

# ◆ *Part One*

## *The Family of Family Ministry*



# A Diverse and Aging Unit



## DISAGREEMENT ABOUT THE CONDITION OF THE FAMILY

The introductory chapter began by claiming that the family is important to us. It ended by reporting that the family is in trouble. Why do Americans have so little success with what they prize so much? Part of the answer lies in what seems to be a large gap between what we say we value and what we actually practice.

Consider the findings of a nationwide survey. According to this survey, Americans believe that the greatest threat to the family is the inability of parents to spend enough time with their children. Yet while most people surveyed believe they don't have enough time with their children, they also said they would not pass up a more lucrative or more prestigious job even if it meant more time away from home. In an attempt to explain the contradiction, the report said: "Although Americans say . . . they place a higher priority on family than on money, we should not expect to see them cutting back on their incomes to live in accord with their values. Attitudes and behavior often diverge at critical junctures, and this is one of those instances."<sup>1</sup> Sociologist Norval Glenn agrees, saying, "The truth is that many if not most Americans will sacrifice traditional family ties for activities they claim are less important."<sup>2</sup>

Surveys offer another answer to why family is important but in trouble. When asked, people give conflicting answers about the extent of problems in families. People judge other families worse off than their own. Fifty-nine percent predicated that America's family life will be "only fair" or "poor" in the year 1999. Only 5 percent guessed it would be "excellent." Yet, 71 percent of those who rated family life "only fair," claimed they were "extremely satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their own family life.<sup>3</sup>

Some believe this shows that families are better off than supposed, and that the public in general is swayed by the media's negative portrayal of American family life. Others say that people claim their own families are better off because they want to portray a positive image of themselves.

Whatever the answer, it is clear that the vast majority of Americans think that the quality of family life in the U.S. is declining, and people have a dimmer view of marriage than they did twenty years ago.<sup>4</sup> Yet 63 percent of Americans agree with the statement: "The family is, by far, the greatest source of pleasure for Americans." Only 8 percent said the same about religion, and 6 percent about work and friends.<sup>5</sup>



## Reasons for Confusion Among Experts

Experts who look at the same statistics about the family often differ about its condition. Some disagree because they approach the topic of family from different theoretical perspectives. Certain theories cause researchers to be more pessimistic about the family than do others. For example, much of the current concern for family deterioration began with what is called “The Chicago School.” Social scientists of this school hold to an “interaction” framework. They focus on the type of interaction they see in families.

When they studied city families in the first part of the twentieth century, those of this school compared these families with the extended family system in Europe. Immigrants to America, they found, were departing from the extended family system they left behind. A new family pattern had emerged. Instead of being held together by law, economics, and authority, family members began to be tied together by “sentiment”: ties of close relationships and loyalty. This, they said, amounted to a breakdown of the traditional family.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, sociologists who held to “structural-functional” family theory were not so alarmed. They focused on how the family relates to other parts of society. That the family was losing some of its functions was no

problem. They believed these functions were sufficiently shouldered by other institutions, like the school, community, or government. What family functions remained were critical for the well-being of individuals. The

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home still uniquely provided an intimate context for personal emotional development. They believed social change actually made the family a stronger, not weaker, institution. From this vantage point, J. Richard Udry optimistically compared the modern family to that of past centuries: “In many ways the nuclear family has become more important as a social unit.”<sup>7</sup>

Some disagreement about family is due to the fact that it is such a political issue. In order to support their idea that the traditional family is still very much American, conservatives claim families are alive and well. Liberals, on the other hand, point to the weaknesses of the traditional family and insist that our idea of family has changed and should continue to do so.

Sifting through expert opinion and social research, we can paint a fairly accurate picture of the modern family. Doing that is the first step in devising a theory of family ministry. While we may have some idea of what we would like families to be, we have to start with what they really are. And the very first characteristic is diversity.

## Family Forms Are Diverse

There doesn’t seem to be any clear-cut, typical family. Diversity is in. Normal is different. What Americans thirty years ago thought of as the “typ-

ical family” is no longer in the majority. Typical meant a family with a husband who was the provider, a wife who was the homemaker, and several children. In 1960, 60 percent of all households were like this<sup>8</sup>; now, only 7 percent are.<sup>9</sup> Even if we add to these families with one or more children in which both the husband and wife work outside the home, this still adds up to only 26.7 percent of the households in the U.S.<sup>10</sup>

For the first time in the United States, the number of married couples without children living at home, 28.4 percent of households, exceeds the number with children at home. Many of these are “empty nesters,” people whose children have moved out. Their numbers are increasing rapidly. The number of married-couple households headed by someone 45–64 years old is projected to grow by 40 percent this decade, to 19 million in 2000.<sup>11</sup>

Yet with all these changes, most people still grow up in a family and live with relatives. Family households (where two or more related people live) far outnumber nonfamily households (persons living alone or with a nonrelative) by 70.2 percent to 29.8 percent. The norm is still for people to marry (over ninety percent of adults do) and to bear children in a family context. So, in a sense, some form of the traditional family is very much present. But the statistics cited above indicate some major changes we should consider in more detail.

## **Large Numbers of Singles**

Because of the high rate of divorce (to be viewed in detail later) and because people are remaining single much longer before marriage, there is a large percentage of single people. Single persons living alone make up 24.4 percent of all households.<sup>12</sup> Add to that the singles who live with a relative or nonrelative, and the percentage of single households is 35.6 percent. Comparing this with percentages of years ago will show how swift and dramatic the change in living patterns has been. In 1970 two-thirds (69 percent) of all households were married couples. Twenty years later that portion had slipped to little more than half (55 percent).<sup>13</sup>

## **Households with Working Wives and Mothers**

More women are working outside the home; many of these are mothers. Fifty-eight percent of married women with children under six years of age are in the labor force. Many are part-time workers or work for pay within their homes. Still, the rate of those in the labor force has increased from 28 to 58 percent since 1970. Similarly the rate of married women working who have children aged 6–17 has increased from 49 percent twenty years ago to 73 percent today.

## Single Parent Households

The number of single parent households (the fastest growing type) has now reached 9.3 percent of the total. The Family Research Council has estimated that as many as one-third of today's children will experience their parents' divorce and close to one-half will spend some time in a single parent family before the age of 18.<sup>14</sup> Single parent homes headed by fathers are becoming more common (growing 2.5 times as fast as the number headed by women).

## Nonmarried Couples Living Together

Another type of household consists of unmarried people who are sexually involved and living together. The number of cohabiting couples has recently increased dramatically. According to the U.S. Census Bureau there were nearly three million of them in 1990, five times the number reported in 1970.<sup>15</sup> Overall, they make up about three percent of the U.S. households.<sup>16</sup>

Despite current trends, we must not too quickly assume that the family as we know it will become obsolete.

Couples who cohabit do so for different reasons. Some live together for convenience—to save rent money or to have a temporary place to stay. Others are in a sort of dating relationship, but have no intention of marrying. Some live together as a permanent alternative to marriage, while others plan to marry and are using cohabiting as a sort of trial marriage. Especially prone to this trial marriage arrangement are those who have been divorced. In one study 60 percent of those who remarried set up housekeeping with someone beforehand.<sup>17</sup>

The degree to which cohabiting has become socially acceptable today represents a change of American moral standards. The prominent historian, Edward Shorter, observes that such living together “would have been unthinkable in times past.”<sup>18</sup>

Some social scientists predict the practice will increase, moving in the direction of Sweden, where 15 percent of all couples living together are not married.<sup>19</sup> One reason for expecting more cohabiting is the shift of college students' attitude toward marriage. In 1968 only one in four students (24 percent) believed that marriage was an obsolete institution. Four years later the figure had increased to 32 percent.<sup>20</sup>

Yet, the practice of living together as an “unstructured trial marriage,” may diminish. Couples are finding that living together with a number of people to find the right one is not working. A recent study found that the later marriage of cohabiting partners was not very stable. Within ten years of their wedding, 38 percent of those who had lived together before marriage had split up, as compared with 27 percent of those who simply married.<sup>21</sup> Whether

or not it is increasing, the acceptance of cohabiting is a serious threat to the institution of marriage and a moral issue Christians must face.

## **DIVERSITY IMPACTS CHURCH MINISTRY**

Despite some of these trends, we must not too quickly assume that the family as we know it will become obsolete. Alternatives to the family that have been suggested have not succeeded. Communes and group marriages have not caught on. In places like the Soviet Union, where there has been strong encouragement for communal living, the nuclear family has survived.<sup>22</sup>

Yet the changes in family life that have taken place and might still take place will impact Christian churches. Christians will be forced to examine carefully the legitimacy of certain modifications of family living and respond to changes taking place.

In very practical ways, church leaders are now compelled to recognize the diversity of family forms in their congregations. A simple announcement that the Sunday school picnic is for “families” creates confusion. A sermon that stresses the joys of married life sends some single adults home feeling hurt and lonely, even angry. Urban congregations feel confused and helpless in dealing with the poverty and loneliness of single parents and their children. These same economic and emotional struggles challenge the resources of suburban and rural congregations as well.

## **AN AGING UNIT**

The fact that so many families are made up of older people is unique in history, and will continue to have a dramatic effect on family ministry. In 1900, only 4 percent of the U.S. population was 65 years and older. In 1984, it was 12 percent. When the “baby boomers” are part of that age group in 2030, senior citizens will make up 28 percent of the population.<sup>23</sup>

This increased older sector provides the church with blessings as well as burdens. With more elderly, there will be more three generation families. Grandparents, whom research confirms can have a significant impact on

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grandchildren, will seek to better understand this role. The increased contact between grown children and their parents will be a tremendous boost to both age groups. For some, however, it will provoke agonizing conflict. A counselor at a senior center told me that they always remain open the Friday after Thanksgiving because they receive more calls that day than any other time from older

people who were pained by family strife during the holiday. The increased reports of elderly abuse may indicate that, for some, this strife is quite bitter.

Middle-aged families may well benefit from the long-term presence of their parents. Studies show that older adults give more financial support to their children than they receive from them until parents are about age seventy-four.<sup>24</sup> After this, middle-aged adults may need to help their parents with financial and, most certainly, with emotional support. Despite the general opinion that children forsake their elderly parents, relatively few do. Almost always, it is the daughter who becomes the chief caretaker. This, along with the fact that so many women have jobs other than that of housewife, has already limited the amount of time they have for serving in church agencies. These caretakers, many of them restricted by the daily care for severely ill, such as those with debilitating Alzheimer's, will need some relief that other church members can provide.

Yet the elderly, who are usually quite fit despite the contrary stereotype, can provide a massive source of volunteer personnel for church ministry and missions. We have yet to see the impact on the world of this available "Greypower."

Issues of the elderly family will call for more attention from our pulpits and in our educational programs. Since some of their marital difficulties are unique to them, for example those brought on by retirement, they will require separate marriage enrichment sessions.

Large numbers of single people over age 65 will require special spiritual and emotional support. Forty percent of the women from age 65 to 74 will be widowed, compared to only 9 percent of the men. They will face issues such as masturbation and nonmarital sex that they may not have grappled with since adolescence. One study reported that almost 40 percent of people over 70 years of age were masturbating regularly. And large numbers of unmarried elderly are involved in sexual affairs.

Diversity and aging are two major traits of the modern family that face the church. As we will see in the following chapters, the church will have to reckon with other major changes in family life.

## NOTES

1. Patrick Reardon, "Top Threat to Family: No Time for the Kids," *Chicago Tribune* (October 11, 1989), sec. 1, 1.

2. Norval D. Glenn, "What Does Family," *American Demographics* 14:4 (June 1992): 34.

3. *Ibid.*, 37.

4. In Mental Health Surveys, the percentage of people who said that marriage changes a person's life in positive ways went down from 42 percent in 1957 to 30 percent in 1976 and negative responses increased from 23 to 28 percent (*ibid.*, 37).

5. Reardon, "Top Threat," 1.

6. Ernest W. Burgess and Harvey J. Locke, *The Family: From Institution to Companionship* (New York: American Book, 1945).
7. J. Richard Udry, *The Social Context of Marriage*, 3d ed. (New York: Harper, 1974), 16. For an overview of the various theories of the family, see texts on the sociology of the family such as Steven L. Nock, *Sociology of the Family* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1987).
8. Households can be either family or nonfamily types. A *family* household has at least two people related by blood, marriage, or adoption. *Nonfamily* households include people who live alone, unmarried couples, and housemates.
9. Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Morrow, 1980), 198.
10. "The Changing American Family," Supplement to American Demographics Desk Reference Series 3 (July 1992): 2.
11. *Ibid.*, 23.
12. Sixty percent of people who live by themselves are under 65, and roughly 60 percent who live alone are women.
13. "The Changing American Household," *American Demographics*, 3.
14. *The American Family Under Siege* (Washington, D.C.: 1989), 2.
15. *Current Population Reports: Population Profile of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), 23.
16. M. Sheils, D. Weathers, L. Howard, and R. Givens, "A Portrait of America," *Newsweek* (January 17, 1983): 20–32.
17. Felicity Barringer, "'Trial Marriage' Is Often a Ticket to Splitsville," *Chicago Tribune* (June 9, 1989), sec. 1, 14.
18. Edward Shorter, *Making of the Modern Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 119.
19. Jesse Bernard, "The Good-Provider Role: Its Rise and Fall," *American Psychologist* 36 (1981): 1–12. In Judy C. Pearson, ed., *Communication in the Family: Seeking Satisfaction in Changing Times*, 2d ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 36.
20. Daniel Yankelovich, *The New Morality: A Profile of American Youth in the Seventies* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 88.
21. Felicity Barringer, "'Trial Marriage,'" 1.
22. "The Changing Soviet Family," in *The Nuclear Family in Crisis: The Search for an Alternative*, ed. Michael Gordon (New York: Harper, 1972), 119–42.
23. Ira L. Reiss and Gary R. Lee, *Family Systems in America*, 4th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1987), 375.
24. *Ibid.*, 390.