

Living Together, by Jeff VanGoethem

<http://headlines.agapepress.org/archive/10/312006g.asp>

Book Review by Rev. Austin Miles, Agape Press, October 31, 2006

(AgapePress) - *Attention please! Attention please! Living together is a test. This is ONLY a test. Had this been an actual commitment, numerous world problems would have been eliminated. Stay tuned for further instructions from the Kregel handbook, Living Together -- A Guide to Counseling Unmarried Couples, by Jeff VanGoethem.*

According to the author of this excellent and needed work, 50 to 60 percent of marriages now involve couples who have lived together and are living together when they seek a minister to marry them. As a chaplain who lives and works in the San Francisco Bay Area, I find the percentage even higher. Many couples are pregnant or already have children when they make their wedding plans.

Over the past 25 years, "living together" has morphed into an alternative to marriage. Even though this arrangement is embraced by an increasingly secular world, it remains a thorny issue for parents, for counselors -- and especially for pastors. Compounding the challenge has been the dearth of available resource material for guidance in dealing with cohabiting couples ... until now, that is.

Living Together is the most complete, in-depth book to be found on this much-too-neglected subject. It provides direction to the delicate task of effectively counseling live-in couples; such as, what questions to ask (an extremely valuable resource), back-up statistics, plus legal questions and problems that cannot be avoided by refusing to marry. For example, one earth-shaker occurred in the 1970s when film actor Lee Marvin, who had freely lived with his girlfriend for several years, decided to move on -- a decision which turned out not to be so free. She sued him for support, and the case birthed a new legal term: "palimony."

In his book, VanGoethem lays out what the Bible says about marriage and the high esteem it is given - - and he offers the greatest definition of the marriage relationship I've ever read, one that should stir up the romantic impulse in anyone who reads it. And the book even includes a wonderful history of marriage.

Sobering facts show how any future marriage is severely damaged when the couple lives together beforehand. Full documentation provided in the book backs this up. For a couple to decide to move in together means that at least one of the two is rejecting marriage, period, and mentally always has one foot out the door.

"Individuals who cohabit may be more resistant to commitment," the author points out. "In cohabitation, they've tried to test out a relationship of commitment by remaining uncommitted. Does that make sense?" This book puts it all into proper perspective.

And the irony continues. For example, many young men move in with their girlfriends for the readily available sex. That's according to their own words in response to the question of why they decided to live with their girlfriends. It has nothing to do with marriage, even though that is what the women say they want and expect.

Mr. VanGoethem observes that some modern thinkers want the Church to modify its thinking on marriage and morality to accommodate cohabitants. In other words, the Church should adapt to the world instead of the world adapting to the teachings of Christ. We have plenty of help to lead us down this destructive path: "liberal" pastors who tossed out the Bible and morality long ago. In my opinion, they are the worst culprits of all.

Marriage and family are the most stabilizing factors in any community. This has been proven. To pervert that social structure is to destroy the very foundations of society. God seems to be putting this issue on the hearts of several leaders to encourage us to get back on track.

For example, syndicated columnist Dennis Prager states in his recent article, "5 Reasons Not To Shack Up" (*WorldNetDaily*, 10/3/06), that there's no comparing living together with marriage. He wonders why anyone would voluntarily choose not to marry the person he or she wishes to live with forever. "Unless, of course," he adds, "one of you really isn't planning on forever." And Dr. Allan Carlson, of the Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society has just released a book titled, *Conjugal America*, in which he argues for "The Necessity of Traditional Marriage."

Pastors, counselors and chaplains today had better be prepared to effectively deal with these issues for the sake of all. *Living Together* is the key to doing just that. VanGoethem's book is the equivalent of a seminary course of "The Theology of Marriage." He offers models for counseling unmarried couples and shows how to draw up a policy for marrying couples who live together (which can be referred to) along with a working form for the reader to use. He instructs pastors how to spot red flags when interviewing couples and the danger of letting any red flags slip by. I plan to read his book a second time (slowly) in order to not miss anything in it.

Jeff VanGoethem (D-Min, Th.M, Dallas Theological Seminary) is the senior pastor of East White Oak Bible Church in Bloomington, Illinois. He is also adjunct Instructor at Lincoln College in Normal, Illinois. He has specialized in this field of counseling for many years, and this book began as a thesis for his Doctor of Ministry program.