all their activities, attends a preschool CCD class, sings in the parish youth choir that I direct, and helps with household chores like his siblings. In turn, his siblings would probably walk through fire for him!

Mike and I had always thought we would have several children of our own. Practicing "openness to life" as our parents did, was our intention. In living God's plan for marriage however, we found that this "openness" led us also to adoption. After being so richly blessed with our children, we felt an amazing need to look beyond our means and welcome a child whose parents couldn't provide for him. Our little Ejigu, now three and a half, bore the pain of losing both parents to death and leaving the early attachments of his first home. We feel an amazing honor to continue parenting him as his birth parents would have wanted. In our practice of NFP, we realized that welcoming life has many dimensions. Listening to God's call is at its heart!

Jennifer and Michael Drees and their children (Emily, Elizabeth, Dominic and Ejigu) are from the Diocese of Camden.