

# ARTICLES

## COUNSELING FAMILIES IN CONFLICT

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In recent years, shifting populations (one-fifth of the population moves annually), widespread use of non-prescription drugs, and changing moral-ethical values have tended to weaken the family system in America. Experimentation within marriage (e.g., group marriage) has further eroded the traditional family structure. After examining extensive research data on the family, Reiss concludes that radical changes have already occurred and that moderate changes can be expected in the future.<sup>1</sup>

The central goal of marriage and the family has shifted from the carrying on of certain family traditions, including its religion, to the fulfillment for each individual within the family context. Since fulfillment can be attained in creative family relationships where an attempt is made to meet the emotional needs of both parents and children, mutuality, conformity, and stability are less highly valued than are creativity and adaptability. Decisions must be made constantly, and the ability to adapt to changing conditions is one criteria for successful living.<sup>2</sup> Families which learn to meet changing conditions creatively remain together; those which fail to develop creative patterns tend to end prematurely. Divorce and remarriage is a phenomenon which pastors must face. Theologically, divorce and remarriage cannot be seen as an ideal solution to marital and family discord. In practice, divorce occurs more and more frequently among conservative Christian families.<sup>3</sup>

The Judeo-Christian ethic calls for a strong family system where parents and children interact in a warm, loving, and forgiving environment. In this matrix of trust and love for each other, children can learn

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from infancy to face the expected developmental crises of childhood and youth, and eventually become adults with healthy and developing personalities. In a home environment conducive to growth, the son develops a strong male image by modeling after his father, while the daughter develops a strong female identity by modeling after her mother. Also, within the matrix of the home, Christian attitudes and values are communicated, often non-verbally, and Christian patterns of behavior are encouraged and practiced.

New ways to strengthen family life are being sought within the framework of the Church. One such approach is family pastoral counseling, the counseling of families together, as a unit.

### **Thrust of Family Counseling**

The thrust of family counseling is to help the family deal with conflict creatively. Conflict may grow out of the stresses inherent in normal growth and development, and may be related to either individual family members, or to the family as a unit. Conflict within the family unit is discussed by Warkentin and Whitaker<sup>4</sup> who suggest that "impasses" are to be expected as the marriage progresses over a period of time. Examples of potentially devastating periods of conflict occur at the birth of children and at the ten-year point when marriages tend either to stagnate or to become human battlegrounds. Conflict of an intrapsychic nature is also to be expected as a child matures, but the emotional turmoil can cause the family to become dysfunctional.

In family counseling, confrontation can take place and growth is fostered. As issues are faced openly and honestly, a mature autonomy and self-reliance is nurtured. This is not conformity with questions being forbidden; it is, in its ultimate product, individualized decision-making for all family members, with older adolescents being granted the freedom to make their own choices. As freedom grows out of open dialogue, decisions tend to become mature and responsible. Creating an atmosphere of safety and trust, where mature and responsible decision-making is possible, is a goal of family counseling.

A girl in her mid-teens turned to marijuana and other drugs for excitement and escape. Other children in the family sought different ways to escape from what they thought were unbearable social restrictions and demands. Both parents were conservative, devout Christians, and tended to blame themselves for the unacceptable behavior of their children. An honest facing of this kind of conflict by all family members, opening blocked lines of communication, and talking about their own

perception of what is happening in the family, can result in changing destructive patterns to those which facilitate growth and personal fulfillment for each family member.

### **The Identified Person**

In many cases one child will be identified by the parents (and siblings) as the person being responsible for the conflict, confusion, and disorganization found in their family. The child may become the scapegoat, the recipient of all the hostile emotions of other family members. In some families, one child becomes the scapegoat because he personifies the undesirable qualities the parents have been unable to deal with in their own lives. The transmission of pathogenic conflict from person to person and from generation to generation can be clearly seen.<sup>5</sup> When the parents' dreams for their child fail to materialize, hostility may be directed toward the scapegoat.

Early in the counseling relationship, the pastor helps the family realize that their concern is with the dysfunctional family and not with trying to place blame. The identified person may already be carrying a heavy load of guilt for his behavior. By focusing on family functioning, as opposed to placing blame, the identified person can begin to express his emotions without fear of reprisal, either from the counselor or from other family members.

The basis for this approach of not placing blame lies in the assumption that all behavior is meaningful, and that mal-adaptive behavior has meaning for the person concerned. For example, the withdrawn child may have an overbearing parent who demands perfection. The child finds that it is less painful to withdraw from interaction with people than to receive the wrath of an angry parent when he performs below the level expected by the parents. At the unconscious level, this behavior is reasonable to the child. The child's behavior is seen by the counselor as a product of faulty family relationships since the family functions as a unit with interdependence on each other rather than independently of each other.

### **Issues In Family Counseling**

One of the first tasks of the counselor is to help the identified person and the family move the focus of concern to the dysfunctional family unit. Satir suggests that this can be done by "accentuating the idea of puzzlement,"<sup>6</sup> the fact that the parents are puzzled at what has happened to their child when they have tried to be "good parents." By reducing the guilt of both the scapegoat and the parents, the counselor then is free to look at the history of the family. While learning about the

family, the counselor will introduce the ideas of pain, having fun, the parents' aspirations, the different-ness of family members, and what they hope to accomplish by coming together as a family.

The opening of blocked communication is seen as a primary concern of family counseling, although the content of communication is important, as is how the members communicate with each other. In faulty communication, hidden messages are conveyed and words have contradictory meanings which must be challenged. Through the intervention of a counselor, feedback may be channeled to individuals, enabling them to correct the perceptions of those receiving the original communication. The counselor notes whose communication is most often distorted. As communication becomes more open and less distorted, growth can occur and feelings of mutuality can be consolidated.

Since 1957, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) has emphasized the treatment of families as a unit. One research project at NIMH studied 59 pairs of parents in three categories: those having schizophrenic children, those having neurotic children, and those having normal children. The researchers concluded that the most disturbed families (those having a schizophrenic child) showed the most difficulty in focusing attention in communication and in maintaining meaningful communication.<sup>7</sup> Such research lends credence to the notion that blocked communication is a major concern in family counseling.

Resistance to change, however, is to be expected since the family will feel ill at ease in discussing intimate feelings with the counselor. Unconscious resistance may reside in individual family members or in the intra-familial dynamics. For instance, there may be resistance to role clarification between the parents. Change will be possible when there is adequate motivation to change, and when the family feels safe, that is, when the alternative is more desirable than the present behavior. As the family and counselor continue to interact honestly, change will gradually occur, pain and discomfort will decrease, and further growth will become possible. Growth is not possible without pain. Recognition of blocked communication by family members and the understanding of how they have impacted each other negatively is painful. The pain, however, is the raw emotion out of which growth is produced.

In the course of family counseling the need may develop for the pastor to see only the husband and wife together or to see family members individually. Within the context of family counseling, an attempt is made to help each member find emotional satisfaction for

all his valid needs which do not impinge on the rights of other family members. Focus is primarily on the "here and now" problems of the family unit, and of the individual members.

Since the level of interaction increases geometrically as the number of individuals increases in counseling, a co-counselor is recommended for family counseling. Two counselors, regardless of their sex, become models of husband-wife interaction for the family in conflict. Reacting honestly in the counseling relationship they may have disagreements, but the working out of those issues with the family present can serve as a practical model for the family. Whitaker's view is that the co-therapist may be the therapist's wife and that she need not be skilled in psychotherapy.<sup>8</sup> For the pastor, his wife may be the logical choice for co-counselor.

### **Learning To Learn**

Methodological approaches to family therapy vary among theorists. One explicitly-described approach is that of Satir;<sup>9</sup> her technique may be adapted for a pastoral approach which focuses on helping those families which are not extremely disorganized. Severely maladaptive families may be referred to professional therapists when the presenting problems are beyond the scope of the pastor's available time and/or training. A pastor who has had supervised training and experience in individual and marriage counseling can be expected to be able to proceed to family counseling. Supervision of family counseling is recommended; supervision can be provided by a Fellow in the American Association of Pastoral Counselors<sup>10</sup> or by other mental health professionals.

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1. Ira L. Reiss, *The Family System In America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971).
  2. Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970). In a public address, Toffler stated that the paperback edition of his book was printed in several colors, thus aiding and abetting Future Shock!

3. See the discussion of some of these issues in the chapter by David R. Mace, "Contemporary Issues In Marriage," *Encounter: Love, Marriage, and Family*, Ruth E. Albrecht and E. Wilbur Bock, editors (Boston: Halbrook Press, 1972).
4. John Warkentin and Carl Whitaker, "Serial Impasses in Marriage," *Family Structure, Dynamics and Therapy*, Irvin M. Cohen, editor (Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 1966). See also, "The Secret Agenda of the Therapist Doing Couples Therapy," *Family Therapy and Disturbed Families*, Gerald M. Zuk and Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, editors (Palo Alto: Science and Behavior Books, 1967).
5. Nathan W. Ackerman, *Treating the Troubled Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), p. 290.
6. Virginia Satir, *Conjoint Family Therapy* (Palo Alto: Science and Behavior Books, 1967), p. 110.
7. Margaret T. Singer and Lyman C. Wynne, "Communication Styles in Parents of Normals, Neurotics, and Schizophrenics," *Family Structure, Dynamics and Therapy*, Irvin M. Cohen, editor (Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 1966).
8. Carl Whitaker, cassette tapes, "What's New in Husband-Wife Counseling," produced by Human Development Institute, Atlanta.
9. Virginia Satir, *op cit*.
10. For directory of members, write the Association at 31 West 10th Street, New York, New York 10011.