Family, marriage, and ministry

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Of all the elements that Americans consider to be very important in life, none is deemed more important than family. Our most recent measure showed that 96% of all adults say family is very important to them. Perceptually, people view family as more important than friends, money, career, religion, or their health.

Another Barna Research Group survey learned that millions of people expect churches to provide assistance in family matters. However, the survey also discovered that less than one-third of all adults strongly believe that churches are helpful when it comes to understanding and dealing with family issues.

In an era in which the provision of benefits and practical assistance are critical determinants of ministry success, how might churches address the arena of family ministry more successfully?

A statistical portrait

Step one in the process is to possess an accurate perception of adult relationships and familial conditions these days. Here are a few items for you to ponder.

"Traditional" families. Some analysts have tagged households with a working father, a homemaker mother, and two children under the age of 18 a "traditional family." This configuration is not, by any stretch of the imagination, the only possible description of a traditional family. However, for the sake of an apples-to-apples comparison, realize that this four-person unit represented 60% of all American households in 1960. It describes only 3% of our households today.

Divorce. About half of all marriages end in divorce. More than six out of ten adults who re-marry find that their second and later marriages end in divorce. While most Americans believe that God intended marriage to be for a lifetime, they also believe He doesn't understand the hardship that a difficult relationship causes. With the high divorce rate over the past two decades, we now have one-quarter of all adults having experienced a divorce. A significant percentage of adults enter their marriage assuming that it will end in divorce; often, that is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Single adults. Currently, only a slight majority of adults (56%) are married. A large and increasing proportion of adults—44%—are single. Two out of every five adults is either divorced, separated, or widowed. One out of every five adults in America is a single parent. Among single parents with children under 18 in their home, nine out of ten are women. With our aging population, we have also experienced a growing population of widowed adults. More than one-third of all senior citizens are widowed.

Birthing. If you're a person who believes that it is necessary to be married to have a child, you're from the old school. This year, of all first births to mothers under the age of 30, about 40% will be among women who are not married. Even the social stigma of giving birth to a child outside of marriage has largely eroded. The prevailing attitude is that it is a woman's right to bear children, as long as she (or the father) acts (or intends to act) as a responsible parent.

Co-habitation. Living with a person for an extended period of time, either prior to marriage or in place of marriage, is now the norm. Among people who will get married this year, more than six out of ten of them will live together before getting married. The incidence of co-habitation increased by 443% since 1970 overall. The fastest increase has occurred in just the last three years, though. During that period, co-habitation has jumped by 1,882%!

Homosexuality. The media have grossly overestimated the number of homosexuals in America. Our research indicates that about 3% of the adult population have engaged in homosexual activity. However, the acceptance of such relationships has continued to grow. Substantial proportions believe that gay couples are legitimate family units; that a gay couple can successfully raise an adopted child; that gay couples deserve the same rights as heterosexual couples; and that homosexuality is not morally wrong. Half of the population believe that people who oppose gay lifestyles are "closed-minded people."

Child care. The number of child care centers jumped from 4,400 in 1960 to more than 45,000 in 1990. During that same time frame, the number of children enrolled in child care facilities rose from 141,000 to more than 2.5 million. Families in America spent more than $15 billion on child care in 1990. One of the driving forces behind this exponential growth in child care has been the steady climb in the number of mothers who hold jobs outside the home.

Define the animal

Another key factor to explore is what people mean when they use the word "family."

A large, national study we conducted this year concerning family issues asked people what the word "family" means to them. Not surprisingly, the responses were quite varied. Overall, here's the picture people have of family (multiple responses were allowed):

- One-fourth of the adults interviewed (27%) defined family as the people living together in a household unit: children and their parents. (This is sometimes labeled the "nuclear family.")
- One out of four people (26%) stated that a family is comprised of all people who have a close, personal relationship. For some individuals this entailed friends, live-in companions, and other individuals who have somehow "bonded."
- One-fourth of the respondents (23%) described family as people with whom you have a "good relationship" or individuals who "enjoy being together."
- One quarter (23%) say that this term connotes a group of people who are related to each other by blood or marriage.
- One-quarter (23%) also said that individuals who love each other or have a strong emotional commitment to each other constitute a family. This included sexual lovers who were not bound by a legal marriage.
- One out of seven (15%) described family as people who are married.
- One out of seven adults (14%) said the people you can count on in times of difficulty are your family.

Other definitions included individuals with whom you have significant interaction (9%); people who live together (7%); extended relatives, such as grandparents, cousins, and in-laws (6%); and feelings generated by various relationships, such as joy, respect, fulfillment, and fun (5%).

Notice that many people offered two or more definitions of family, but that more than nine out of ten definitions described the types of people involved in a specified relationship. Also realize that *for the majority of Americans, family no longer connotes a union of people related by marriage.*

Further evidence of this new perspective on family is provided by the finding that three out of four adults said that a man and woman who live together, have had a child together, but are not legally married are a family. In fact, almost one out of four people believed that two adults of the same gender who live together and have a sexual relationship are a family.

Changing view

Surprisingly few Americans believe that marriage is an outdated institution that no longer has a place in our society. The vast majority of Americans instead believe that marriage has a viable role in our culture, but that it is simply one of many alternative family systems from which people may choose. The role of marriage is analogous to the transformation that has impacted views of church involvement in our society: it is available but not mandatory; it is based on a historical precedent that may not be viewed as pertinent to today's world, but it is useful in some situations and for some types of people.

More than two-thirds of all adults view marriage as a means to personal gain, without placing limitations on the individual. This viewpoint is especially popular among young adults: use the marriage for personal benefit, but don't allow it to block your opportunities or to alter your desires. Three out of four Baby Busters view marriage in this all-for-one-and-one-for-me manner.

Interestingly, despite widespread selfishness and the prevailing utilitarian view on marriage, most people concur that "God intended for people to get married and to stay in that relationship for life." Even a majority of non-Christians believe this to be true.

Challenges in ministry

As in any situation in which there are substantial opportunities, there are also challenges to the church regarding family-based ministry. Briefly stated, here are some of the more pressing needs to consider.

Establishing Biblical perspectives. Confusion reigns when it comes to the "Biblical view" of family. What is the role of a father, a mother, or a child? What is the function of religious belief in the development and management of the family? Indeed, what *is* a family? As America redefines its basic values and laws, many adults are stymied when it comes to family issues. Strong arguments can be made for contrasting perspectives about the family. What many adults desperately need is the benchmark view from which to base their decisions about what is acceptable or unacceptable, and why.

Demonstrating compassion. Numerous adults and children suffer because of their family circumstances. Can we help alleviate or reduce their suffering? Can the Church truly be a community of healing and love rather than rejection and judgment? What a tremendous opportunity for us to teach all people how to support those who experience pain by understanding, accepting, and assisting.

Many Christians are unaware of the difference between rejecting a sin and rejecting the sinner. When it comes to divisive and emotionally charged matters, such as divorce, abortion, child abuse, and sexual sin, God's people often seem perplexed as to how they might love people but hate people's sins. In this era when millions of people are suffering from painful or unhealthy relationships, millions of Christians are emotionally or spiritually paralyzed by their ignorance of how to respond to people's cries for help. Can the church provide spiritual and intellectual direction, models to explore, and a firm comprehension of the scriptural foundations of the family?

Perhaps no people group better exemplifies the chance we have to make a difference in people's lives than single parents. Almost without exception, single parents hurt from their broken relationships, their economic hardships, and their bouts with self-doubt. And increasingly, we hear from single parents that the church is not a place of healing but of condemnation. In what ways can we facilitate the church becoming a reflection of God's values and love to the growing numbers of single parents?

No more simplistic "singles" ministry. How many churches recognize that there are at least three separate singles groups: the divorced, the never-married, and the widowed? Each group has unique interests and needs. Providing a one-size-fits-all singles ministry may do more harm than good. While budget constraints are real, crying poverty may not sufficiently justify a ministry to single adults that denies their special needs and spiritual hunger.

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Practical family outreach. Every time we hear people complain that churches "only teach about family" rather than help families grow, it raises the question of what would truly minister to these individuals. The desire to have a "successful" family draws many people back to the local church. Unfortunately, many of those explorers leave, disappointed that tangible benefits related to family were not available.

Many adults intimate that churches seem driven to teach about family, rather than really help with family development. The inference is that merely disseminating information on the subject is insufficient. Here are some of the ideas offered by research respondents that the church might consider.

- Celebrate successful families. Instead of bemoaning the collapse of broken families, celebrate the ability of surviving families to make the relationship work.
- Replace a strict diet of teaching **about** family with a combination of family teaching and family **experiences.** If a relationship is built on the basis of time and mutual experience, perhaps churches can provide a regular experience of family activities to build those relationships in a safe, nurturing environment.
- Assist new parents in practical ways, such as providing parental mentors. These experienced parents can help the new parents understand the realities of parenthood, supporting them emotionally through the sharp learning curve.

Pray for families. Relatively few churches regularly pray for their families. If family is a matter of importance and priority for us, it ought to be a matter of consistent discussion with God, too.

Family is not dead, it is simply changing in unforeseen ways. The change is happening at breakneck speed. To cope with the continual challenge of ministering to families, create a theology of the family that will enable you and your ministry partners to address the pressing needs and questions of a nation that is lost in a sea of questions about the family system.