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□ Faith Today

Trapped (by the "goods" of life)

By Cindy Liebhart
NC News Service

"Sometimes I feel as if I'm no longer in control of my own life," a friend admitted to me somewhat anxiously a few weeks ago.

"I mean, television commercials and magazines flood us with images of these successful men and women who hold demanding full-time jobs, shuttle children to ballet lessons and basketball practice, have immaculate homes that look like a page out of a decorator's manual, throw parties regularly, do volunteer work at the local nursing home, fix their own cars, read a book a week, work out at the health club...

"What happened to the simple life?"

It is true that many TV programs and commercials create the impression that an active, productive life is characterized by fierce self-reliance and incessant activity. Often in the media, "being more" as a person seems to be equated with having more and doing more.

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David Suley knows well the difficulty in trying to achieve — and maintain — a simple way of life. Suley is executive director of International Liaison, a Catholic clearinghouse that places lay people on assignment in U.S. and foreign missions.

A husband and father of two preteen children, he faces responsibilities typical of many Americans — driving children to soccer games and music lessons,

commuting daily to the city, keeping out-of-town speaking engagements at least one week a month as well as many weekends a year, meeting house payments, insurance premiums, grocery bills.

For Suley, a key obstacle to simplicity is "the feeling that I have to do everything myself."

With his work-related travel, long hours at the office and the work he brought home every night, Suley realized some years ago that he had no time left for himself or for his family.

Simplifying his life required Suley and his wife to reflect on their priorities and examine their needs — "what we wanted to be and to become as individuals and as a family" — and then to make choices and changes in their living patterns where necessary.

To spend more time with his wife and family, Suley has even had to forego some time-consuming and worthwhile community commitments, refuse invitations on occasion for social engagements and ask others for help or advice.

"We are not called to be the savior of the world or the parish or the neighborhood. We already have one Savior," Suley said. "We are called to do the best we can with the limitations of time, talents and gifts that we have."

This requires the ability to recognize how valuable the talents of others are — to realize that everything doesn't depend on one person, Suley suggested.

Nevertheless, he and his wife have tried to find ways of blending the time they spend together



with service to friends and the larger community.

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An important dimension of simplicity is the ability to make time for yourself. "I have to love myself, to take time out for myself, or else I'll simply burn out and be no good to myself or anyone else," Suley said.

With a little creativity, he transformed his daily drive to work into an enriching, peaceful time. Sometimes he listens to scripture readings, music or personal development tapes. Other times he enjoys the drive in silence.

He has also made daily Mass "the most important appointment of the day."

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Suley suggested that simplicity of life does not necessarily imply poverty or austerity, but it does involve the ability to live on what

you need.

What real needs are — and the shape of simplicity in one's own life — must be determined by individuals or couples themselves, not by images projected in the media or by what others call a need.

Simplicity might mean that several couples planning an evening together would eliminate costly restaurant bills and baby sitters by dining in one of the couple's homes.

But simplicity might also mean that a couple experiencing stress in their marriage caused by life's hectic pace would take a two-week vacation alone, Suley said.

Simplicity, Suley says, means "not getting so much that it suffocates you, not getting so much that you have to work and work and work just to maintain it" at the expense of your own well-being, your relationships with others and God.

(Ms. Liebhart is media reporter for NC News.)

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To David Suley, a simple life is a good life. That means not letting "things" become paramount, he tells writer Cindy Liebhart. But, he adds, the form simplicity takes has to be determined by individuals and families.