Family Counseling: Basic Concepts for Ministers

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Much of the time that ministers spend counseling is taken with family related issues. Yet many ministers find themselves in the difficult position of having little or no formal education or training in family counseling. This article deals with some basic issues related to problematic families and pastoral counseling that are meant to bridge the gap between having no formal training in family counseling and having advanced training and education.

Ministers are frequently asked to counsel people whose problems are family related. Many issues that ministers are asked to address involve marital problems and/or problems with children, adolescents, or young adults. Because many ministers are not well-versed in the formal aspects of family counseling, they tend to decline to deal with family issues by referring families to other counselors, or handling these issues in superficial or even, at times, unhelpful ways.

Little attention has been given to helping ministers fill the gap between having no real foundation in family counseling and having advanced education and training in the field. In an effort to fill this gap, this article will address two issues: the characteristics of problematic families, and some principles of helping them. The focus of the article is more on "thoughts to consider" than on offering an in-depth analysis of the topic. A word of caution is in order, however: what appear to be simple statements can, in fact have wide-ranging and profound implications when they are fully understood.

Problematic families—that is those whose problems significantly interfere with their development and happiness—often have a number of

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characteristics in common. When these characteristics are recognized and understood, families and those who help families can be in a better position to bring forth appropriate changes in behavior. The following are some characteristics that many problematic families have in common.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PROBLEMATIC FAMILIES

Defense Mechanisms

The family has a "family defense system" that the parents brought into the family from their families and which they teach their children. The three most common defense systems are denial, rationalization, and projection. Denial states: "I didn't do anything wrong and, if I did, it was no big deal." Rationalization states: "Well, I guess I did something wrong, but there were so many extenuating circumstances it wasn't really my fault." Projection states: "You're to blame for the problems around here." With everyone in the family either denying, rationalizing, or projecting, no one takes responsibility for any problem; and therefore, the problems never get addressed or solved.

Alternating Victim and Oppressor Roles

Family members alternate between being a victim at one time and an oppressor at another. For example, a wife is a victim of her husband's neglect, but at the same time, oppresses him with constant criticism. Both define themselves as victims, and neither perceives himself/herself as an oppressor. However, until the spouses can recognize that they take turns being both victim and oppressor, conflicts will continue.

Inappropriate Reinforcement

A family can react to the behavior of its members in the following ways:

- Reward positive behavior and punish negative behavior.
- Reward positive behavior and ignore negative behavior.
- Ignore positive behavior and punish negative behavior.
- Reward negative behavior and punish positive behavior.

Problematic families often avail themselves of the latter two options, which means that they create an atmosphere in which healthy behaviors are ig-