

THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF FAMILIES

VARIED FAMILY SITUATIONS

Family ministry seeks to reach every kind of household. The stereotype of the "ideal" family and household—father, mother, children together—is no longer typical. In the United States, for instance, such families now comprise only about one-third of all households. Two out of every five of U.S. households are now headed by single parents. The death of a parent is responsible for some of these homes, divorce and marital separation for many more. Divorce has necessitated custodial arrangements for children. A wide variety of custodial situations exist. Joint custody, in which divorced parents share equal time with their children, is becoming increasingly popular. The single parent who has never married represents another less prominent family style which is gaining in numbers.

As more and more widowed and divorced parents remarry, stepfamilies, with their own unique needs and challenges, increase. Singles, while not considered "family" by dictionary definition, nevertheless have family life needs. These too must be considered.

Family ministry in its widest context is not addressed to any one segment of the church; it includes everyone, for it speaks to universal needs. In a real sense, the church itself constitutes a family. Because of this, family life ministry will be alert to special needs in the whole congregation that require consideration as well.

SEASONS IN FAMILY LIVING

Family ministry must be aware not only of the many and varied forms which the family takes, but also of the fact that people and families pass through various phases in their lives, such as childhood, adolescence, pre-marital, neo-marital, mid- life, retirement, etc. The needs of families will vary, and ministry to families will change according to the particular stage or "season" through which the family is passing.

Anticipatory ministry. Much study is currently being given to these phases of life and the periodic change points that individuals and families encounter throughout their lifetimes. Students of these life-cycle stages have identified some built-in, predictable stresses and crises that can and often do occur. Helping a person anticipate and prepare for these potential stresses is what we call "anticipatory ministry." When we alert people to upcoming, new experiences in their lives, we greatly increase the likelihood that they will make a successful transition.

BALANCING IDEALS AND LIMITATIONS

Ideally, Adventist families should be happy, well-regulated and spiritually strong, with capabilities for coping with the events of life. While we all have much to learn, some families have had more opportunity for growth than others. It is important to remember that it is easy to be too idealistic in our presentations. People already carrying enormous burdens of anxiety and guilt regarding their homelife may become more discouraged. While we have certain goals in mind toward which we wish our families to progress, we must work with great care, recognizing the importance of unconditional acceptance as a prelude to growth. We must, in other words, grapple with the family as it is as well as how it might be.

Family can be a place of great happiness; it can also be the scene of terrible hurt. Realistic family life ministry must deal with the pain of disappointment, crisis and failure. It must address the complicated struggles that are part of life, while avoiding idealistic solutions that create guilt rather than stimulate growth. The Saviour must ever be lifted up as the One who loves people, loves families; He died to redeem them and lives to minister in their behalf. "Satan's work is to

discourage the soul. Christ's work is to inspire the heart with faith and hope." E. G. White, "Mind, Character and Personality, vol. 1, p. 32.

A BROAD SPECTRUM OF NEEDS

The following list catalogs the broad issues that typically concern families and family members:

General Interests

- Self-concept
- Emotions
- Communication
- Conflict resolution
- Decision-making
- Equality
- Sexuality
- Finances
- Mission of the home
- Love
- Forgiveness
- Reconciliation
- Family worship
- Family council
- Recreation
- Stress
- Impact of T.V. and media
- Understanding temperament
- Abuse

Marriage

- Preparation for marriage
- Neo-marital experience
- Roles
- Headship
- Mutual submission
- In-law relationships
- Marriage enrichment
- Divorce and remarriage

Parenting

- Family planning
- Prenatal development and care
- Child development and training
- Adolescent development and behavior
- Parent-child relationships
- Parent-teen relationships
- Working mothers
- Youth and drugs
- Special needs of the one-parent family

Life and relationships in Adulthood

- Friendships
- Dating
- Selecting a life partner
- Never-married singleness
- Single again--divorce recovery

- Spiritually single (religious division in marriage)
- Coping with the "empty nest"(when children are gone)
- Mid-life concerns and crises
- Adjusting to aging parents
- Preparation for retirement
- Grandparenting
- Handling grief, death, dying and other crises
- Adjusting to decreasing physical strength and health

Each item, of course, could be subdivided many times. This general summary of family life needs can become the basis for specific surveys of congregational and community needs and can provide a framework for comprehensive family ministry.