

MEETING SOME MYTHS

A number of ideas flourish which tend to defeat family ministry.

If you're a good Christian your family life will be all right.

Being a Christian does not exempt one from the difficulties and problems of family life. A good Christian experience does not necessarily provide or substitute for the education in family living that is so necessary. Unless one does receive some education and training, negative habits, actions and patterns of interacting change very little. In addition, family life needs are ongoing, even among Christians. The importance of fellowship and spiritual and emotional support from one's family are felt even more keenly. One who is truly seeking to live the Christian life will be open to and interested in learning as much as possible about successful family living.

If we could just return to the good old days the family would be better.

No doubt each generation reminisces of a former time when it believes things were much better. What people want to get back to may never have existed in the first place. Faced with present realities, many of us romanticize the past. Unhappiness may manifest itself differently now. In earlier times outward signs of family difficulty may have been different, but we have no evidence that families were generally any happier. In any case, today's society is so different from the past that such a retreat is impossible, even if it were widely desired. Families living in a fallen world need help; they always have and they always will. We can seldom change the world around us, but we can, with God's help, change ourselves. We can adapt the best aspects of the past to the present and, though it may take some effort, we may experience satisfying family life today.

The more we talk about family life needs, the more we have. If we downplay these needs and get our minds on other things we should be accomplishing, they will become less prominent.

It is true that the more we verbalize something, the more fixed in our minds it becomes and therefore, more real. However, the realities of family life needs are present before we verbalize them and no amount of repression or diversion will eliminate them.

The need for love, affection, affirmation and a sense of personal worth are real. So is the need for companionship, intimacy, decision-making and conflict resolution. To be insensitive to these needs, to neglect them, or worse yet, to deliberately ignore them, leads at best to dull, monotonous, parallel living in the family and at worst to frustration, despair, resentment and even violence. Commitment to fulfilled family living must become a high priority. Maintaining healthy family relationships requires time, effort, and at times, personal sacrifice. No other accomplishment in life is more significant than the happiness and well-being of our families.

It is not appropriate for the church to become involved in the intimate family lives of its members.

This thought seems to contest the legitimacy of family life ministry by the church. Since we have already stated the reasons why such a work is vital, let's think about why individuals might have reservations about it.

Family life is an intimate matter. Many feel that participation in family life programs is a sign that they are having problems and therefore are not all they should be as Christians. Others know their weaknesses and feel that by becoming involved they will open their family life and, in particular, their own participation in their family for inspection. They fear their ignorance in understanding, their inadequacy in skills and their failures will be revealed. As we might expect, any such public revelations will be shunned, but even a private disclosure of needs can be very threatening.

Those who work in the field of family life eventually must deal with the universal unwritten rule that married couples and families should never talk to other couples and families about what is going on in their family. This has been called the "intermarital taboo" or the "interfamily taboo." At the core of this rather general marital and family privatism is a restriction on disclosure, particularly of those things which would cast a bad light on anyone in the family.

Undoubtedly the restrictions on sharing marital and family relationships which have characterized our society in the past and continue to influence the present have their roots in religious attitudes that have inculcated our culture over centuries. These restrictions are not all bad. Biblical passages such as Genesis 2:24 and Matthew 19:6 imply that the husband and wife and family form a special nucleus, a cell with certain privileges. One of these privileges is the right to privacy or the right to have a union which is undisturbed by outsiders. Ellen G. White expresses this idea well when she writes: "There is a sacred circle around every family which should be preserved. No other one has any right in that sacred circle." (*The Adventist Home*, p. 177.)

Every marriage and family has a specialness to it, a perimeter about it which marks it off from all others and gives it security and identity. It is unfortunate, however, when the sacred circle becomes a wall entrapping the couple and/or family behind it. Excessive privatism deprives the family of much-needed companionship and interaction with others—interaction which might help sustain and enhance that family.

This family cell, which in one way is a private entity, is also dependent upon networks around it for life support. Illustrations from the cells of the human body are evidence of this. The Bible itself supports such interfamily and interpersonal ministry in such passages as Acts 4:32; 2:46; Galatians 6:2 and James 5:10.

In family ministry we must foster a sense of balance between openness and privatism. A family's right to privacy must not be invaded. At the same time, growth in individuals, in couples and family units can only take place as family members become open to each other. Openness to other individuals who are willing to be of help during premarital guidance, marital and/or family counseling or marriage enrichment is also important.

Leaders in family ministry must show themselves worthy of the trust of those with whom they work. They deal with delicate matters which require sensitivity to feelings and a high degree of propriety. In the presence of caring people, this intermarital/interfamily taboo may be relaxed somewhat and relational growth in the family may be stimulated.