

Family Transitions

Introduction

Weddings, funerals, baby dedications, baptisms and other life cycle ceremonies offer unique opportunities for ministry to families. Family therapist Edwin H. Friedman (1985) says that "the family itself . . . is going through the passage, rather than only some 'identified' celebrant(s), and the family may actually go through more change than the focused member(s)." Such rites of passage, he continues, "function as 'hinges of time.' All family relationship systems unlock during these periods. More doors open or close naturally between various family members than can be swung at other times, even after years of agonizing endeavors" (p. 164).

Family members tend to view such events with such significance that they will often hurdle barriers of time and distance to participate. They will reopen communication with each other in extraordinary ways, go to great expense to take part in celebrations, even traverse great distances to be present. Friedman sees religious significance in such life cycle ceremonies and unprecedented opportunities for healing and growth.

Where clergy can utilize the opportunity presented by such family life-cycle crises to foster increased mutual respect for the personal integrity of one another, the *religious* functioning of everyone actually reaches a higher level. . . .

For example, let us say a family happens to be seeking help on some problem regarding a child, a marriage, a physical illness, or an aged person. If during the course of that counseling the family begins to go through a passage, then because of the loosening up of family relationship systems during such periods, the time is especially propitious for facilitating change even if the event seems totally unconnected with the focused problem. This is healing at its best (pp. 167, 168).

What follows is a list of family transitions and how family ministry may be built around them. For much of the material we are indebted to "Family Transitions," *Resources for Family Ministry*, Southeastern California Conference, 1990.

Adolescence

One of the most exciting, challenging, and difficult times of transition for families is adolescence. Beginning with the junior high school years and extending all through high school, it is a time marked by major changes in the relationship between teenagers and parents. Teenagers struggle through the process of developing their own sense of identity and choosing the values that will guide them toward adulthood. Parents struggle to find balance between "letting go," and providing appropriate structure as their teenager begins to assume more independence and responsibility. This is indeed a time when families can benefit from the nurturing support of their church.

Avenues of Ministry

- Parent-teen communication seminars.
- Special seminars for teens on topics like dating, how to be a good friend, how to talk to your parents, what to do when it seems that everything is falling apart, how to choose a career, developing self-esteem, sexuality.
- Programs that provide opportunities for youth to be together in various settings—Bible study, social events or outings, projects, special church services or Sabbath School programs.
- Parent-teen outings.
- Involve young people in church service and programs. They can greet people, distribute bulletins, take up the offering, read Scripture, provide special music, offer prayer.
- Involve youth in planning personalized and innovative church services.
- Plan a special youth church service once a quarter.

- Visit the young person at home to acknowledge this important time in his or her life.
- Give priority to developing a youth program if your church does not have such already.
- Share information on programs and services of the church that are targeted for youth and extend personal invitations for them to participate.
- Attend school events or drop by school for lunch once in a while just to get to know youth and let them know you are interested in them.
- Give a gift book to young people as they join the youth or earliteen Sabbath School division.
- Give a gift book to parents of youth who are entering junior high and high school years.
- Provide appropriate books, tapes, videos in the church library on parent-adolescent relationships.

Births/Adoptions

The arrival of a new child is an occasion anticipated with great joy or perhaps with great apprehension. The pleasure of ushering a new life into the world and watching a child develop and grow is accompanied by a deep sense of responsibility. Through preparation and planning some of the rough spots of this transitional time may be smoothed and the celebration of a new person be made more meaningful. The church is in a position to provide support and contribute to the celebration.

Avenues of Ministry

- Childbirth preparation classes.
- Parenting classes.
- Class for first-time parents.
- Family financial planning seminars.
- Baby dedication.
- Seminar on family worship responding to such issues as, How do we worship as a family and as a couple?
- Pastor or church leaders visit prospective parents with gift or book from church. This may be a good time to talk about baby dedication service.
- Letter or card of congratulations both at time of anticipation and at birth.
- Provide a shower of gifts and well-wishes for prospective parents.
- Hold a personalized baby dedication service.
- If available, give a subscription to a Christian journal on parenting.
- Offer an alternate Sabbath School class for new parents.

Death

Death causes families to grieve the loss of their loved one. The period of grief affords an opportunity for family ministry. Grief is intense and may last for years until the process of grieving has been sufficiently accomplished. Anger, blaming, poor communication, all build pressure on the family. Some marriages may end in divorce following a child's death. In his article on the death of a child, author Greg Hubbard (1992) provides tangible directives to those who would offer comfort.

Avenues of Ministry

- Visit grieving families and give them opportunity to talk about their loved one.
- Remember and speak about the loved one with the family. Keep the memory of the loved one alive. Look for opportunities to mention his or her name. Ask about his or her favorite sports, interests, friends. Of parents grieving the loss of their child Hubbard (1992) says, "They long for someone, anyone, to speak their child's name just once without apologizing for it. They wish someone would talk about their child."
- Don't try to answer the "Why" question. Say, "I don't know why. All I know is that I miss your loved one too, and I care about you."
- At a time when things seem out of control, help the family to maintain as much control over the

situation as possible.

- Assure them that the things they are experiencing are normal.
- Discourage friends or family from disturbing the loved one's personal effects. These are associated with the memory of the loved one and handling (and at the right time disposing of) them is part of appropriate grieving.
- Help would-be comforters to understand the grief process and to realize that those suffering from the death of a loved one need a number of months, perhaps years to heal.
- Remember grieving ones in prayer during worship at church for a period that is commensurate with their grief.

Divorce

Divorce constitutes a substantial transition point in many families today. Generally it follows a period of turbulence in marriage and family living. Over the years, the church has come to recognize that those who have experienced brokenness of relationship have need of loving ministry from the followers of Christ, who understands and accepts people in all human conditions. Ministry is necessary for the personal needs of adults who are involved as well as the personal needs of the children of divorce. In addition there are single parenting needs in homes with children.

Avenues for Ministry

- Visit divorced individuals, offering pastoral care. Loving ministry must be provided irrespective of the individual's behavior and experience. Often such ministry may be best effected by listening, allowing the hurting one to sort through feelings, and assisting him or her to explore options.
- Help the divorced individual to identify resource persons who can provide necessary specialized help such as pastoral care, personal counseling or therapy, social services, legal counsel.
- Assist the divorced individual in establishing a personal support group.
- Provide a divorce recovery seminar.
- Provide a single-parenting seminar.
- Encourage increased sensitivity on the part of church members to the needs of single parents. Avoid stereotyping "family" in ways that discriminate against single parents.
- Seek ways to assist single parents with needs related to reduced income, child care expenses, work overload, and child-rearing issues.
- Continue to involve divorced persons in church life, helping them to heal from damaged emotions, to trust and be trusted.
- Be sensitive to the needs of children of divorce to be treated normally, yet with an awareness of the hurt, rejection, and confusion they often feel inside. Help to lift the feeling of blame for the divorce which children often feel.

Grand parenting

One of the happiest experiences of the life stages may be the expectation and the arrival of a grandchild. This is often marked by sharing the news, pictures, and stories. As the grandparents share this with church family there are some ways the church can provide support and meaning to the occasion.

Avenues of Ministry

- Have a grandparenting seminar.
- Begin an "adopt-a-grandchild" program for children without grandparents or for grandparents who could benefit from such an experience.
- Include grandparents in the child dedication service.
- Send a letter or card of congratulations.
- Provide an appropriate gift book.

Graduation

Not only does graduation mark the completion of a long course of study, but it also heralds a new beginning. High school graduates face a wide variety of new tasks and responsibilities. Some of these include participation in the political process, choice of a career or further education, selecting a life partner and establishing a home, redefining relationships with parents, and determining the role that God and church play in their lives.

Avenues of Ministry

- Seminars on how to choose the 'right college for you' and how to finance your education.
- Seminars on career choice.
- Seminars/programs on personal financial management and budgeting.
- Social programs, especially for those not attending college, that provide opportunities for social interaction and developing relationships with people of their own age.
- Send a card or letter of congratulations from the church.
- Visit with the graduate and talk over plans for the future.
- Provide information on Christian colleges.
- Have a 'going away to college' shower of gifts and well-wishes for students about to embark on their first boarding school experience.

Remarriage

The marriage of people who have been married previously, especially if there are children involved, needs support and encouragement from the church family. There are often conflicting emotions. "People who remarry are generally poorly prepared for the special complications of remarried family life" (Messinger, 1990). Remarried families constitute a high-risk group with breakdown often occurring within the first five years at rates higher than the rate of first marriage divorce.

Remarried issues include concerns over children—their financial support, the custodial arrangements, and parenting by the step-parent. Other issues include personal resolution of the married partners' feelings about the prior marriage, boundary issues between families, family financial management, and concerns about revising wills, insurance, and property assets. Too often differing views about divorce and remarriage held by church members constitute additional stumbling blocks for the remarried family. Divorce and/or remarriage seem at times to be unpardonable sins beyond which there is no possibility of spiritual life or fellowship. It will test our concepts of community and our understanding of grace to the utmost perhaps, but the gospel must be allowed to work its work of repentance, confession, forgiveness, and renewal. A growing population of divorced individuals begs for a ministry of redemption. The church could help in numerous ways.

Avenues of Ministry

- Shower of wedding gifts and well-wishes. Children of the couple could be included in the festivities.
- Letter or card of congratulations and encouragement.
- Seminars or programs on stepfamily issues.
- Introduction/recognition during the worship service of a family that has just merged.
- Give a gift or book in recognition and support of the new family.
- Present gift or 'Sabbath candles' or flowers in a house-warming setting.

Retirement

Few events in life are greeted with such mixed feelings as retirement. While it represents the culmination of years of effort and accomplishment, there is also apprehension and even

resentment with the fear of what lies ahead. Anticipation of new roles and new sense of meaning may bring joy. The church can join in the celebration and affirmation of those who retire.

Avenues of Ministry

- Retirement preparation classes.
- Financial planning for retired persons.
- Grandparenting classes.
- Health classes for those in retirement years.
- Give special recognition during worship service.
- An appropriate gift might be given to the new retiree.
- Visitation by pastor before and a few weeks after retirement date.
- Monthly meetings and/or activities for retired persons.

School Days

As children grow older, one of the events that marks a significant transition for both parent and child is the beginning of school. For many children this may be the first major venture into the world on their own. It is both exciting and frightening for both child and parents. They will form new relationships with other significant adults and further develop their own social skills through interacting with other children. For parents, there is the excitement of watching their child grow, mixed with apprehension at no longer being able to 'shield' him or her.

Avenues of Ministry

- Arrange for an orientation program for new students and parents. Cover what a typical school day is like, the goals of the teacher and school, how parents can give input and be involved in the program.
- Provide a parenting seminar that focuses on school-age children. Include material that would be of interest to parents who will return to work full or part-time.
- Work in cooperation with Home and School leaders to provide continuing programs for students and parents.
- Take time during worship service at the beginning of the school year to recognize students starting school for the first time.
- Give a small gift that will help kindergarten or first-grade children remember that God is with them in this new venture.
- Plan worship services so that school-age children can participate in a meaningful way. This could include a children's story or special feature. Children might assist with parts of the program: helping receive the offering, handing out bulletins, reading Scripture reading, providing special music.
- If possible have Children's Church periodically. Such a service, usually held at the same time as the regular worship service but geared for school-age children, helps children to know that church is not just for adults, but for them as well.
- Send a card or note to the child to recognize this special time.

Wedding Anniversaries

The celebration of wedding anniversaries can be a time of real significance and joy, particularly when milestones are reached such as the twenty-fifth or fiftieth anniversary. The tenth anniversary of a second marriage of an older couple may also be a very significant time.

Avenues of Ministry

- Recognition during worship service.
- Recommitment services.
- Give rose or appropriate gift in a special presentation.
- Ask for letter of congratulations from conference president for significant anniversaries.
- For a fiftieth anniversary letter, notify local officials/heads of state who often will provide letters

of commendation and recognition.

- Sponsor an anniversary party, particularly if children live far away. A conference telephone call with those children may be a possibility in some areas.
- If children are unable to be present, invite them to send letters to the church which can be read to their parents at an appropriate time during the service.

References

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Hubbard, Greg. "Helping parents grieve." *Leadership*, Winter Quarter, 1992.

Messinger, Lillian. "Reflections on a study of remarriage: ten years later." *Marriage Encounter*, July/August, 1990.