

THE PLACE OF SINGLE PARENTS
IN THE AFRICAN CHURCH

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. CONCLUSION

Thirty years ago, Walter Trobisch observed that "There is a great upheaval in Africa today in marriage and family life. No other realm is so troubled." He also said that "the greatest landing strip for the Gospel in our generation is marriage and the family."¹ The situation of the African family and marriage is still in upheaval. God wants to bring the world to himself, through marriage, through those people who live in the family. Bruno Gutman, a missionary in Tanzania said "We must win the family if the work (of evangelism) is to be effective."² Moreover, God is interested in the family as His first established institution. Therefore the church of God must be interested in the survival of the family structure.

God hates divorce. The positions of Jesus and Paul are all against divorce. Many people, especially Christians divorce because they have not grown to the fullness of the knowledge of God, especially of his love. The family ethics of the N.T. has not yet penetrated the fabrics of the African society and its culture. No wonder then that while God hates divorce but accepts and forgives the repented divorcee as well as the repented unwed parent, most of African culture does not discourage divorce or unwed parenthood but rather has much that encourage these inspite of the society's hatred for divorcees and unwed parents. When it comes to discipline within the

cultural melieu anti feminist chauvinism is so evident that it seems only women divorce or become unwed parents. Unfortunately the African church seems to be too influenced by the culture, such that the divorcees and unwed parents do not have much of a place in the church and are not very much welcome; and so little is done for them. The Lord Jesus said in Matt. 11:28 "Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." The church is God's instrument for ministry to these single parents who are certainly burdened by the pressures laid on them by the society. The Christian Council of Zambia warned that the High rate of divorce in Zambia will continue unless the churches take up the challenge to consolidate marriage.³ This warning is in place not only for Zambia but for all of Africa. The little effort being made by some churches as discussed in chapter four is commendable, but much still need to be done.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS TO PASTORS, CHURCHES AND SINGLE PARENTS.

For the church to purposefully contribute to marital stability in Africa and to help single parents to be fulfilled in life, there are a few things that both the pastor, the church and the single parents themselves need to bear in mind and to do.

1. The Role of the Pastor

As the spiritual leader of the church much that can be done depends on the pastor. Personally he can undertake some preventive strategies to fight against the growth of divorce and unwed parenthood. He can also adopt some corrective strategies to help the victims of divorce and unwed parenthood to reestablish their lives in Jesus Christ and in the church and to make life more meaningful.

Preventive strategies would include premarital and family (marital) counselling as well as teachings and seminars on marriage and family life. Premarital counselling both at individual and group level is necessary for those who are not yet married. This will help the youth and the unwed adults to prepare well for marriage, chose the right life partner, have a good attitude towards marriage and thus a good foundation against future divorce. Special attention should be paid to seniors or middle adults who are not married, possibly for being unable to find the right life partners. To prevent the danger of unwed parenting, the unwedded in the church need to be taught the principle of chastity. Sexual immorality should be vehemently rejected from the pulpit and in other teaching sessions. Career men and women need to be taught to put God first rather than their occupational aspirations, so that they will not sin in order to be fulfilled both at work, and at home with illegitimate children. They should be encouraged to marry or to be truly committed to celibacy.

Seminars can be a very effective way for both preventive and curative therapy for marriages. The pastor who is not well trained in counselling should not be ashamed to invite a better trained, professional counsellor (he must be a Christian) to give Seminars on marriage and family life. The book, "I married you" by Walter Trobisch is an outstanding publication that has touched lives for years. It grew out of such a seminar and remains a classic even today; over twenty five years since it was published.

In curative therapy, counselling is the greatest tool for the pastor. Post-marital counselling is a must for divorcees. To counsel them effectively, the pastor needs to know the individual

so as not to be condemnatory and/or to make an error of judgement; the consequence of which might be fatal. The counselling aim should be to restore his or her personality and to lead the victims to "realised forgiveness." According to John C. Wynn, "forgiveness is the therapy that can resuscitate the marriage, where the death is not yet compounded by remarriage."⁴

Realised forgiveness, a concept of John Wynn is forgiveness as an experience in a person's life, not just a concept. Such forgiveness enables the individual to be free from the bondage of the guilt of the past and move forward to act creatively in the future. Real forgiveness has to start with the pastor forgiving and accepting those involved, especially the party that the pastor sees as responsible for the divorce. Without such forgiveness the pastor cannot effectively help. The divorcee should then be helped to forgive himself or herself and the spouse; then to realise the forgiveness of God ultimately and where possible to be reconciled to the spouse. If there is no room for remarriage to the spouse, say the spouse has already married another person and may be is no more a part of the church, the church member victim not yet married should be helped to realise God's will for his or her life. In summary, the pastor's counselling effort for the divorcees should seek to answer two questions: (a) What will creatively close the gap created by the divorce? This includes the gap between the divorcees themselves, the gap between them and the church and the gap between them and God. (b) What will help them realise God's will for them?

As for the unwed parents, the pastor needs to help them through counselling also, to come to realised forgiveness. Each case should be handled individually as much as possible. Some become unwed parents by choice while in courtship, or trial marriage,

some as a result of pressure from the society or parents. The pastor must avoid assumptions and seek to know the truth. Each one should be helped to see his or her behaviour in the light of the scripture and then be counselled to restoration and encouraged to get married if God so wills.

Sometimes the pastor cannot help the single parents in the church because he does not know them, especially for large churches. This was the confession of one pastor in the course of the research for this thesis. To solve this problem of ignorance it is good that the pastor should have new member's information form especially for transferred members. The form should seek to get such information as the person's age, when converted, marital status, if divorced and unmarried, number of children, occupation, area of service in the former church, if disciplined before by any church, if unmarried any child or children and of course the name and address of the respondent. This will help the pastor to identify the single parents in the new membership who need help. This will also help him solve the problem of infidelity of knowledge; where by someone decides to keep himself or herself secret, to hide his identity.

The pastor can train counsellors for such people from among those who have been that way before and are now well restored into church life.

All these should be done prayerfully lest the counsellor may fall too. Helen Tarkelson's prayer for this ministry is in place.

"As we devote our thoughts and hearts, O God, to understanding and helping the young woman (and man) who bears her (his) child outside of the family circle (as well as the divorcees), let us witness to the sanctification of family life and the dignity of all motherhood.¹⁵ (Brackets mine).

When these people have been brought to a realised forgiveness and restored personality in the Lord, they should be brought into the full life of the church. Where there are many divorcees and single parents, they can have their own fellowship times during which they address their peculiar problems. They should be accepted back into the church and made to feel as a real welcomed part of the church.