

MINISTERING TO CHILDREN OF DIVORCE THROUGHOUT THEIR LIVES



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*D*ivorce has become a defining feature of American childhood in the past thirty years. Yet, as common as divorce has become, the experience of growing up in a divorced family remains poorly understood. Most people still assume that a child's experience of divorce is centered around the time of the legal divorce—that a family crisis builds, crescendos at divorce, and gradually ebbs and heals thereafter. In fact, researchers are now finding that, for children, the legal divorce is only the beginning of the distinctive, lifelong experience of growing up in a post-divorce family. Therefore, clergy must be aware of the needs of young people not just at the time of their parents' separation and divorce but throughout the life cycle.

This article briefly explores some of the pastoral issues that may arise in the lives of children and young people in the years and decades following their parents' divorce. It is drawn from interviews with young adults from divorced and intact families that I have conducted for a forthcoming book on the moral and spiritual lives of children of divorce.

The life cycle of children of divorce can be broken into three phases: the period around their parents' separation and divorce; the years growing up in a post-divorce family; and the transition into young adulthood. In addition, a fourth element of the life cycle occurs when children of divorce experience the death of one or both parents.

AT THE TIME OF SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

Children experience numerous losses when their parents divorce. Children lose the daily presence of one parent and their remaining parent is often overwhelmed with financial and emotional worries. Yet, unlike a death in the family, in which church and community members surround the family with care, the opposite happens in divorce. When a divorce occurs, people flee.

Most of the young adults I interviewed grew up with some or a lot of involvement in a faith community prior to the divorce, but none of them could recall a clergy person or congregant reaching out to them after their parents' divorce. Most could recall no one at all reaching out except perhaps for their own friends, who were other children their age. There are many reasons why adults avoid talking with children about their parents' divorce. They fear undermining the parents or upsetting the child or they simply do not know what to say. The result is that, during an event they will later recall as one of the most significant in their lives, children largely suffer alone.

While clergy and lay leaders must reach out to children of divorce, their task is admittedly complex. Children usually come to church with their parents. When a divorce occurs, parents will not feel comfortable attending the same church together and one or both of them may leave, taking the child with them. In addition, custody and visitation issues can interfere with church attendance. One young adult I interviewed recalled his mother pleading with his father to take the children to church on the weekend, to no avail. Others recall the complications of juggling visitation with attendance at religious instruction to prepare for their confirmation or bar mitzvah. One child of divorce who walked to a nearby church with her sib-

lings remembered sitting at the back of the church while the children who came with their parents sat up front. If the churches are going to welcome children of divorce, they will have to be creative and committed about reaching out to the youngsters at the back of the church and in the community who may not have a parent to bring them to services on Sunday.

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A popular movement in mainline Protestant churches today is to write orders and prayers for clergy to use with families at the time of divorce. While these liturgies are well intended, they are written for adults and do not reflect the children's experiences. For instance, *The United Methodist Book of Worship* contains a prayer to be used at the time of divorce that ends with the words, "in the name of the One who sets us free from slavery to the past and makes all things new." These words may express the feelings of some adults, but children do not experience the break up of their families as being "set free from slavery to the past." Indeed, even one young woman who, as a child, witnessed her father beating her mother on numerous occasions said their subsequent divorce "made some things better and a whole lot of things worse." Divorce was a necessary remedy in this case, but divorce did not set her free. New liturgies for children of divorce might someday be helpful, but I suggest that we learn more about these children's experiences before we try naming them in formal prayers or rituals.

POST-DIVORCE FAMILY YEARS

Life in a post-divorce family is very different from life in an intact family. Children who stay in contact with both parents travel back and forth between two homes, with varying sets of rules, expectations, and traditions at each place. In each place they are an insider, sharing traits and experiences with others in the household, but they are an outsider as well because at times they look, act like, or share experiences with the parent in the other household. One or both parents may remarry and may divorce again, or boyfriends or girlfriends may move into and sometimes out of the home. Some children experience the gradual loss of a parent, often the father, who they see less and less in the years following divorce.

Most clergy would agree that our life experience shapes the way we hear stories of the faith and how we approach our relationship with God, but there has been very little recognition of how divorce shapes children's spiritual and moral lives. In my interviews with young adults from divorced families, I find they often have surprising and different interpretations of biblical texts. For instance, children of divorce may say they do not recognize the welcoming father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, because they so frequently came home to an empty house, or because it was their father, not them, who left the home to seek his fortune elsewhere. Children of divorce also have strong reactions to the commandment to honor your father and mother. They feel confused by the commandment's implication that their parents are a unit, when they are not. They ask how they can honor their parents when their

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parents could not honor each other, or how to honor a parent whose failings become so apparent in the aftermath of divorce. They also struggle with whether they are "breaking" the commandment by asking these questions.

Clearly, when clergy are preaching and teaching they must be aware that children and adults who grew up in divorced families will hear some stories differently. When we teach children that God is like a parent, we must recognize that children of divorce as frequently experience a parent's absence as a parent's presence. When clergy preach on the importance of honoring one's commitments, they must recognize that some children and young adults have suffered as the consequence of their parents' loss of commitment to each other and sometimes to their child.

TRANSITION INTO YOUNG ADULTHOOD

Because divorce shapes children through the life cycle, its effects do not drop away when children turn 18 and leave home. Indeed, in a society as increasingly complex as ours, family and social support in the early adult years is more critical now than ever before. Unfortunately, compared to young people from intact families, those from divorced families are more likely to lack the complex network of family and community relationships that helps to propel young people into secure futures. As a consequence, these young people can feel isolated.

At the same time, when children of divorce leave home, for instance to attend college, they experience yet another major change in family life. In my interviews I observed that many young people first begin to experience

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palpable grief and anger about their parents' divorce when they go to college. Living at college is the first time they have some physical and emotional distance from the post-divorce family and thus it is their first opportunity to reflect on it. Further, visitation patterns that had been established earlier must be renegotiated now that the young person only goes home for summer and holiday breaks, and this brings up painful questions of com-

mitment to their parents and competition between them. In addition, the close relationships they form in college give them opportunities to observe their peers' experiences in intact families, and they begin to wonder what it would have been like to grow up that way.

Studies show that children from divorced families are more vulnerable to depression, mental illness, and suicidal thoughts and attempts. While the reasons for their vulnerability are complex, they lie in part in that fact that children of divorce are often more isolated and confront powerful feelings of grief and anger as they mature and reach adulthood. Many of them desperately need caring, older adults who can help them to understand and deal with these feelings.

There are two major life tasks that young adults must complete. The first is to find and prepare for a vocation, which in this society means obtaining a college or technical education or training. The second is to learn how to form an intimate relationship and eventually find a life partner. Any clergy members who counsel engaged couples or perform

weddings have a responsibility to learn all they can about the unique challenges children of divorce face in achieving intimacy and forming a good marriage.¹

DEATH OF A PARENT

Throughout their lives, the relationships children of divorce have with their mothers and fathers flow on separate trajectories. In death, it is no different. Among the young adults I interviewed, at least two had already experienced the death of a parent. Both were in their twenties when their mother, to whom they were quite close, died, while the father with whom they had a troubled relationship was still alive. Some of the questions they asked included: Am I an orphan now even though my father is still alive? Why did my "good parent" have to die while my "bad parent" lives on? Now that my mother is gone will my father finally be there for me the way I've always needed him? Further, when their father failed to offer much comfort after their mother's death, they asked: Why can't my father be there for me even now, when my own mother is dead, the woman he once was married to?

In a divorced family the parent who has now died may have symbolically "died" a long time ago for the other parent, while for their child both parents have been very much alive. This difference in experience means there is no shared grief like that which usually occurs after a death in an intact family, when at the same time a father has lost a wife and a child has lost a mother. Shared grief brings comfort and can bring the remaining members of the family to a new kind of closeness. In contrast, adults who are children of divorce grieve the death of a parent alone. Even if the surviving parent is kind and loving the grief cannot be shared in the way it could be if he or she had still been married to the deceased. In the midst of losing a parent to death, therefore, the loss of divorce arises anew.

The churches are now beginning to address the consequences of divorce. They have begun by addressing the needs of divorcing adults and there is much more to be done in that area. At the same time, the churches need to



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understand and include the distinctive experience of the children. In our society adults get more attention than children because they are bigger and louder and they speak in a language that other adults understand. The churches must continue widening their embrace of divorcing adults, but they must do so by reaching around them and including the children in their grasp as well. □

¹ For a rich account of the lifelong effects of childhood divorce and its impact on the ability to form intimate relationships, see Judith Wallerstein, Julia Lewis, Sandra Blakeslee *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study* (New York: Hyperion, 2000). In addition, the website www.smartmarriages.com contains an extensive clearinghouse of information about marriage education and preparation with much attention given to the issues facing people from divorced families.