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# THE CHANGING FAMILY IN TODAY'S WORLD

*Delores Friesen and Al Dueck*

Most of today's grandparents (Mennonite Brethren) raised their families in villages that resembled churches, whether Gnadental in southern Manitoba or Corn, Oklahoma. Each began as a village of a few families, a church and a school. As agricultural people, they were sustained by the land and the labours of the whole family. Marriage was not designed for personal fulfillment but to bear children and fulfill obligations. Divorce was unthinkable.

Our parents moved with their families to towns. Here it was assumed that fathers worked outside the home in factories, businesses or schools. Mothers cared for the children inside the home. Church was now what one goes go to. And divorce was the way "other" families solved their problems.

My generation lives in the city. Our families are often dual career. We talk about the importance of friendship and companionship in marriage. We feel the freedom not to have children and to select a church that meets our personal preference. Over half of our marriages will end in divorce.

It seems hackneyed by now to state

*"Will the church respond with confusion, embarrassment...?"*

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that there are profound social changes in the past century which have molded and shaped the contemporary family (Skolnick and Skolnick, 1989). Both the difficulties and the resources of the contemporary family are a consequence of these changes. A list illustrative of changes follows.

- The decline of infant mortality means one doesn't have to have six children so four will survive.
- The fact that people live longer means more time together and more adjustment after the children leave.
- The use of birth control allows for more choice in family and career planning.
- The spread of mass education increases employment opportunities for men and women.
- Women have surged into the work place and so increased family income.
- Birth rates have declined leaving more time for activities other than parenting.
- The women's movement has affected both the way men and women think and act towards one another.
- Social and sexual rules continue to be relaxed so that unmarried couples live together and unmarried mothers raise children.
- Abortion is legal but under attack.
- Remaining single and childless is increasingly acceptable.
- Divorce rates have skyrocketed and then leveled off; now we begin to assess the after-effects.

These are changes that reflect a changing culture. Most of the changes that have shaped the structure of our family life are less a result of Christian conviction than the result of societal shifts. The church will not be able to understand or respond to these families unless it reflects on the social changes that have occurred in this century. The family in times past was embedded in a community, not a private place of refuge from the world of work. Research has demonstrated that between 1957 and 1976 a major psychological revolution had taken place in American society such that in the past fulfillment meant satisfactory performance of traditional roles of spouse and provider while 20 years later fulfillment meant finding intimacy, meaning and self-definition. There are fewer functions (education, entertainment, religious socialization, etc.) served by the family than in time past and more of the

functions are relegated to institutions outside of the family. What is left is a need for companionship without the structures which mediate family closeness.

Furthermore, for Mennonite Brethren the change from the Ukraine to North America has had significant impact on the structure of our families. Our grandparents grew up in a culture which accepted Czar Nicholas II as ruler and their family life reflected that version of the state, a small autocracy. There were clear parallels between socio-political ideals and family structure. The family hierarchy was patterned after social and political hierarchy. But our generation grew up in a Western democracy. Giving unilateral commands, however kindly, is simply not considered appropriate. In a democratic family greater emphasis is placed on respect for the other member's ability to make decisions.

While the past shapes us, what will be the constellation of the family in the 21st century? What will be the context, the environment of the family then? What will be the strengths of the different family constellations? How will the church relate to the changing family? Will the church respond with confusion, embarrassment, tolerance, acceptance or distance?

This article will reflect on four family constellations. We will not examine the family portrayed in "Little House on the Prairie." It is doubtful that it was ever that idyllic. Nor will we look at the traditional family where father worked in the market-place and mother worked at home raising the children. That family is rapidly disappearing. Only 13% of North American families fall into this category. Rather, our four constellations are based on rough estimates of these types of households in North American society:

- (a) the two-earner family 15-20%
- (b) the step family of remarriage 10%
- (c) the single parent family 15%
- (d) the empty nest couple 20%

### *Dual Career*

This family seems familiar, like the traditional family with two parents and two children. But what is unique about these two parents is they both have careers. In 1985, 54% of all American women over the age of 16 were working. Of these 56% were married (Cox, 1987).

Why the emergence of this family constellation? 1) Inflationary pressure and rising expectations of living standards have combined to bring many women to work. 2) It is less expensive to be working than to be staying home, given the fact that real wages have increased dramatically. 3) Declining birthrates contribute to women working more. 4) A college education has increased the number of jobs available to women. 5) Attitudes have changed. In 1930 only 18% of surveyed women believed that married women should take a full-time job outside the family whereas in 1970 it was 73% (Cox, 1987).

### *The Structure of the Dual Career Family*

These parents probably met in college, married after graduation and then for the next several years traded off working and going to graduate school. Both are now professionals in high status, high paying positions. They are home owners and frequently vacation abroad.

This family sees itself as very different from its more traditional parents. Two career families provide an increased measure of autonomy for each of the individuals. The practice of combining two careers has radically altered the balance of power. Negotiation, consultation, and friendship are the norm now. No longer is the woman's identity derived from that of the male. The changes in this family may not have come because the wife is an ardent feminist. As a college student she may have become interested in a particular field and wanted to pursue a career. The structure of the family then followed the negotiation of two careers in marriage rather than a particular ideology (Herz, 1989). Sometimes the relationship between the two marriage partners seems closer to a business partnership where a major issue is fairness. This is an active family. Their calendar is full of engagements. As a result family activities and time schedules are negotiated and that consumes considerable energy.

### *Resources*

This family has incredible resources: college and graduate education, high paying jobs and broad social networks of friends. They tend to come from families that are already educated and have a middle to upper-middle class lifestyle. This kind of family is, however, dependent on a high level of

income. A labor force which they can hire enables them to save time.

The dual career family may be active in a congregation but scheduling is a problem. If its members are involved they bring a sense of competence and confidence to the tasks they perform in church. However, the couple may have consciously selected a particular congregation because they felt it would meet their family needs. They would choose another congregation if they felt their needs would be better met. This couple often feels a large gap between their professional lives and the life of the church community and are not sure what to do about it. In all probability this couple will not have regular family devotions the way their parents did but will occasionally read the devotional literature and share their spiritual concerns.

#### *What are its Stress Points?*

This is a family constantly under stress. Whether to have children and how to care for them are among the most difficult issues that these families face. Career women may postpone childbearing until they are promoted to higher ranks. Having children may mean promotions will be denied. At the same time the biological clock is ticking; when is the best time to have a child? These couples also worry that their children in day care centers are not receiving the kind of nurture they deserve. Sometimes this family has difficulty finding outside labor to perform household and child-care chores. Occupationally, they experience greater difficulty finding careers for both partners in the marriage in the same location. When they find one they must adapt to competing employer demands.

This family prides itself on being more egalitarian. Women continue, however, in dual career marriages to assume responsibility for child-rearing while these fathers seldom talk about the importance of fathering. The research (Cox, 1987) indicates that 89% of the married men and women agree that household cleaning should be shared by both partners when both work. In actuality 40% of the full-time employed wives and only 8% of the husbands reported doing most of the housework. Not surprisingly, these working mothers report not having enough time for themselves.

In spite of all the resources the family possess, there is fragility:

- a) This family has virtually no models to guide them in creating marital relationships.
- b) The notions of family self-sufficiency and autonomy are myths with the dual career couples. They must purchase individual and institutional services in order to fulfill traditional family functions. "Dual career couples trade time for money, and, instead of bartering their own labor with friends and relatives as lower-class families do, ... they buy domestic services from strangers." (Herz, 1989, 296)
- c) The lifestyle of this couple has been inflated to the point where both incomes are necessary to maintain their way of life. They can pursue a lifestyle available only to the wealthy. The dual career family is a social and economic elite within a capitalist society.
- d) Increased personal fulfillment has meant sometimes that there is not as strong a commitment to home life and traditional marital relationships.

In all probability this type of family will not only survive but increase in the 21st century. It will bring with it its strengths and weaknesses, its needs and gifts.

### *Step Families*

A stepfamily is defined as a remarried family with a child under 18 years of age who is the biological child of one of the parents and was born before the remarriage occurred. The step family, also called the "blended" or "reconstituted" family, is different from the "natural" family. For one thing, it has a larger supporting cast, including former spouses, former in-laws, and absent parents, as well as assorted aunts, uncles and cousins on both sides. Furthermore, it may be "contaminated with anger, guilt, jealousy, value conflicts, misperceptions, and fear" (Einstein, 1986). It is, in short, burdened by much baggage not carried by an "original" family.

Stepfamilies must deal with stress that arises from losses (as a result of death or divorce), which can make both children and adults afraid to trust and to love. A welter of family histories, complicate present relationships. For example, previously established bonds or loyalty to an absent adult may complicate new bonding.

### *Statistics: Present and Projected*

So, how many families are there in this group? According to a recent issue of *Newsweek Magazine*, which featured the "Family in the 21st Century," about one-third of all children born in the 1980's may live with a step-parent before they are eighteen. According to the latest available census figures, there were close to seven million children living in stepfamilies in 1985. That's an increase of 11.6% in just five years.

In the early 1900's death was the major cause of marital dissolution. Today a typical couple has only a small probability of being separated by death during their first 15 years of marriage but perhaps 10 times as high a probability of being separated by divorce (Becker & Landes, 1977). Approximately 4/5 of those who divorce will remarry, and half of those who remarry will marry previously divorced persons (Messinger, et al, 1977). Prosen and Farmer (1982) reported that every year one-half million adults become stepparents and that one out of every six American children under 18 is a stepchild. They also predicted that by 1990 the stepfamily could well be the norm. Research conducted by Glick (1989) shows that 17.4% of married-couple families with young children in 1987 were stepfamilies, but he projects that 40% may be expected to become stepfamilies before their youngest child becomes 18 years old.

### *Questions and Issues Often Faced*

Couples planning on remarriage do not spend much time talking together about such things as previous marriages, finances, doubts about the relationship, etc. Many of them live together before remarriage because they think that is the best way to discover whether the marriage will work. In the study by Ganong and Coleman (1987) very few persons contacted professionals before entering remarriage.

Those who did go to a pastor said that the pastor did not bring up specific issues that would be relevant to remarriage or stepfamilies. That is a significant omission. Only about 2% of the men and 8% of the women attended a support group. This particular study indicates that the couples who remarry are either overly optimistic or naive (Ganong and Coleman, 1989). Few potentially important issues were discussed prior to marriage. People often enter the new relationship with a lot

of optimism. They expect, for example, their new partner to have a good relationship with their children. Only 7 to 9% thought that the stepparent/child relationship might be bad. However, about 30% considered and discussed the possibility of divorce.

For those who did seek help, much of the counseling received was oriented toward solving divorce-related problems rather than focusing on remarriage and stepfamily issues. Stepchildren and finances were the two concerns most often mentioned. There tends to be an assumption that unless there is overt conflict prior to remarriage, then nothing needs to be done.

### *Problems and Strengths*

Disagreements over stepchildren appear to be a frequent problem, as do relationships with former spouse(s). These two items alone may create considerably more conflict than in a nuclear family. The lack of societal guidelines for stepfamily roles is confusing at times, and there may be certain legal problems, for example, the rights of stepparents to sign for medical care for stepchildren and access to children following a subsequent divorce. Economic reintegration can be complicated, and commitment and cohesiveness may decrease. Difficulties in merging two different lifestyles and blurred boundaries can also create problems.

How do children experience living in a stepfamily? In Patricia Lutz's (1983) study of 103 teenagers between the ages of 12-18, eleven categories of stress were identified by the researcher: discipline, divided loyalty, biological parent elsewhere, member of two households, desire for natural parents to reunite, unrealistic expectations, social attitudes, compounded loss, family constellation, sexual issues, and pseudo-mutuality. Of all of these categories, the teenagers only noted two of them as stressful: discipline and divided loyalty. Feeling caught in the middle between the two natural parents, and liking a stepparent more than one's natural parent of the same sex were the highest stressors. Interestingly, none of the other items were felt to be stressful. It appears that once the initial adjustment is made (this usually takes about two years), living in a stepfamily may not be that difficult for teens.

There are also some significant strengths of stepfamilies. One of these is the availability of more adults, who may

provide stability and new experiences for the children. The biological parents may be happier as a result of the remarriage, making life more pleasant for the children. A happy remarriage presents to children a positive model of adult intimacy and marriage. They learn that love is not just automatic; it takes time to grow and develop. The stepfamily may help individuals to have a more realistic view of marriage. There may also be some long-term advantages; some people feel that stepchildren potentially become more adaptable and are able to deal more flexibly with life as adults.

### *An Opportunity for the Church*

The kind of integration that is called for in a remarriage creates many opportunities for the church to step in and help with education, ministry and support. The church needs to broaden its models of family relationships in the church, so that all experience greater openness. A lot of the remarriage concerns are not identified, either by the couple entering it, or by the church, or by those who may be parenting these persons who are remarrying. So it seems this is an opportunity for the church to enter much more fully, both in premarital sessions and in providing individual and group support and counsel.

### *Single Parent Family*

The single parent family is a contrast to the other family constellations. This is the family with a single parent. Most single parents do not live the life of "Kramer vs. Kramer".

In contrast to the descriptions of the previous family structures, we will begin with a profile of Sharon, a 38 year-old single parent with two children: Jeryl (12) and Kirk (14). She divorced her husband Frank, after 15 years of marriage. Jeryl reported that her father had touched her inappropriately over a long period of time and had physically forced himself upon her on numerous occasions. When he continued to deny it publicly and at the same time became physically abusive to Sharon in private, Sharon filed for divorce.

Sharon holds down a full-time job that brings in \$14,000 per year, \$1,000 per month after taxes. She works as a clerk in a shopping center. Her monthly rent is \$425. Frank does not provide her with child support and is currently earning

§38,000 per year. While Frank had finished some years of college and begun a career, Sharon had raised the family. She completed a year of college before marriage and now has no marketable skills.

Both children attend school but carry the emotional scars of abuse and their difficult divorce. Jeryl is withdrawn and finds it hard to make friends. Kirk has been a problem in school. He is not doing well academically and has been unruly in class. Shortly after the divorce, Sharon moved from their modest home into a rather cramped apartment since house payments were beyond her means. The children changed school systems, and thus left behind old friends and teachers.

Sharon has sole custody of the children but the father has visiting rights every other weekend. Jeryl refuses to see her father. Since Frank sees Kirk only occasionally he plans special events. He places no restrictions on Kirk and so Sharon has considerable difficulty setting limits when he returns.

When Sharon first approached her pastor regarding the sexual abuse of Jeryl, she found him sympathetic and understanding. He encouraged her to confront Frank with the truth. He did not feel it was his responsibility to notify the authorities. When she indicated that she was filing divorce papers, her pastor encouraged her to continue in the relationship. Reluctantly, she agreed to return. When Frank became physically abusive, she proceeded with the divorce without her pastor's support. Sharon has felt like a second class citizen in the congregation. There have been some individuals who have reached out to her in friendship. She has received no financial assistance.

### *Single Parent Stresses*

This home has multiple stressors. 1) The most frequently voiced complaint of the single parent is the enormous emotional and physical drain that single parenthood imposes. The work role seems to absorb most of the single parent's energy and there is little left for homemaking and parenting (Schlesinger, 1979). 2) Single mothers become stricter and fathers more lenient in relationship to the children after the divorce which creates adjustment problems for the children (Krantz, 1989). The children need additional discipline and support. A single parent lacks the validation and parental authority which tends to exist in two-adult homes. 3) The single parent

may experience feelings of guilt and confusion trying to answer the question, "Who is to blame?" Not knowing how to relate to the ex-spouse is a problem. 4) Women after many years of divorce indicate that loneliness and depression were their major problems. They also indicate that this was not offset by the gains of autonomy and competence.

### *The Church and the Single Parent*

Reed (1986) has suggested concrete ways in which the church can respond to the needs of single parents:

1. Re-define family to include single parents and their children.
2. Provide respite by taking the children for an evening or a weekend.
3. Arrange childcare for church events.
4. Plan support groups for single parents.
5. Give workshops on parenting, discipline, communications and finances.
6. Organize resources for sharing clothing, childcare etc.
7. Find appropriate role models for the children.
8. Reach out and respond in a friendly manner to single parents.
9. Understand and accept the single parent.

### *Empty Nest Families*

The empty nest is a term for the transitional phase of parenting following the last child's leaving the parents' home. For some it is a time of completion, fruition, and opportunity; for others it may be overwhelming loss, general disintegration, and may even lead to disruption through divorce. Today more marriages are ended by divorce, but couples who manage to stay together can look forward to twenty or more years of married life after the last child has left the home. For some it may be thirty to forty years. Four- and five-generation families may become quite common.

### *Structure and Demographics*

The duration between the last child's leaving home and the death of one spouse has increased since 1910 from a median of less than two to almost twenty years due to the younger age of the mother when the last child leaves, the small

family, greater employment of women, changing role definitions and greater life expectancy.

The 1981 Census Bureau report includes in middle age all those between 45 and 64. In 1979 in the U.S. there were 44 million, or 20% of the population in this group. By the year 2010, the number will almost double to 75 million, or approximately 25% of the population. Nine out of 10 live in families and the vast majority with spouses (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1981).

Financially the empty nest families are the group who are most well off. In 1986 the 45-54 age group had the highest mean household income, \$31,516. In 1984 62.9% of all women aged 45-54, and 41.7% of all women aged 55-64; were in the labor force (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1986). The kinds of work the women are doing is significant.

### *Problems and Strengths*

Launching children and moving on is the newest, the longest stage and in many ways the most problematic of all phases. This phase can lead to parental feelings of emptiness and depression. It has the greatest number of exits and entries of family members: deaths of parents, entry of in-laws and grandchildren. The move up to grandparent position may come at the same time one's own parent becomes dependent. Or this phase may be a liberating time, with more finances and more free time and potential for moving into new and unexplored areas — travel, hobbies, careers.

This phase necessitates a restructuring of the marital relationship once parenting responsibilities have ended. Marital adjustment is pivotal; new opportunities and growth for the relationship become possible. If solidification of the marriage has not taken place and reinvestment is not possible, the family often mobilizes itself to hold onto the last child, or the couple may divorce (Solomon, 1973).

When the nest does not empty when expected, or is refilled by fledgling adults returning home to live, there is sometimes tension as parents are forced to accommodate to the presence of their full-grown offspring (Lindsey, 1984). In 1984, 37% of 18- to 29-year olds in the U.S. were in households headed by their parents. About 7% of the men and 10% of the women were in school, and most had not yet married. This situation creates sources of possible psychological conflict.

Adult children living with parents may fall into immature, dependent habits, while the parents continue or resume the role of caregivers. Meanwhile the parents may be deprived of long-postponed freedom to renew their own intimacy, to explore personal interests, and to resolve marital issues that were preempted by parental responsibilities. Almost half of the still-married parents complained of strains on their marriages.

Eleven percent of divorces and annulments during 1982 were for individuals who had been married 20 years or more. These couples are more likely to see divorce as personal failure. They also experience less peer support. The prospects of new marital roles and relationships are drastically different for men and women, due to the combined effects of sex differences in the death rates and the double standard of aging. Men have a much larger pool of possible partners to choose from.

Some women who have a heavy investment in mothering experience problems at this time; but they are far outnumbered by those who find it liberating not to have children in the home any more. There is some evidence that this stage may be harder on fathers, who may react to their children's leaving with regrets that they did not spend more time with them when they were younger (Rubin, 1979). The empty nest also appears to be hard on parents whose children do not become independent when the parents expect them to and on women who have not prepared for the event by reorganizing their lives through work or other involvements (Harkins, 1978; Targ, 1979).

Many women may see this time as a release from the dual demands of family and career. But family needs do not cease as the children leave; the growing old-old population (85 and over) is presenting unprecedented dilemmas to the generation in the middle regarding caregiving.

Some of the other problems and needs of this group are: mutual help between the generations, reducing the strain of caregiving, lifelong parenting, and new creative ways to relate, which call for mutual giving and receiving. Elder abuse, including neglect, physical and psychological abuse, is a pressing social concern of the 1980s and 1990s. Estimates of victims of such abuse vary from 600,000 to 1 million, which involves about 4% of the older population.

There are strengths in the empty nest family as well. The years immediately after the children leave home may bring as much contentment as the honeymoon. The couple has more privacy, the freedom to be spontaneous, fewer money worries, and a new opportunity to get to know each other as individuals. The post-child rearing stage is often a time of consolidation, since the couple has experience, maturity, and financial solvency. The death of a parent may resolve an attachment and help offspring feel more responsible for self, and provide a never known sense of freedom. Sometimes the family rituals around engagements, marriage, birth, and death can give people an opportunity to work out previous unfinished business. People in middle age often learn a lot about themselves while helping elderly parents with their life reviews. Learning to deal with declining physical faculties, aging, etc., may help persons focus on internal, spiritual growth, and develop inner resources. The heightened awareness of one's own mortality may help set priorities and bring new appreciation for relationships. Change is essential and autonomy, responsibility, and connectedness are key issues. The development of adult relationships with adult children is often positive.

### *Marital Satisfaction*

Current literature on marital satisfaction suggests that it follows a U-shaped curve (Gruber-Baldini and Shaie, 1986). From a high point early in the marriage, it declines until late middle age and then rises again through the first part of late adulthood. The least happy time seems to be the period when most couples are heavily involved in child rearing and careers. Positive aspects of marriage, such as discussion, cooperation, and shared laughter, seem to follow the U-shaped pattern, while negative aspects, such as sarcasm, anger, and disagreement over important issues, decline from young adulthood through age 69.

What makes middle-aged couples split up? Middle-aged couples are separating for many of the same reasons as younger couples: their greater expectations, their growing willingness to end an unsatisfactory relationship, increased acceptance of divorce even for older couples, the less stringent divorce laws. Broderick says, "The chief cause of divorce is disappointment. If it was a long-term marriage, the disappointments are long-term" (1990, 9). But divorce can be especially

traumatic for middle-aged and older people. People over 50 suffer more distress. Indeed, divorce has become so prevalent that sociologists are now studying why some marriages do not break up. Reasons frequently given for lasting marriages are a positive attitude toward the spouse as a friend and as a person; belief in the commitment to, and sanctity of marriage; and agreement on aims and goals in life.

### *Opportunities for the Church*

There is a lack of role models for later-life family relations. Present role definitions and labels may not fit. The successful functioning of families in later life requires a flexibility in structure, roles, and responses to new developmental needs and challenges. Patterns that have been functional may no longer fit and new options must be explored. Previous losses and adaptive patterns also affect responses to later life challenges. The church needs to speak forthrightly to invisibility and ageism which are two major problems in society.

The church also needs to be aware that the marriage relationship may be more seasoned, stable, and more satisfactory than any other time. It might also be more conflictual, more tenuous, and more alienated. In the absence of children, the conjugal bond, whatever its nature, will gain prominence. By the same token, more reliance on it will make existing strains more obvious. The couple may adopt either more constricted or more expanded roles. If areas of conflict have been sealed off, there will be significantly less self-disclosure. To stay in emotionally safe areas there will be avoidance which means less intimacy, and may lead to emotional distance and physical distance. Both the amount of love expressed, and the number of problems they have declines — thus, there appears to be less happening between them, for good or for ill. Therefore, the empty nest stage seems to be a key time for marriage enrichment and involvement in ministry.

### *Conclusion*

By highlighting dual income, blended, single parent and empty nest families we have tried to show that in the family of God there is much diversity and that persons in each of these families are of inestimable worth. It behooves us to develop new models and find a new language for caring. An awareness

among leaders that the family has changed, is changing, and will change is critical. Change is not evil in and of itself. Yet the church often fears change. Why insist on labels and stereotypes that hurt other people? Why be so hesitant to change the language and the conception of the family? We would do well to work harder to affirm families that feel they are second-class citizens. The kinds of families we have described are families that need the church. They challenge the church with a new set of problems and strengths. They can motivate the church to develop new structures and new models of ministry. Let us mobilize ourselves, our gifts, and our congregations to nurture families that reflect the Reign of God.

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