

LIFESTYLE

Money ministry: Biblically based programs teach how to achieve financial peace for God's glory



By Kathy K. Martin, Special To The Commercial Appeal

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Cynthia Elliott didn't let two years of unemployment lead her into despair. A certified public accountant, she used her knowledge and extra time to write a book that applies Biblical principles to money management while she was living them out herself.

Elliott said her book, "ABCs That Make Cent\$," can help people gain control of their finances as they learn how to dream, budget, focus and save. Her book is based on content from scripture, such as Romans 13:8, which is about repaying debt.

Many people with concerns about managing their finances are also turning to Christian financial programs, such as Crown Financial Ministries and Financial Peace University, which is led by well-known author, talk-show host and personal finance expert Dave Ramsey. Since its inception in 1994, Financial Peace has helped more than 11/2 million families, said Meg Grunke, public relations coordinator for "The Dave Ramsey Show" and The Lampo Group.

Since 2004, more than 550 Financial Peace classes have been held throughout the Memphis area. Crown Financial, which began offering classes, seminars and personal money coaching in the Mid-South in 2008, has reached 12,000 people, said Travis Moody, a Crown area associate.

Eddie Hathcock, financial planner of Old Towne Investments in Olive Branch and facilitator of Financial Peace University courses at Life Fellowship Church in Olive Branch, said Ramsey would make an excellent preacher. "When you think about it, a preacher is a teacher behind a pulpit," Hathcock said.

The 13-week course, which begins with a video lesson by Ramsey, includes information on how to be a good steward of money, stressing the point that the money comes from God and ultimately belongs to Him. One of the first warnings he gives participants is that by the time they're halfway through the program, half of the class will drop out either physically or mentally.

Justin and Ashley Conway, a married couple who completed the Financial Peace course led by Hathcock in November 2010, had heard of Ramsey and read his book, but wanted to learn more in a class setting. Ashley Conway said the added benefit of having the teacher actually work as a financial adviser was ideal.

"After the class, Eddie became our financial adviser because we knew he believed in Dave Ramsey's philosophy of how spiritual and financial work together," she said. Creating and following a monthly budget has

become the No. 1 piece of advice they follow today. "We had been frugal, but not methodical about a plan of telling the money where to go," she said.

With undergraduate and graduate school loans and credit card debt, Trent Curry attended Financial Peace at First Evangelical Church to set his family on a better course toward financial health. After three years of following a plan, he was able to pay off all the debt and is working on paying off their home mortgage.

"The benefit," Curry said, "is the stress relief, especially in this economy today where flexibility is needed the most if unforeseen circumstances arise, such as my wife and I losing our jobs." Now he serves as a facilitator of the course at the church.

"I tell the class that from a Christian perspective, money is broader than our own personal finances," he explained. "It's having a strong personal financial foundation with no debt and savings and long-term investments. It's having the freedom and flexibility to give more to the church, to the homeless, to others in need," he said "and this strengthens societies as a whole."

Doug McElrath and his wife, Amanda, have been attending Curry's course for the past few weeks. He said he is learning how to look ahead to prepare for spending and to think more long-term for expenses such as their daughter's birthday party and Christmas gifts.

Crown's mission is to equip servant leaders to live by God's design for their finances, work and life through lordship to Jesus Christ, stewardship and generosity.

Moody said the program is offered in many different formats, such as a 10-week Bible study, one-day seminar or one-on-one session with a money coach. "Crown is Biblically based and focused on studying scripture to find out what the Bible says about money." Curriculum, he said, centers on verses like Proverbs 22:7 ("The rich rule over the poor,

and the borrower is servant to the lender.") and the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, which speaks about stewardship.

Memphis-area churches, such as Bellevue Baptist Church, The Life Church of Memphis and Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church, offer studies, as does Brown Missionary Baptist Church in Southaven.

Moody and his wife attended the class as well, and he said it helped them eliminate their more than \$100,000 in unsecured debt over a three-year period.

"We started teaching Crown to help others like us get out of what seems like an impossible debt situation." Even though Moody had success in the corporate world, was head of his church's finance team and had an MBA from Duke University, he said he didn't know how to handle money from God's perspective, only the world's.

"Handling money God's way changed my life," said Moody, who shared his personal story in a book published in 2006 called "Financial Breakthrough -- God's Plan to Get out of Debt."

Elliott, who lives in East Memphis and is a member of Cummings Street Missionary Baptist Church, said she felt God was leading her to write a book about finances with a promise that when she completed it, she would get a job. Within one month after she turned in her manuscript to her publisher, she was offered the job of her dreams.

The 18 chapters of Elliott's book represent a letter or two of the alphabet, beginning with the ABC's for attitudes, behaviors and characteristics of spending, to the YZ chapter, which discusses mastering your whole plan by involving the entire family and providing confirmations of success with zeal. The X chapter, she said, is all about X-ing out negativity, which she fought with prayer and weekly fasting while she was unemployed.

She said she had to deal with her fears, and with help from her Christian writers circle and her church, she still had hope when job

prospects were slim. As a single mother over age 40 with no job for two years, she knew many factors were against her success. "I know that God is alive, he's real, and he decides when and if a job will happen," she said.

Now, Elliott is marketing her book and speaking to various groups in the community. She also plans to write a financial book for children with the help of her 10-year-old daughter, Christina. "I know now that God meant for me to go through this job crisis so I would have time to write the book and then relate better to others who are suffering."

MORE INFORMATION

Financial Peace University: Daveramsey.com.

Classes combine what Dave Ramsey calls "God's and Grandma's way of handling money." Participants learn how to handle their money through common-sense principles and small-group accountability. Each lesson deals with a different topic that changes ways of thinking about personal finance, such as saving money, living on a budget, communicating about money, eliminating debt, finding bargains and experiencing the joy of giving.

Crown Financial Ministries: crown.org.

A range of personal finance, career, business, church and marriage tools that teach God's Biblical principles of finance through media programs, church teaching solutions and products such as workbooks and software.

Local contact: Travis Moody, tmood@thelifechurch.com.

Note: Costs vary for these courses. Most churches offer the Financial Peace lifetime membership kit, which includes audio CDs, Ramsey's book and workbook, at \$99, as part of the 13-week course. Resources are also available for purchase online, but usually at a higher cost.

Crown's 10-week Biblical financial study offers books at \$45 for singles and \$55 for couples.

"Financial Breakthrough -- God's Plan to Get out of Debt" by Travis Moody available at iuniverse.com.

"ABCs That Make Cent\$" by Cynthia Elliott.

Cpacent110@gmail.com. Available online through AuthorHouse, Amazon, Barnes & Noble and other known book wholesalers. \$9.99/e-book, \$15.99/paperback, \$27.99/hardback. abcsthatmakecents.com

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