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Health, Wholeness and the Family: Some Theological Implications

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Introduction

The issues raised in this paper reflect the tension between the importance of affirming, valuing, preserving, and nurturing the traditional nuclear family, while at the same time moving toward developing a theology of the family which is inclusive of alternative forms the family may take in our society. Such inclusiveness is related to developing policies and pastoral practices, including education and worship, which recognize that both health and brokenness can occur in both traditional nuclear families and in alternative forms of the family. Such a theology must recognize that the grace, forgiveness, reconciliation and redemption that are central to the Christian faith are offered to individuals and families regardless of the form the family takes. It recognizes that the potential for health and wholeness resides in God's grace as this grace is proclaimed and lived in community, and that movement toward health and wholeness occurs when individuals and families, of whatever form, are invited into and accepted as part of God's redemptive community. It recognizes, as well, that a theology or pastoral practice which overtly or covertly excludes, marginalizes, stigmatizes or stereotypes certain groups does not contribute toward health and wholeness in either individuals or families. Golding, for example, makes this same point in relation to women in abusive relationships. She writes:

> The good news is that the church does have a doctrinal tradition within which confession, repentance, forgiveness and genuine reconciliation are normative. Often in the past, such doctrines have been misused to reinforce the oppression of women in family life. The

> suffering and psychic damage which we now know results from violence in the family must be seen as a call to the church to respond with new ways of looking at marriage and family. This amounts to a call to conversion. It is supported in church tradition by the experience of grace that gives hope and empowerment.[1]

Faith resources which may contribute to health and wholeness—including liturgy, word and sacraments, education, and pastoral care—are most effectively offered as expressions of God's grace and compassion in faith communities that are shaped by a theology that is nonjudgementally inclusive of all individuals and types of families.

The Family

The Christian church affirms the essential truth of the Genesis stories that God is a creator God and that, after each act of creation, God saw that "it was good". The church further affirms that God created them male and female, and blessed them, saying "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth..." (Genesis 1:27). And it recognizes that, although we fall short of perfection, we are loved by God, sustained by God's presence, and recipients of God's grace.

The church affirms the importance of marriage as a life-long commitment in the familiar words, "I take you, ——, to be my *wife/husband* from this day forward, to join with you and share all that is to come, and I promise to be faithful to you until death parts us."[2] And, the church affirms procreation within marriage as a creative act.

It is important to affirm that the family is foundational to society. There are, however, at least two realities which have theological and pastoral implications for the church and for issues of health and wholeness in relation to the family. First, while families may encourage the creativity, health and well-being of family members, not all families provide a healthy, nurturing environment for their members. Factors like abuse, violence, lack of intimacy, inability to deal with conflict, inability to provide nurture or allow individuation, or inability to adapt and change will affect the well-being of marriages and the ability of families to function in ways that promote health and wholeness through the life cycle.[3] Second, while it is important for the church to affirm values of the traditional family, we are faced with the reality that there are a variety

of different forms of the family, including single-parent families as the result of divorce or death, single-parent families of unmarried women, remarried families where at least one partner brings children from a former marriage into the new relationship, couples living common law, couples who decide not to have children, and gay families with children from a prior marriage of one of the partners. Each family type presents unique opportunities and challenges for ministry.

Health, Wholeness, and the Family

The tasks assigned to the family are enormous and challenging. The family is a primary context within which personality is formed and nurtured. In the procreative act the family is given responsibility for maintaining the future of human generations. It is the bearer and "teacher" of attitudes, values and beliefs, and ways of being and behaving. It also is one of the primary groups for nurture and care of adults, and frequently the caretaker for the elderly. Yet as the family sociologist Reuben Hill wrote:

> Compared with other associations in the society, the average family is badly handicapped organizationally. Its age composition is heavily weighted with dependents, and it cannot freely reject its weak members and recruit more competent teammates. Its members receive an unearned acceptance: there is no price for belonging. Because of its unusual age composition and its uncertain sex composition, it is intrinsically a puny work group and an awkward decision-making group. This group is not ideally manned to withstand stress, yet society has assigned to it the heaviest of responsibilities; the socialization and orientation of the young, and the meeting of the major emotional needs of all citizens, young and old.[4]

The degree of health and wholeness within families is related, in part, to the family's ability to: (1) provide for the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of family members; (2) communicate effectively; (3) engage in constructive problem solving and conflict resolution; (4) provide support, security, and encouragement; (5) initiate and maintain growth producing relationships and experiences within and without the family; (6) maintain and create constructive and responsible community relationships; (7) grow with and through children; (8) practice appropriate self-help and accept help when appropriate; (9) perform family roles flexibly; (10) demonstrate

mutual respect for the individuality of family members: (11) allow for the individuation of family members; (12) provide stability over time while at the same time allowing for and encouraging adaptation and change; (13) use crisis, or seemingly injurious experience, as a means of growth; and (14) foster a concern for family unity, loyalty, and cooperation, while at the same time being open to other social systems—such as church, school, and work—which have an impact on family members and the family as a unit.[5] Kegan claims that the healthy family is one in which the process of individuation is allowed to occur not just once but throughout the individual and family life cycle, with the family having the capacity to adapt and change as individuals adapt and change.[6]

Obviously families vary greatly in their ability to provide the kind of environment which contributes to health and wholeness for both individuals and the family unit throughout the life cycle.[7] One only has to listen to the comments of individuals in families to recognize the truth that providing such a nurturing environment is not always an easy task. Consider, for example, these comments:[8]

> My parents each wanted to be an individual but they didn't know how to do that in the marriage. So they got divorced. It wasn't fair. I got caught in it.—Teenage girl.
>
> I came from a good home. Everybody in my family is successful. So am I. My father could have been really great, but his drinking got in the way. I live under the shadow of his success and his drinking. I'm just beginning to realize what it means to me to be an adult child of an alcoholic.— Professional.
>
> My husband used to beat me. Everybody thought he was so gentle. But home was hell. I got out when he started beating the kids. No one would believe me when I told them he was violent. They all thought I was crazy.—Divorced woman.
>
> My parents never fought. They never showed much closeness either and my father was gone most of the time. I think I avoid closeness sometimes.—35 year-old male.
>
> My father molested me when I was 12. I'm angry. I also feel guilty. Where was my mother when this was going on?—50 year-old woman.

Changes in the Family

The concept of the family as a nuclear unit remaining intact through the family life cycle is being challenged by individuals

and organizations serving the family as they re-work traditional definitions of the family. After examining demographic changes in the Canadian family over several decades, Ramu concluded that the data "point clearly to significant shifts in various aspects of marriage and the family and indicate fundamental changes in the structure of the ideal family in Canada."[9] For example, according to Statistics Canada the divorce rate increased in every province except Alberta between 1986 and 1987.[10] The changes were:

Number of Divorces

	1986	1987	Percentage
Newfoundland	610	1,002	+64.3%
Prince Edward Island	191	246	+28.8%
Nova Scotia	2,550	2,640	+3.5%
New Brunswick	1,700	1,952	+14.8%
Quebec	18,399	19,315	+5.0%
Ontario	28,653	38,233	+33.4%
Manitoba	2,917	3,771	+29.3%
Saskatchewan	2,395	2,751	+14.0%
Alberta	9,386	9,170	-2.3%
British Columbia	11,176	11,697	+4.7%
Yukon and Northwest Territories	183	218	+19.1%

The divorce rate fluctuated again, however, between 1987 and 1988. While Statistics Canada reported a 16.4 percent increase in the number of divorces in Canada between 1986 and 1987 (from 78,160 in 1986 to 90,985 in 1987), they reported a decrease of 12.2 percent in the number of divorces in Canada between 1987 and 1988 (from 90,985 in 1987 to 79,872 in 1988).[11] This decrease may be due, in part, to economic recession.[12] Whatever the causes, however, this shift does not

mean that marriages or families are becoming more healthy. In fact, economic, occupational, and environmental stress place added demands on families, many of which already have difficulty coping as a family unit.[13]

While the percentage of husband-wife families in Canada increased from 4,154,381 in 1966 to 5,881,335 in 1986, the percentage of single-parent families increased from 371,885 (8.2 percent of all families) in 1966 to 853,645 (12.7 percent of all families) in 1986.[14] In 1931 nearly three out of four single-parent families were headed by a widowed parent. Fifty years later, as the number of divorced single-parent families increased, only a third of single-parent families were headed by a widowed parent. Similarly, births to unmarried women increased from 31,177 in 1971 to 59,604 in 1985, despite the increased number of therapeutic abortions.[15] Further, it can no longer be assumed that women will give up a career to stay at home to raise a family. Numerous writers have discussed issues women may face which are related to the tension between identity, career and family.[16]

The conclusion that the contemporary family in Canada is in a state of flux seems obvious. The Christian church generally has affirmed the more traditional forms of marriage and family. Alternative forms of marriage and family have not always received the support from faith organizations in a way which communicate inclusion in the faith community, an inclusion which has implications for health and wholeness. As one woman said:

> When I got divorced I kept going to my pastor and friends in the congregation to get support and talk to them about the pain I was experiencing. They avoided the topic and me. I suppose it scared them and they didn't know what to do with me.

Theological Implications

We need a theology of the family that, while biblically based and valuing the traditional forms of the family, recognizes the diverse forms families may take. This theology should not only offer support for the more traditional family, but should also offer inclusion, grace, redemption and affirmation to families which are struggling with the failure or lack of more traditional family structures. If we are concerned with health and

wholeness, it is important that these families are not further marginalized. Indeed, such marginalization is antithetical to developing programs and communities which foster health and wholeness.

It is essential that a theology of the family be grounded in a theology of community. If we believe in grace, forgiveness and reconciliation, then we as a community of faith must have a theology that makes grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation living realities to families regardless of the form the family may assume. If our theology does not proclaim and nurture such inclusiveness, our proclamation is in danger of becoming empty words which can contribute to obscuring people's experience of God's grace and healing.

An adequate theology of the family must affirm the importance of stability and continuity in the family while recognizing that adaptation and change are essential to growth, health, and wholeness. The church needs to recognize, as well, that there may be stability in alternative forms of the family and that it is its responsibility as well as the responsibility of pastor and congregation, to encourage and nurture this stability.

Finally, a theology of the family needs to be aware of the contemporary forms of brokenness, including separation and divorce, but also brokenness caused by abuse and violence. In this acknowledgement such a theology needs to recognize that individuals, usually women, must not be theologically, emotionally, physically, or spiritually "locked" into situations which are abusive, violent or which negate personhood, growth, health, and wholeness. Families disrupted by such brokenness need to hear the healing word of the Gospel in the context of and as part of a faith community that welcomes them into the community as fully included participants.[17]

Implications for the Church

Numerous implications could be generated from the above comments. However, only four areas are identified, with the hope that readers will identify other issues which are relevant to faith communities as these communities explore issues of health and wholeness within the family.

(1) A central question is: How do we assist families in moving through the normative transitions of the life cycle?[18] In

addition to pastoral care, we need to develop and effectively use programs, rituals, and support systems that nurture families through life transitions. Within Christianity there is a rich resource of liturgical events that mark normative life transitions, such as birth, confirmation, marriage and death.[19] Possibly we need to consider liturgical events to mark other transitions, such as separation and divorce. But how do we do this without devaluing the church's support and affirmation of the traditional nuclear family? Yet, how we respond when the traditional family disintegrates through divorce has implications for our ability to respond constructively and appropriately to individuals and families as they struggle with brokenness while at the same time struggling with how to form a new family which will nurture its members.

(2) We need to develop resources for family life education that consider the reality of dysfunctional families, the stress of normative changes on the reasonably healthy nuclear family, and stresses experienced by individuals in alternative forms of the family.[20] Since many of the church's resources appear to focus on the more traditional nuclear family, we must ask what knowledge and resources are needed to respond pastorally to other forms the family may assume, including stepfamilies, single-parent families as a result of divorce, single-parent families where there has never been marriage, families in common-law relationships, and couples who consciously decide not to have children.

(3) We need to confront individual, organizational, and religious attitudes which stereotype, marginalize, stigmatize or judge any form of the family other than the more traditional nuclear family. A reconsideration of a theology of the family is an important part of this process.

(4) Finally, it is relevant to consider the church's role in the formation of social policy which affects the family. Obviously families may be positively or negatively affected by policies of economic, political, social, or health institutions. For example, changes in welfare policies in Saskatchewan reduced the real value of benefits to families with dependent children by 28 percent between 1981 and 1988, with the result that basic needs were not being met.[21] The church's concern for health, wholeness and the family must include an advocacy role for families at all socioeconomic levels.

Conclusion

The church has the potential to be a positive resource for health and wholeness for families. This potential will be increasingly actualized to the extent that the church is able to build its pastoral practices, education, worship, and fellowship upon a theology of the family that, while biblically rooted and affirming the traditional form of the family, also is affirming of and inclusive of alternative forms of the family. Within this context the church has the potential to contribute to the nurture of individuals and families toward health and wholeness through the proclamation in theology and practice of God's grace. Part of this process must include the church claiming the responsibility to speak to economic, social, political, and health institutions whose policies may have direct positive or negative effects on families.

Notes

1 Gail Golding, *Hands to End Violence Against Women* (Toronto: Women's Inter-Church Council of Canada, 1988) vii. Also see: Lenore Walker, *The Battered Woman* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1979) 164.

2 "Marriage," *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978) 203.

3 For example, see: W. Robert Beavers, *Successful Marriage* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1985); W. Robert Beavers and Robert Hampson, *Successful Families: Assessment and Intervention* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1990); Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick (eds.), *The Changing Family Life Cycle*, second edition (New York: Gardner Press, 1988); Golding, *Hands to End Violence*; Virginia Satir, *The New Peoplemaking* (Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books, Inc., 1988).

4 Reuben Hill, "Generic Features of Families Under Stress," in Howard Parad (ed.), *Crisis Intervention: Selected Readings* (New York: Family Service Association of America, 1965) 33–34.

5 Adapted from: Beavers and Hampson, *Successful Families*; Nathan Epstein, Duane Bishop and Lawrence Baldwin, "The McMaster Model of Family Functioning," in Froma Walsh (ed.), *Normal Family Processes* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1986); and H.A. Otto, "The Production of Criteria for Assessing Family Strengths," *Family Process*, 1963.

6 Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

7 For example, see: Beavers and Hampson, *Successful Families*; Carter and McGoldrick, *The Changing Family*; and Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985).

8 Sufficient change has been made to protect anonymity of sources without changing the substance of the quotes.

9 G.N. Ramu (ed.), *Marriage and Family in Canada Today* (Scarborough, ON: Prentice-Hall Canada, Inc.) 98.

10 Statistics Canada, "Divorces 1987–1988," *Health Reports*, Supplement No. 17, Volume 2:1, 1990, 2–9.

11 Adjusted figures, Statistics Canada, *Health Reports*, Supplement No. 17, ibid. 2–4.

12 Saskatoon *Star Phoenix*, "Recession May Cut High Divorce Rate," Saturday, November 17, 1990, C7.

13 See articles in Hamilton McCubbin and Charles Figley (eds.), *Stress and the Family, Vol. I: Coping With Normative Transitions* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, Publishers, 1983).

14 Ramu, *Marriage and Family*, 90.

15 Ibid. 90–92.

16 For example: Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse, *Identity* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984); Monica McGoldrick, "Women Through the Family Life Cycle," in Monica McGoldrick, Carol Anderson and Froma Walsh, *Women in Families: A Framework for Family Therapy* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1989); Ramona Mercer, Elizabeth Nichols and Glen Doyle, *Transitions in a Woman's Life* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1989); Maggie Scarf, *Unfinished Business: Pressure Points in the Lives of Women* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1980); and Gail Sheehy, *Pathfinders* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981).

17 For example, see: Walker, *The Battered Woman*, 164. Walker writes: "... a new focus seems to have emerged within the religious community. Churches are beginning to establish safe houses to assist battered women. How they will resolve the conflict between the religious value of keeping the family together and the need to separate the family when the relationship is violent will be interesting to see. The beginning is there, and that is encouraging. I believe that religions should protect individual souls rather than the collective family; and as long as it is detrimental for the woman and her children to remain in a violent relationship, I feel confident that church groups will take measures to assist her in rearing her family as a single parent, much the way they have responded to women who have become widows."

18 See: Herbert Anderson, *The Family and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); Charles Figley and Hamilton McCubbin (eds.), *Stress and the Family, Vol. II: Coping with Catastrophe* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, Publishers, 1983); McCubbin and Figley, *Stress and the Family, Vol. I*; and Walsh, *Normal Family Processes*.

19 For example, see: Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); and William Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

20 For example, see: Elizabeth Einstein and Linda Albert, *Strengthening your Stepfamily* (American Guidance Service, 1986); and Clifford Sager, Hollis Brown, Helen Crohn, Tamara Engel, Evelyn Rodstein and Libby Walker, *Treating the Remarried Family* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, Publishers, 1983).

21 James M. Pitsula and Ken Rasmussen, *Privatizing a Province* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1990) 210.