The family of a mentally retarded child must grow toward understanding and accepting the child as the specific and unique human being he really is—with both his realistic weaknesses and his realistic strengths.

The Pastoral Care and Counseling of Families of the Mentally Retarded

THE MOTHER of a thirteen-year-old mentally retarded son was heard to say, "My pastor is a good counselor. He counsels many of his parishioners. But, every time I go to talk to him about Jimmy, he refers me to the chaplain at the institution for the mentally retarded. Why won't he counsel me about my son? Are we that different?"

This statement was given to a social worker friend of mine who in turn shared it with me. As my friend and I discussed the situation of this family, we felt this particular pastor was more than capable of ministering to the needs of these people—if he only knew it. He didn't need any new and strange counseling techniques. The counseling methods he now uses would be sufficient. It is true, he could have used some knowledge of mental retardation. But, it was our hunch that he could have learned all he needed to know about this human situation by letting himself get involved in a pastoral way with this family.

The following are a few considerations about the human predicament of mental retardation which pastors seem to need. It is hoped these considerations cast light on some of the major issues and problems in such a way that the pastor will recognize he already has the skill to deal with the situation. It is further hoped that these clarifications will help the pastor feel more free to involve himself with these struggling families and to utilize the pastoral skills he already possesses that are so greatly needed. I have the very strong hunch that many pastors are on the verge of discovering how very helpful they can be to the families of the mentally retarded. It is my hope that what is written here will help them in this discovery.

The Enormous Width of the Mental Retardation Range

When one thinks of the many different types of people who can be labeled "mentally retarded" he can't help being overwhelmed. A "mentally retarded" person can be a person in a bed, barely living off the cortex of the brain with a frightfully feeble heart, almost imperceptively pumping blood through the body. He may have little or no consciousness of himself or life around him. He literally must be kept alive by others.

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On the other hand, a “mentally retarded” person can be one who is near normal in his intellectual functioning. And yet, he’s able to adapt to society and have specific talents that are superior to those who are labeled “normal.” The label, “mental retardation” is supposed to cover all persons who function between these extremes. In fact, the range of mental retardation is much wider than the range of those who are called normal!

Every now and then the clinical staff at the children’s institution where I work must struggle with the problem of “patient placement.” At these times we try to figure out where each child belongs in our hospital. The debate sometimes becomes hot and frustrating. It’s an impossibly difficult problem. But we try to solve it as best we can for each child, or some children would have to live alone in the hall.

This may help the pastor to see that the wide range of mental retardation allows no general answers; there are no two mentally retarded persons who are alike. Every family confronted with the problem of a mentally retarded child will have their own tensions, their own weaknesses and strengths, their own limits and possibilities, all of which must be taken into consideration. Every one of these families will have to ask a staggering number of pat questions. But, they must be answered afresh as if they had never been asked before. “Is it best to keep Susie at home or send her to the institution?” “Will Jim be able eventually to live in the community or will he need sheltered care all of his life?” “Should Sally be placed in regular school classes requiring minimal study, or should she be assigned to a special education class?” “Why did God let this happen?” “What horrible thing have I done that Billy was born this way?” These are only the beginnings of a long series of questions that must be raised for which no general answer will be found.

To me, this is what makes pastoral work with families of the mentally retarded such an exciting thing. One must let himself get involved with a family in a pastoral way and struggle along with them in situation after situation as each comes up. Yet, no one can predict how the family will solve a certain situation until they’ve struggled with it for a time. The complete absence of pat answers forces the pastor to move into these situations in such a way that he must use his best senses and his greatest creative talents to help the family solve each situation as it arises. This makes it an intriguing pastoral work!

The Parent’s Process of Understanding and Accepting

Stop and think how you would feel if you were told your child is mentally retarded! At first, this would be very hard to understand and accept. You would begin a process in your life that would never completely end. At first, you would deny that anything is wrong. You simply wouldn’t let yourself believe it. Later, you would start believing it and you would feel guilty. You would be sure that you must have done something wrong to cause your child’s mental retardation. You would search for that one cause as if you could go back and make it right. Still later, you would try to place blame on others. You might blame your doctor, or your spouse, or anyone else who might have been negligent. You would become interested in people who claimed to cure mentally retarded children. You wouldn’t care if other people did call them “quacks.” You would want to believe in them for the sake of your child. During these struggles, you might play with the idea