

# **Chapter 17**

## **CHRISTIAN FAMILY 7**

### **THE CHURCH AND THE NON-TRADITIONAL FAMILY**

**A FATHER TO THE FATHERLESS, A DEFENDER OF WIDOWS,  
is God in his holy dwelling. GOD SETS THE LONELY IN FAMILIES,  
he leads forth the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious  
live in a sun-scorched land. (Psalm 68:5-6 NIV)**

- I. We first need to look at some important factors and consider them as we look at developing the ministry the church should have to those people in our church and our community who do not live in "Traditional Families." (Genesis 12:3 AV; Genesis 18:18-19 AV; Deuteronomy 14:28-29; Psalms 82:3; Psalm 10:18; James 1:27)
  - A. From earliest times, the "fatherless, strangers, and widows" were a special category of people whose special needs God recognised, cared for, and admonished His people to care for. We can see the love of "Father God" being shown through this type of care.
  - B. The people that are in churches and in our community that are not part of a "Traditional Family" are not some Alien Life Form that has accidentally crash landed on earth and must forever simply try to survive and fit into an unfamiliar environment. These are not sub-standard people who simply need to "get married" and then they'll be "normal!"
  - C. The people in non-traditional families will have the same needs as everyone else. These needs are often not met as they would be in a traditional family situation, but they are legitimate needs. Therefore other ways must be found to meet those needs. This is an increasingly important aspect of the role of the church in today's society.

**But You, O God, do see trouble and grief;  
You consider it to take it in hand.  
THE VICTIM COMMITS HIMSELF TO YOU;  
YOU ARE THE HELPER OF THE FATHERLESS. (Psalms 10:14)**

- II. People live in a variety of situations that might fall into the category of a "Non-Traditional Family."
  - A. Firstly there are single people. These may be either young single people still living at home with parents, or young singles living on their own, or in groups with other single people. Second there are the older singles that are living alone, who have never married, or older singles living alone as a result of a divorce or the death of a partner.
  - B. Secondly there are the single parents. Again they may be single through the death of a partner or because of a divorce. They may be single and have never married.

EXPERIENCE SHOWS US THAT THIS CATEGORY IS PRIMARILY MADE UP OF SINGLE MOTHERS  
WITH ONLY A MINORITY OF SINGLE DADS.

- C. Thirdly there are families consisting of husband and wife who have been married before with children from one or both of the previous marriages and possibly children from the current relationship. This can create "his, hers, and ours" family situations. Because of the children, this will usually involve to some degree the other partners from the previous relationships.
- III. What are some of the needs of the non-traditional family that the church must identify and address?
- A. First, of course, are the material and practical needs.
1. This may include some type of help with transportation and childcare. There might be a need, especially with single mothers, for assistance with shopping and other necessary outings such as visits to their GP.
  2. Another very practical need could be the need for help with the practical aspects of living. Some of these practical needs might be washing machine repair, car maintenance, minor household repairs. Perhaps even how to program the video recorder!
  3. Single parents will at times need support in the day-to-day activities of family life. Sometimes assistance and input in child discipline and training might be helpful. Care needs to be given not to overdo the "help" in this area. Sometimes simple involvement with "normal" families in social and recreational activities can be a real blessing.
  4. Also, in the case of single parents, the need for a male or female caring person to develop some kind of lasting relationship with the children so that they can get both sides of the parental care can be helpful. This is important but can also be potentially dangerous.
- B. Second, there will often be a need some type of financial help.
1. Many times there is simply not enough money to meet the needs. Perhaps the person is too old to be employable or is young and unskilled. They may have been made redundant and are not re-employable. There may be single parents that are not working who may be paying child support and other expenses related to a previous relationship.
  2. There could be a need for financial training and counsel. There may be a need to be taught how to budget and handle money wisely. Sometimes they may need help in learning the procedures of dealing with the necessary agencies and with the paperwork that might be involved.
- C. As with any family situation, the non-traditional family will have emotional and psychological needs.

**"The greatest disease in the world today  
is not starvation but loneliness."**

**Mother Teresa**

1. One of the first areas of need here could be real loneliness. Living alone with no one to talk to or relate to on a daily basis can be difficult. The idea of going home to an empty flat night after night or sitting alone all day can become quite discouraging.
  2. Perhaps there is the necessary grieving over a broken relationship or the grieving over the death of a partner. There could develop a sense of hopelessness as one looks toward the future.
  3. The seasons and occasions that we traditionally look forward to with greatest delight and anticipation can be the things the lonely person looks forward to with dread and anxiety.
  4. Many times people in the non-traditional family will have the need for simple companionship. Someone to talk to; someone to be with; someone to show some interest in them and what they are doing. There is also the need to be touched and cuddled from time to time.
- D. Everyone has spiritual needs, including those that are in a non-traditional family.
1. Sometimes they may experience the feeling that God is distant because others are distant.
  2. They may have unanswered questions because there is no one to talk with about spiritual matters.
  3. Perhaps there is anger or disappointment because of the loss they have experienced or the perceived lack in their lives. This anger may be directed at God, the Church, or other Christians.
  4. There is the need simply to share both good and bad things with someone else. There is the need for someone to talk to about their day or something that happened to them or even to someone else.
- IV. What can the church do to address the special needs of those in the non-traditional family?
- A. The church needs to recognise the fact that these people of the non-traditional family represent a growing segment of society.
  - B. If the church is to be relevant, it will need to help these people to become a growing and active part of the body of Christ.
  - C. Traditionally the ministry of the church to the older singles is to give them some occasional social activity and an occasional pastoral visit. The traditional ministry to young singles has been to try and give them some "proper" social activity and arrange a sort of "Christian Meat market" where they can shop for potential mates without patently violating 2 Corinthians 6:14, *"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?"* Since these are not traditional times, the church must be willing to get beyond

traditional methods and approaches.

- V. What are some of the possibilities that the church can look at for ministering to those that are in non-traditional families?
- A. For singles there could perhaps be families within the church that would be able to “adopt” a single person and find ways to include them in some aspects of their own family life. Include them in occasions such as special holidays and birthdays. Begin to build lasting relationships. Note though that not every family is able to do this. There will need to be a strong relationship between the husband and wife of the family that wishes to be involved in this way. The church will need to be careful in handling this.
1. In the social activities of the church, be careful to not exclude the singles. Make the effort to have different types of activity for different interests and ages.
  2. The church could offer classes and specialised training that would be of benefit. Classes that are family, career, recreation, or ministry related might be helpful.
  3. As the church looks for possible ways of ministering to the singles, it needs to be careful also to give them opportunities for service. Properly structured ministry and helping activities that are overseen, so that a framework is created for individuals to give a little or a lot of time and energy. Be careful to provide the necessary training, accountability, and encouragement.
- B. What are some specific possibilities for the church to minister to single parents?
1. There is always the need of assistance with childcare to give a break to the single parent. Giving Mom’s (or Dad’s) a day off, or an evening off could be just the refreshing that they need.
  2. Perhaps mature people could offer to be “Grandparent” for the children. Also there could be those that could be a “big brother” or a “big sister.”
  3. These “Grandparents” or “big brothers and sisters” are not to be seen as substitutes but as supplements.
- C. What can the church offer to those families that are living with divorce-related issues and needs?
1. The church could offer practical teaching and counsel on dealing with the pressures and potential family conflicts inherent in the situation.
  2. Perhaps the church would have some mature people that could serve as “mediators” in developing fairness and equity in families that are the product of previous marriages.
  3. Also, the church may offer carefully guided self-help or recovery groups.

VI. The Cautions:

- A. As with anything we do that is on the cutting edge, there is the danger of accidental injury. We should be aware of both the natural and spiritual hazards inherent in ministering to these needs. We must, in the words of Jesus, “...be as shrewd as snakes (wise as serpents - AV) and as innocent (harmless - AV) as doves.” (Matthew 10:16 NIV)

The Hippocratic Oath says, "First of all, do no harm." Don't be naïve or simplistic in dealing with people. WE CAN'T JUST MAKE IT ALL BETTER!

- B. The church must be aware of the danger of trying for the "quick fix." Often we react to our emotions rather than respond to the Spirit of God. Our emotions fade quickly and our attention wanders, so that ministry projects based on an emotional reaction seldom address anything but surface issues and seldom follow through to real lasting benefit. An approach based on the "Quick Fix" approach assumes that the problem is only a simple surface issue. The things we are dealing with here are not simple and not surface. The church will need to be careful to avoid the danger of the big start, but small finish.
- C. How is the church to deal with sensitive situations? Many situations are emotionally, psychologically, and even legally sensitive. The church must use real wisdom and care. The church should have as part of its ministry resources, skilled people who can deal wisely and advise in these matters. Special care must be taken in situations involving past or present physical, emotional, or sexual abuse.
- D. Development of unhealthy dependency is something to watch out for. Some people are single, or are in difficult living situations because they have been unwilling to make lasting commitments or to take full responsibility in certain areas. Don't over-react to this caution but just be aware. Ministry to people should not include doing everything FOR them. The church should care for, but not carry people.
- E. It is very easy for a lonely person to misinterpret the care and concern of another; especially a person of the opposite sex. Physical attraction may develop in a perfectly innocent situation that gets out of hand. People who have sexual problems sometimes use a caring activity to set up the situation so that they can take advantage of innocent and defenceless people.
- F. Favouritism, either real or perceived, either intentional or unintentional should be avoided. Consider the situation in the early Jerusalem church described in Acts 6:1; *"In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food."* Some people are easier to minister to than others. Some needs are easier to address. We all have our favourites and "special friends," and it is easy for these personal preferences and even prejudices to slip over into ministry.
- G. The church also needs to watch out for burnout or over-extension on the part of care givers. Those involved in practical care-giving are susceptible to burnout. The carer can only do so much. The same heart of compassion that leads a person into a caring ministry can lead a person to take on more than they can handle. Their own family needs must be considered. They must have time for their own life to be kept in some balance.
- H. Possible disappointment on the part of those giving and receiving the ministry must also be considered. Unfulfilled expectations are a fact of life. We must do our best to cultivate reasonable expectations so that the destructive effect of disappointment is minimised. The person giving the care may expect immediate results or overflowing gratitude. Neither may be forthcoming. The key is "As unto the Lord!" The person receiving care may feel that the carer should do more or be more involved and they may try to get from the carer or the church what they should be getting from God or should even be taking

responsibility for themselves.

VII. Summary

- A. God cares for the "Fatherless, the Widow, and the Stranger."
- B. God has always admonished His people to demonstrate His care for these people.
- C. More and more people are finding themselves in "Non-Traditional" living situations at some point in their lives.
- D. It is important that the church realistically look at the people, the situations, and the needs.
- E. We must seek God's heart (the heart of a Shepherd) and God's strategy for effectively ministering to people in these situations and for equipping them and enabling them to have an effective ministry to others.

**QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION**

*Chapter 17 Christian Family 7: The Church and The Non-Traditional Family*

- 1. Consider your own situation (church, community) with regard to the "Non-Traditional" family. With specific people and situations in mind, what do think are some practical things that the church or you personally could do to be a help to those in this situation?
- 2. Do you believe that unhealthy dependency can develop when some of the needs are being addressed through a caring relationship? What do you feel are some of the best ways of preventing this unhealthy dependency?