



THE PASTOR AS MARRIAGE FIXER

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on plans for the service and reception. Chris came from a nice family and she had been active in MYF, the senior pastor said.

The couple moved to suburban Chicago where both had promising jobs. They found a lovely house to buy. They got pregnant sooner than they expected. The baby was often sick and they decided that Chris would stay home. Day care was very costly. Chris's depression returned. Marc spent more and more time at work. Their school loans came due and their credit cards escalated. There never was enough money.

The stress made them think about church again. They visited a new, growing church. The contemporary music and the dramas were interesting. They made no friends and the pastors did not call. The added expense of church offerings loomed negative. They stopped attending.

They argued about money, her moods, his lunches with women co-workers, his drinking, and their sick baby. They should see a counselor. His HMO told them that marriage counseling was not covered by their policy. She asked for help from her physician and was put on antidepressants. She felt better but they argued more.

Marc filed for divorce and they hired one attorney who would see them both to reduce costs. The marriage ended before their second anniversary.

When news of the divorce came to relatives and friends, folks were surprised. Why didn't someone help them? **Don't pastors fix marriages anymore?**

They met in college. After their first date, Marc announced to his roommates that he had found the woman he would marry. Chris felt good with Marc. He lifted her spirits. In two months, they were living in Chris's apartment.

Chris's mother, a UMW officer, insisted that the marriage take place in their home church. Neither Marc nor Chris had attended church except at holidays since their confirmation. Chris asked her former youth pastor to preside. Due to the distances involved, only two premarital sessions took place and they centered

When a couple repeats their marital vows before us, most pastors simultaneously offer a prayer too. We pray that we will be able to stand behind this new marriage, to support the couple and protect their new family. Were it not for that pastoral promise, most Christian marriages would be indistinguishable from non-Christian or secular ones.

It is always a disappointment to discover that a couple is divorcing. If pastor and congregation knew earlier, would they have been able to make a decisive intervention for the couple? Many believe that pastors are marriage fixers. Regrettably, few are.

The signs of a deteriorating marriage are many. In retrospect nearly everything can be a signal or symptom of a problem. Cross words and emotional distancing are easy to spot. Likewise, distressed children often signal a problem. More subtle indicators include changes in worship participation and changes in financial stewardship. When marriage becomes troubled, nearly everything else is affected. Regrettably, pastors are better "Monday morning quarterbacks" than expert diagnosticians about the marriages in their congregation. We eventually know, but often late in the game.

Why is this so? Are persons embarrassed, or shamed or

in denial about their marital problems? Some obviously are. Most would be quite willing to share their difficulties with a helping friend, however. Some do not share as much as they used to due to changes in practices of pastoral care. Regular calling on families is not as frequent as once was the case. Pastors of larger congregations find it hard to be personally knowledgeable of many of their congregation.

Boundary training has led some to discourage deeper conversations with parishioners. The pastor who makes ten family calls each week is quite rare these days. Those who do that level of calling greatly expand their pastoral understanding of the marriages and the individuals of their congregations.

Experts in church life also report that there is a significant decline in the interest of persons in having a home visit. The home is a private place for many in larger communities. Even the pastor is not welcome in many church homes. Pastors report an increasing pattern of turn-downs to their requests to visit. The net result is less pastoral knowledge of those marriages which would benefit by support and encouragement.

What causes marital problems? When I was trained as a marriage therapist thirty years ago, it was popular to think of the symptoms of marital difficulty as: sex, money, intimacy, and communication. Attention to problem arenas often did little to prevent divorce. Deeper concerns were nearly always at the source of the broken marriage.

TWO CORE CAUSES OF MARITAL PROBLEMS

I have come to believe that there are two basic sources of marital problems. **First is the lack of the necessary personal growth and development to enter into marriage.** Lack of individuation from family of origin, personality problems, health problems, addictions, immaturity, and the like, produce marriages which are seriously flawed. In order for these marriages to be made

workable, the persons in them need to be fundamentally changed. Lacking this, marriage will not work. Pastors need to be certain that persons are equipped and ready to marry. Although pastors can be trained to use sophisticated pre-marital psychological inventories such as PREPARE, most sensitive pastors can accurately judge a couple's readiness for marriage on their own. Such inquiry takes

several hours in personal conversation, however.

The second major cause of marital breakdown is the inability of the partners of a marriage to change. Fixed expectations, rigid personality patterns, and difficulty in adapting to the new bring

marriages to an end more than anything else. Unwillingness to learn is another way of describing this problem. Pastors can serve persons well by offering family life education classes and by teaching and preaching about new possibilities for family life. Transformation of life from the stuck and rigid and broken is what ministry is about. All acts of ministry can be used to help broken marriages. Should a pastor refer to professional counselors? Yes, by all means. If a half dozen pastoral conversations with the couple have resulted in insufficient change, a referral is usually in order. There are specialists in marriage counseling in most communities. Professional organizations certify counselors (American Association of Pastoral Counselors and The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy). Many states license the practice of marriage counseling. A referral should be to trained counselors with whom the pastor is acquainted and who share common values for marriage and family. Counselors should welcome consultation with pastors.

Professional marriage and family counseling is somewhat more difficult to obtain in the days of managed care. Many insurance companies exclude relational problems from coverage. Payment may be only for individual mental illness. Managed care programs often have expectations that problems can be fixed

very quickly. If not, problems are dismissed as unfixable. Frankly, relationship problems take time to be addressed helpfully. Similarly there may be encouragement of symptom removal through medications rather than addressing the underlying learned patterns of behavior. Allow help to take place over months, not days or weeks. Quick fixes are often bad fixes.

CHOOSING DIVORCE

When is divorce the choice? I personally never make that decision for another. A helper cannot ever know enough to make that very life-changing decision.

Each partner in a marriage needs to make the decision to continue a marriage or end it. Sometimes it is made deliberately and consciously as in weighing a list of pros and cons. Usually the decision is made at a deeper level. The decision announces itself to the person. It may come almost as a surprise. I refer to it as the "click off" discovery. Persons find that they cannot and will not continue the marriage. Their well-being and the well-being of others in the family requires that a divorce happen. After that "click off" discovery, no therapy or counseling or external persuasion seems to matter.

A decision to divorce is not the end of pastoral concern for a couple or their family. A divorce can be done respectfully and constructively or harshly and destructively. Helping persons through the divorce process (often two years) is a pastoral responsibility as much as is helping reconstruction of marriage.

Just as Jesus addressed the woman at the well, who had a long history of marital problems, with compassion and care, not condemnation, so we should minister to those whose marriages have failed. It is in forgiveness and transformation of broken lives that we know God's love for couples and families. In this we all need God's ministry of grace. □



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