

## SHAPING A CHURCH'S FAMILY MINISTRIES

The form that family ministry takes will be determined by the overall goals of the church, the felt needs of the congregation and the community, the prevailing attitudes toward such specific ministry and the resources available. The approach that may be used and the intensity with which it is pursued are ultimately tied to one or more of these factors. However, as a growing awareness of the need for special efforts for families occurs, family ministry will begin to take shape. Sound planning can be implemented when the church is able to see its options. At the risk of oversimplification, we may sort specific approaches to family ministry into three broad types or categories: counseling, education and enrichment.

### COUNSELING

Some individuals and families are in such need as to require counseling, specialized work that is particularly tailored to assist them in resolving short or long-term personal or relational crises and difficulties. More trained counselors are needed, and more must be done to inform church members about the availability and appropriateness of individual, marital and family counseling.

Encouragement should be given to families to seek out the help of qualified Christian counselors who can assist them in times of need. Special efforts are needed as well to put the financial cost of professional counseling within the reach of all who could benefit from it. Where situations prevail which disallow professional counseling, a pastor or lay person with some training in this area may be able to provide some basic help. Peer ministry, which includes peer counseling, is a growing movement in Christian circles. The peer ministry idea has great potential for Adventist family life ministry as well.

Counseling may make exorbitant demands, however, so early assessment of the time required in given counseling situations and an awareness of when to refer individuals for more professional help are important considerations for pastors or lay persons who become involved in family counseling.

### EDUCATION

As a church we have long recognized the importance of education. This powerful tool must now be utilized in a special way for the benefit families.

A wealth of material exists to educate church members in virtually every conceivable area of family life. It is available in books, magazines and brochures, on films, and on audio and video cassettes. Schools, universities and community organizations offer continuing education programs and courses on family life. Self-study and group-oriented seminar materials are readily obtainable from a number of publishers including Adventist sources. (For more information see the General Conference Department of Church Ministries publication *Family Ministry Resources*.) Many churches have established lending libraries for family life books and cassettes. Others integrate family life education into the church's calendar of weekly meetings, Sabbath Schools, divine worship services, in the preaching program or in other special weekend programs. The potential exists for our schools to become involved in broad-based family life education for our young people and to lead in parent-child/parent-teen joint educational experiences.

More and more family life professionals are available for programs, seminars, workshops and other speaking engagements. The division offices of the General Conference Department of Church Ministries or the counseling/behavioral sciences departments of our colleges and universities are sources to contact for the names of such individuals. The Church offers annual workshops at its two North American universities, Andrews and Loma Linda, and in one or more overseas divisions, to teach the fundamentals of family life education and to equip pastors and laypersons for local church ministry.

A great opportunity exists for pastors and lay individuals interested in family life to avail themselves of such educational resources and to relay vital information about the family to others in the church.

## ENRICHMENT

"Enrichment," as used among those involved in family life ministry, is a special term for the process of enhancing relationships through better communication, deeper understanding and an improved ability to resolve anger and conflict. Although it may refer to the end result, i.e., "The couple's marriage was 'enriched'," more often than not, it is synonymous with a particular event or program in which individuals, couples and families take part and relational growth occurs.

For couples. Family life enrichment activities are focused on the family as a system. This is where the marriage enrichment movement has had such a powerful impact. In the presence of other caring couples, husbands and wives have seen a practical demonstration of God's love, have found reassurance for their identity, comfort in the midst of difficulty and hope to carry them forward.

For families. Enrichment programs involving the whole family, perhaps the most complex to conduct, provide opportunities for families to make the same gains through sharing and interacting. The family clustering approach is one example of such enrichment.

For singles. A slightly modified approach has been used with singles in singles' enrichment seminars. This group too has family needs. Some adult singles share living accommodations and thus can benefit much from family life ministry. If they do not have roommates or live-in companions, they are part of a family system somewhere, even if that system is the larger-church family. An enrichment event for them can improve their relationships with others.

In a very practical way this couple-to-couple/family-to-family/single-to-single helping occurs as open verbal sharing within and between couples/families/singles takes place. All of these units experience a sense of freedom in examining their own behavior and interaction, in observing others and in trying alternate ways of relating in order to meet the various needs in their relationships.

Enrichment events, because they are designed to provide for self-disclosure, encourage a sense of community among participants. In a day and age when many do not have extended families nearby [i.e., other relatives beyond the immediate nuclear family of parent(s) and children], an enrichment group becomes a surrogate extended family. When enrichment activity is carried on among individuals who are all part of the same church body, the results have a wonderful effect on the spirit of community and cooperation that is exhibited there.

## THE ULTIMATE FAMILY MINISTRY

Counseling, education and enrichment represent three broad approaches which can be followed to accomplish the goals of Family Ministry in the church. But ultimately Family Ministries is more than completing a checklist of programs, services or special events. The spirit of Family Ministries is seeking through each relationship to open the way for God to reach down and work His miracle of grace in every home and church community. Such a ministry is not so much programmed as it is spontaneous; it manifests itself in loving families and warm, vibrant communities of believers. It is the church becoming a place where

—**we experience** with fellow human beings the same acceptance, forgiveness, healing and love that Jesus offers.

—**the discouraged** and lonely can find friendship and warmth.

—**the grieving** widowed can find encouragement and hope.

—**singles** find a family that includes them and gives them reasons for living.

—**the handicapped** find out it really doesn't matter; where their worth in the eyes of God is experienced in expressions of caring love.

—**one can grow old** without loss of a sense of being needed.

—**a haven** is found from prejudice and put-downs.

—**children** are respected and cherished as a sacred trust by the whole congregation, lifting the parent's burdens and providing role models which live out what it means to be a Christian.

—**the distressed** can find empathy, and yet rest assured that Christian principles will be upheld because they are not arbitrary but meaningful parts of our lives<sup>3/4</sup>the essence of our values.

—**youth** can freely speak their minds and grapple with pressing issues, trusting they will be listened to and assured they can expect honest and open discussion, even self-disclosure from adults they can trust.

—**newlyweds and marrieds** find themselves enveloped in a fellowship that affirms their coupleness, a fellowship that forms a supportive network around them and creates a climate that helps marriages to develop and grow.

—**people refuse** to run away from difficult relationships but in a caring way confront one another in love.

—**the generations** come together to learn from each other, to share in the traditions that make us the family of God and to help ensure that the torch of values passes from one generation to the next.

—**people turn** from their isolation and total pursuit of material comfort to become involved in one another's lives.

—**one needs no credentials** to commend him/her, where strengths and weaknesses are taken together, where each one's gifts are affirmed and needed, and where being oneself is enough.

**Caring people are the key.** Such a church community places a high priority on people and relationships. While attempts to provide counseling, education and enrichment opportunities can be helpful tools which assist in bringing about a genuine experience of familyness, warm, loving, caring people who touch others' lives are the real key. Promising is that church who has a nucleus of such as these. Blessed indeed is the congregation where many like these are found.

Exciting are the possibilities when these people-loving church members have the ability to lead in the kinds of family ministry activities mentioned earlier. Under their ministry, people in whose hearts a desire has been born to be more caring, and to improve family relationships will be able to receive not only information and skills for relational growth, but experience the modeling and personal attention so necessary to bring about behavioral change.

As a congregation experiences the moving of God's spirit through Christ-centered family ministry

activities and feels the heartbeat of familyness within itself, family ministry comes full circle. Families carry the warmth and inspiration to their own homes. There, with the blessing of God, these can become miniature replicas of the vibrant, loving, caring church community of which they are a part and to which, at each meeting, they will bring such a spirit of familyness back again.