

## FOUR REASONS FOR FAMILY MINISTRIES

### I. FAMILIES ARE IN TROUBLE

*The family is being attacked from within and from without. We must rush to its aid.*

The Divine ideals for family living are scarcely evident in our time. Great crises face many families today. In fact, some suggest that doomsday is near for the family as an institution and that new forms of communal living will succeed it.

The complexity of society and its increasing problems present great challenges and bring on enormous stresses. Changes in the world about us—industrially, technologically, politically and economically—have brought about significant social changes.

**Attitudes toward marriage.** Marriage is undergoing change from a lifelong commitment to a less permanent contractual arrangement based on personal fulfillment. A modern emphasis on individualism contributes to the independent attitude of both marriage partners. The recent elevated status and expanding opportunities of women in some societies enable them to extricate themselves from marriage when they do not feel fulfilled. Men are also getting out of marriage if their expectations are not met.

**Role conflicts.** Traditional family patterns of the past provided defined roles for men and women, leaving the marriage institution more secure though more rigid. Many households now have two careers and two paychecks. Since wives as well as husbands work outside the home, roles and responsibilities must of necessity change. The need for a more flexible role structure is a source of considerable stress.

**Financial pressures.** Rising costs of living and the desire for material possessions have driven many to search for better wages, take additional jobs, seek more education and overextend credit.

**Sexual revolution.** Traditional mores concerning sexuality have been eroded. Homosexual as well as premarital and extramarital sexual experiences are common. Within marriage, sex is often thought of in terms of performance and ability. Its purpose to provide for marital intimacy is frustrated. Sexual abuse in the family is on the increase.

**Parenting inadequacy.** Parents become involved with pressures and responsibilities that allow little time for meaningful relationships with their children. Society tends to downgrade the role of parents and the functions of parenthood. Many parents have difficulty in successfully combining the demands of the occupation and the family. This is a common source of parental guilt and anxiety.

**Juvenile delinquency.** Studies of adolescents reveal an extensive indifference of youth toward parental values. At every age and grade level, the children of today show a greater dependency on peers than did the children of the last decade. Alienation from parents has resulted in rising rates of runaway children. Also on the increase among youth are the problems of dropping out of school, drug abuse, vandalism, violence, and suicide.

**Family violence.** All family members—husbands, wives, parents, grandparents and children—are victimized by family violence. Child abuse has reached epidemic proportions.

**Escalating divorce rate.** Unresolved marital conflict accompanied by a softening of divorce laws and better economic conditions for women have contributed to today's escalating divorce rate. Such an increase also signals a high degree of marital discord and unhappiness in those who have not yet made it to the divorce courts.

**Increase in one-parent households.** An increasing incidence of out-of-wedlock births and a rise in the number of marital break-ups have led to a dramatic rise in the number of one-parent households and divided parenting situations. The cessation of hostilities which occurred within marriage, however, generally gives way to a new set of stresses and burdens for the single parent.

**Remarriage and blended families.** Many who lose marital partners soon remarry. When children are present, the result is a "step" or "blended" family. As families attempt to cope with the stress of unifying parts of families that may be very different and that have experienced considerable pain and loss, the blending process is often painful.

**Chain dysfunction.** Dysfunctional families tend to produce dysfunctional families. Relational patterns are taught by the modeling that occurs in one's childhood home. As a result poorly-relating families promote negative attitudes, habits and emotions in their offspring. Such patterns need to be unlearned or modified before healthy relationships can be established by these individuals in adult life.

**Encroaching secularism.** Many factors affecting unchurched families affect Christian families. Though connected with the church, Christians too live in a fallen world. While endeavoring to heed the special revelation of God regarding family living, they are constantly bombarded by secular philosophy, ideas and behavior.

In addition to the crises faced by families in general is this greater one faced by the Christian family—it appears to have lost its immunity to secularism.

Secularism, thought of here as the antithesis of spirituality, is making inroads in families. Many troubled homes urgently need to have Christianity made real in their midst. Even those with spiritual strengths need reinforcement.

If this catalog of family ills is only partially correct, it is obvious that something very important to us, a very part of us, is in trouble. The family is being attacked from within and from without. We must rush to its aid. We must have a family ministry that will help families deal with their difficulties.

## II. THE FAMILY NEEDS NURTURE AND INSTRUCTION

*The challenge facing the church is to nurture its members, presenting biblical concepts of marriage, parenting and family living.*

While the present emergency situation in families may be required to get us thinking about family needs, we must beware lest our work be only crisis-oriented. If family ministry is carried on primarily because of crises, it will have a kind of "stop-gap" flavor to it—a fire engine approach. Once the fire has died down we assume we can put away the equipment and get on with business as usual.

**Focus on God's purpose for the family.** As mentioned earlier, a whole body of truth regarding the family has been divinely revealed. It is of God's design—this idea of family—and He knows how it functions best. When it is dysfunctional, He knows best how it may be restored. An important duty of family life ministry is to focus on God's purpose for the family and promote restoration and renewal of Christian family life.

**Unfold the spiritual dynamics that are at work in families.** Many are attempting to help the family today, but most of this work is being done by non-religious persons and organizations. Consequently, the spiritual component is down-played or non-existent. Humanistic views often govern secular family-life practitioners. A ministry for families is not well-rounded without the

spiritual emphasis, even as a ministry to the individual which addresses physical, social, intellectual and emotional dimensions is incomplete without consideration of his spiritual well-being. The church not only has the responsibility, but the privilege of unfolding to families spiritual dynamics that are at work in the family—this most intimate network of personal relationships.

**Present Scriptural concepts of family living.** The challenge of the church is to present Scriptural concepts of marriage, parenting, and family living. The Bible theme of the covenant is rich in meaning for family relationships. Families need understanding of such principles as mutual submission, unconditional love and the use of one's spiritual gifts at home. The church is to make plain Scriptural teaching on handling emotions and conflict and is to present the family life implications of such Christian doctrines as forgiveness and reconciliation. These must be shown not to be old-fashioned and outdated, but real keys to fulfilled and lasting marriage and family relationships. If the family is to maintain distinctive Christian characteristics, we in the church must make an effort to give these gospel truths contemporary expression. We must help families integrate these gospel principles into day-to-day, intimate living.

**Include family life in holistic ministry.** The church can go even further. It can include family life as part of a holistic ministry to the individual.

Holistic ministry is not a new idea to Seventh-day Adventists. Taking our cue from the biblical notion that human beings are indivisible wholes, we have long taught the importance of total health—physically, mentally and spiritually. In our deepening understanding of human psychological, emotional and social needs, let us extend our holistic ministry to include them.

Since many of these needs are satisfied or left wanting by one's family, the church, to truly minister holistically, must address the issue of the individual in relationship to his family. To provide families with spiritual nurture, instruction and to include the family as integral to a holistic approach to living are important tasks of family ministry.

### III. THE FAMILY SYSTEM REQUIRES A PARTICULAR KIND OF MINISTRY

*Effective discipling of the individual takes place in a primary way within the context of his family. Special forms of ministry by the church can enhance this process.*

The poetic thought of John Donne, "No man is an island, entire unto himself," is never more true than when we look at the individual in relationship to other members of his family. He is affected to some degree by all that transpires there. In subtle, yet very real ways, members of a family are linked. Together, they form what family social scientists call a "system." These linkages or ties provide a much-needed structure of support for the individual.

**Setting for primary relationships.** Primary relationships, in which family members are more intimate and self-disclosing, develop within this system. Such primary relationships, in contrast to secondary relationships (less intimate, more task-oriented) known elsewhere, foster healthy physical, emotional, social and spiritual growth. Those individuals who have experienced well-functioning primary relationships at home are equipped to relate more meaningfully, to communicate more openly, and handle conflict more effectively than those who have not. The Christian's relationship with God, to be healthy, must be of a primary nature also. Successful primary relationships which form in the family prepare the way for the development of each member's relationship with God. The intimacy of the family thus affords an exceptional climate for Christian nurture and discipleship.

Through its family ministry, a church aims to encourage this primary relationship-building and to reinforce this unique support group for the individual—his family. The object is to assist in the release of the family's potential as a supportive network and, as a result, benefit the individual family member, the family, the church and society.

**Ministry to families as wholes.** Efforts must be made then to minister not only to individuals and to various age groups within the church, but to the family as a whole. What can be done to strengthen the ties that bind families together? What will help to improve the family's interaction and relationship-building? Of necessity, family ministry will take on alternative formats and structures from those used in ministry to the individual. Such programs will have the family unit as a target audience.

**Ministry to marrieds.** Marrieds need special nurture and care. The health of the whole family depends heavily on the health of the marriage relationship. Each couple is constantly faced with challenges, even assaults upon their oneness, their coupleness. Perpetually they must renew their covenant with each other, stay in tune with each other and grow together. Anything, therefore, that can be done to enable a couple to remain intact and growing in their relationship has a positive effect on family health and well-being. Encouraging couples to fellowship, socialize and participate in enrichment programs with other couples is essential in maintaining their spiritual, psychological and emotional well-being.

**Families need other families.** Whole families are also encouraged, enriched and renewed by fellowship and interaction with other families. A sense of companionship and belonging, a sense of family worth and purpose are brought about as families minister to each other. The family draws strength from realizing it is not alone in the issues it faces. It develops, grows and flourishes in the midst of other nurturing, caring families, just as the lone individual does in the presence of his nurturing and caring personal family.

Family ministry recognizes the unique needs of the family as a system and seeks to provide the positive interaction and support family units require.

#### IV. FAMILY MINISTRY IS TANGIBLE EVIDENCE OF A CARING CHURCH

*The church that works personally with its members, touching individuals where they live and helping them to find more fulfilled lives as singles or marrieds, as parents or children, is a church that creates strong bonds that are not easily broken.*

A focus on family life can assist in revitalizing the church, helping it to maintain its vitality and to grow. The presence of the Spirit of Christ in the church leads us inevitably to care about people. We cannot become deeply involved with people without caring for their families. "The Saviour," we are told, "mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow me.'" E. G. White, *"The Ministry of Healing"*, p. 143.

People are interested in coming to and staying with a church that is concerned about and provides help with the basic issues of life. The church that works personally with its members, touching individuals where they live and helping them to find more fulfilled lives as singles, marrieds, parents and children, is a church that creates strong bonds that are not easily broken.

The practical implications for church life and growth are obvious. As the church reaches out to strengthen its elemental components—individuals and families—it is itself strengthened. The back door, which has witnessed the departure of many a church member who felt nobody cared, will not swing so widely. The front door, through which hopeful individuals enter in eager anticipation of finding someone who really cares, will become wider and more attractive.