A Preventable Death

You've probably heard it said that the divorce rate in the United States is about 50%. Unfortunately, that statistic has frequently been misunderstood and misused. Some declare that it means 50% of couples will end up in divorce. This assertion is not only incorrect, but it presents a very dismal outlook, particularly for couples who are either contemplating marriage, or who have recently married, and who can't imagine the death of their marriage.

This 50% divorce rate actually represents the official number of divorces issued by the courts during a year as a percentage of the number of marriages licensed during the same year. For instance, if in one state there were 10,000 marriage licenses issued and registered in a year, and that same year there were 5,000 divorce decrees issued by the courts, then the "divorce rate" was 50%. It's wrong to conclude, however, that the 5,000 couples who divorced were half of the 10,000 couples that were married that year. Some couples may divorce in their first year of marriage, but more than likely the majority of those who divorced that year had been married for a number of years.

In 1999, the Barna Research Group released the results of their poll about divorce, in which they interviewed 3,854 adults from the 48 contiguous states. Among their findings, Barna reported that 11% of the adult population is currently divorced and 25% of adults have had at least one divorce during their lifetime. The most disturbing finding was that divorce rates among conservative Christians were significantly higher than for other faith groups, and much higher than for Atheists and Agnostics. Their research found few significant differences between the moral behavior of Christians and non-Christians.

Barna’s results confirmed what other studies have shown. On average, conservative Protestant Christians have the highest divorce rate, while mainline Christians have a much lower rate. Barna stated that the results raise "questions regarding the effectiveness of how churches minister to families." The data challenges "the idea that churches provide truly practical and life-changing support for marriage."

Some have mistakenly taken the results of the Barna poll and applied them directly to Adventists, stating that their divorce rate is identical, if not higher, than the divorce rate in the general population.

In fact, a study of Adventist families in North America, commissioned by the NAD Family Ministries Department and conducted by Monte Sahlin, showed that a total of 27% of Adventist households had gone through a divorce; 8% were divorced and single, 16% were divorced and remarried, and 3% were divorced, remarried, and divorced again. In his 2010 report, Sahlin stated that one in four first marriages ended in divorce among Adventists.

Compared to the general population, the divorce rate among Adventist appears to be much lower—and for that we can praise God! Nevertheless, divorce is still present among us and it is much more prevalent than it should be.

In our travels around the North American Division, Pamela and I are often approached by couples contemplating divorce as a solution to
Divorce Complexities

As a young theology student, I naïvely thought that if I diligently studied “divorce” I’d be able to come up with a clear set of “if-then” guidelines that could be applied to all cases.

• If neither party had committed adultery, then there could be no divorce.
• If the guilty party repented, then the innocent party had to forgive and reconcile.
• If you foolishly entered into a horrible marriage, tough luck; you’re stuck—for life!

It didn’t take me long to realize that I was on a futile quest. Marriage problems are much too complicated to be resolved with simplistic solutions. The variety of difficulties encountered is limitless. And heartless, legalistic denunciations are wrong-headed and cruel.

And yet, aren’t we morally negligent if we passively stand by and leave troubled couples to flounder in a turmoil of uncertainty about what is right and best for them to do?

In the same way that people experience a kind of craziness when they’re madly in love, a malignant type of unsettledness takes hold on people’s minds when they face the dissolution of their intimate relationships. They need sane and sensible counselors to help them untangle the complexities of uncoupling or re-coupling.

The bonding that holds people together in marriage is made up of different kinds of “glue.” As the shadow of impending divorce looms over them, the adhesives that have bound the couple together begin to lose their stickiness.

Observing the loosening of the ties that bind two people together, secular mental health professionals may see their role as facilitating the dissolution of the marriage with the least collateral damage. And where absolutely irreconcilable differences do exist, when divorce is truly inevitable, a modified version of this approach may be the appropriate intervention.

However, the Christian counselor operates from different first principles. Instead of defaulting to a purely pragmatic solution, these counselors are guided in their thinking by Biblical restoration narratives. The straying sheep is restored to the fold. The prodigal son is reunited with his father. Epitomizing God’s yearning for reconciliation with His people, Hosea pays a ransom for his adulterous wife, rescues her from harlotry, and returns her to his marriage bed.

Recognizing that, “The Lord God of Israel says, ‘I hate divorce,’” godly church leaders will first try to help struggling couples to resolve their problems so as to avoid the break-up of the marriage.

If interfering individuals conspire to alienate the husband and wife, close family and friends can mobilize to counteract that negative influence. Speaking with one voice, they can assure the couple of their support, and of their ardent hope that the fracturing of the family will be avoided.

If money troubles are at the root of the marital conflict, the church can provide a scholarship so that the couple can attend a financial-management seminar; or it could subsidize the cost of the services of a Christian financial advisor. And the family-life professional can assist the couple to improve their problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills.

Infidelity is the death knell of many marriages. Broken trust runs deep. The anguish of betrayal lingers long. Brokenheartedness spawns hopelessness. But a godly and compassionate counselor can lead the couple out of the labyrinth of recrimination and blame to the place where healing can be found. Reconciliation is possible. Destroyed trust can be reborn. Divorce is not inevitable.

But for some, reconciliation is unthinkable. They feel a desperate urgency to get away from the source of excruciating pain. They want it to be over as soon as possible. Divorce seems like a miracle pain-reliever. Too often that way of escape only intensifies the suffering.

The adversarial legal process is devilishly effective in driving wedges between spouses. Each attorney wants to win the contest by fostering the best interests of their own clients, often at the expense of the other party. No wonder so much smoldering resentment, bitterness, and viciousness persist in post-divorce relationships, especially when custody issues are at stake.

When divorce seems unavoidable, counselors and pastors can urge couples to seek mediation before they rush out...
Thinking Theologically about Divorce

An official action taken in 1887 at a General Conference Session offers the earliest insight into the biblical thinking in our church about the subject of divorce and remarriage after divorce:

WHEREAS, Our Saviour has laid down the one sole ground on which parties once married can be divorced; and,

WHEREAS, the practices of society have become most deplorable in this respect, as seen in the prevalence of unscriptural divorces; therefore,

RESOLVED, That we express our deprecation of this great evil, and instruct our ministers not to unite in marriage any parties so divorced.¹

Though unreferenced, the teaching of Jesus implied in this action is in Matthew 5:32: “But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery” (KJV; cf. Matt. 19:9). The exception clause, “saving for the cause of fornication” (Gr. porneia), was interpreted as “unfaithfulness to the marriage vow,” i.e., physical adultery. In this, church leaders discerned “the one sole ground” for divorce. Divorces stemming from other reasons were considered “unscriptural divorces.”²

In the early decades of Adventism, pastoral and church praxis in matters related to divorce, especially with regard to discipline, grew out of this prevailing understanding of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. Examples included: the prohibition against Adventist ministers performing marriage ceremonies for those who had been divorced without scriptural grounds, censure, and later disfellowshipping, of all members found guilty of adultery (if they remarried, they and the new partner were both to be disfellowshipped), and the distinction between “guilty party” and “innocent party” in a divorce—with the latter having a “right” to remarry.³

THE EXCEPTION CLAUSE AND BEYOND

Though the Matthean passages continued to anchor church thinking about marriage, divorce, and remarriage, discussion in 1950 brought a new idea—“the forgiving mercy of God.” “[The church] believes that victory and salvation can as surely be found by those who have transgressed in the matter of divorce and remarriage as by those who have failed in any other of God’s holy standards.”⁴ The notion of “repentance,” that would allow those formerly divorced and now in “unscriptural” marriages to be readmitted to membership, began to be explored. It was acknowledged too, that, for reasons of safety, some married persons might need to seek a legal separation or even a divorce. If such persons remained chaste and single, they would not be condemned.

The escalating divorce rate in the late 20th century no doubt served as a catalyst for a closer look by our church councils at porneia in Matt. 5:32; 19:9. An expansion of biblical grounds for divorce resulted:

Unfaithfulness to the marriage vow has generally been seen to be adultery and/or fornication. However, the New Testament word for fornication includes certain other sexual irregularities. (I Cor. 6:9; I Tim. 1:9, 10; Rom. 1:24-27) Therefore, sexual perversions, including homosexual practices, are also recognized as a misuse of sexual powers and a violation of the divine intention in marriage. As such they are just cause for divorce.⁵

The General Conference Divorce and Remarriage Study Commission (1997-1999) produced a report based on an expansive biblical study of marriage:

The covenant of marriage rests on principles of love, loyalty, exclusiveness, trust, and support upheld by both partners in obedience to God (Gen 2:24; Matt 19:6; 1 Corinthians 13; Eph 5:21-29; 1 Thess 4:1-7). When these principles are violated, Scripture acknowledges that tragic circumstances can destroy the marriage covenant. Jesus taught that the marriage covenant may be irreparably broken through sexual immorality (Matt 5:32; 19:9), which includes a range of improper sexual behaviors. Paul indicated that death brings the marriage covenant to an end (Rom 7:2, 3),

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4
as does desertion by an unbelieving partner no longer willing to be married (1 Cor 7:15). Elsewhere, the Study Commission affirmed, “Violence in the setting of marriage and family is especially abhorrent, destroying the marriage covenant (Mal 2:14-16; see also AH 343.”

Church Manual editions since 2001 now incorporate many of the biblical passages and theological insights of the Commission.

Marriage rests on principles of love, loyalty, exclusiveness, trust, and support upheld by both partners in obedience to God (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:6; 1 Cor. 13; Eph. 5:21-29; 1 Thess. 4:1-7). When these principles are violated, the marriage is endangered. Scripture acknowledges that tragic circumstances can destroy marriage.

Divine grace is the only remedy for the brokenness of divorce. When marriage fails, former partners should be encouraged to examine their experience and to seek God’s will for their lives. God provides comfort to those who have been wounded. God also accepts the repentance of individuals who commit the most destructive sins, even those that carry with them irreparable consequences (2 Sam. 11; 12; Ps. 34:18; 86:5; Joel 2:12, 13; John 8:2-11; 1 John 1:9).

Scripture recognizes adultery and fornication (Matt. 5:32) and abandonment by an unbelieving partner (1 Cor. 7:10-15) as grounds for divorce.

All ministry, whether disciplinary, educational, or emotionally supportive, is seen as spiritually redemptive: “The Church as a redemptive agency of Christ is to minister to its members in all of their needs and to nurture everyone so that all may grow into a mature Christian.”

As family life professionals we rejoice at the distance we have come in tone and substance over the decades. Let us grasp the profound truth enounced in that sentence “Divine grace is the only remedy for the brokenness of divorce” and let us run with it!!

Ron Flowers is the President of the Adventist Association of Family Life Professionals and, prior to his retirement, he and Karen Flowers directed the Department of Family Ministries, in the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What motivates church members to “punish” the “guilty party” in a divorce by censoring or disfellowshipping him/her?
2. What motivates church members to avoid taking appropriate measures in cases where members divorce without scriptural grounds?

References
7. Ibid.
The Pain of Divorce

Do you understand my pain and have you ever walked in my shoes? This question was asked by a divorcee to a member of her local church who was judgmental and reproachful about her recent divorce. How much better to empathize than to criticize!

Divorce marks the loss of a socially valued status and often compromises a comfortable relationship with one’s fellow parishioners. It may also mark a shift from a standing of respectability to a reputation that carries stigma. For example, one’s identity changes from a spouse to an ex-spouse, from a relative to an ex-relative, from married with children to single parent. No demographic groups are immune to marital disruption. Nor have education, social status, age, finance, race, religion and the presence of children been able to diminish the rate of divorce or separation in a family.

In research done by Smith and Smith (2000)¹, 343 church members were surveyed to determine the relationship dynamics among parishioners and members in their congregations who were divorced or separated. The responses indicated:

- lack of support and assistance to divorced/separated persons,
- lack of acceptance of the divorced/separated individual,
- limited awareness of the feelings of loneliness and isolation that come with divorce or separation,
- limited awareness of the feelings of rejection and neglect that divorced and separated persons feel, and
- limited awareness of the psychological effects of divorce/separation on children.

In light of these expressed opinions, and in keeping with their spiritual obligations, pastors should seek to gain a better understanding of what divorced members are facing and should seek to lead their congregations into a supportive and understanding role.

Members who have experienced divorce face many spiritual, social, financial, and emotional challenges. The healing and helping ministries of the church are needed to assist children and families cope with the adjustments they are forced to make. Listed below are nine practical steps pastors can take with their congregations to assist divorced families.

- Provide unconditional love, acceptance and support. A meaningful and powerful way to show this love and support is to fund or offer professional counseling services. This may include, individual counseling, family counseling, and support services for children and youths.
- Church members are all part of a spiritual family. Therefore, they should seek to maintain a cordial relationship with each other.
- Help Them Deconstruct Irrational Meanings

Whenever a member is going through, or has gone through a divorce, fellow members should provide support for the family or individual and attempt to understand their emotional and spiritual pain.

- Some divorced families eagerly await the opportunity to discuss their problems with an understanding person in their church. Members should be aware of this need and make best efforts to be that genuine, understanding person.
- The church should be sensitive to the pain and experiences of its members, and be inclusive, rather than exclusive. Many divorced persons are angry, hurting, sensitive, and lonely. Members who seek to befriend them and provide a helping hand can be a wonderful blessing to them.
- Pastors should seek to promote open communication pathways between the divorced members and the other church members. This fosters nurture and support and assists hurting members cope with their emotional adjustments.
- Divorced members sometimes construct meanings that are irrational. Such as: “If only I had tried harder,” “I must be a very bad person,” or “The only way out is to take my life.” Providing counseling and presenting seminars for these members can be redemptive and therapeutic.
- Pastors need to understand that children of divorced families also construct their own irrational meanings.
meanings, for example: “It’s my fault that mom and dad broke up,” or, “If I’m really good my parents will get back together.” By providing a support group for these children, pastors can help to set right their irrational thinking.

- Members sometimes develop socially constructed myths, attitudes, and biases toward divorced members. Through their sermons and workshops, pastors can deconstruct these damaging mind-sets.

- The church family should be aware that, in many instances, divorced families have difficulty regaining their sense of control, self-esteem, and hope for the future. By offering friendship, showing love, sharing hope and optimism, members may empower divorced persons to re-establish balance in some of the more difficult areas of their lives; and may assist them to become reintegrated into church life.

If pastors and churches unite in an attempt to reach out to divorced families, the following positive outcomes will likely be realized:

- divorced members will develop better coping skills and self-efficacy,
- members will better understand the needs and dynamics of divorced individuals, and
- members will develop a more supportive and caring ministry to divorced families

It is our hope that the information in this article will: assist church members to become more sensitive to divorced and separated persons; prompt churches to provide professional counseling as a sensible way of helping divorced persons and their families; inspire pastors to develop sermons and workshops that are geared towards helping divorced families; and help divorced members to understand the benefits of accessing professional counseling services and maintaining connection with the church.

While it is true that, in some respects, the divorce rate in the church reflects that of the world, there are positive steps that can be taken to stem the tide of broken marriages. Pastors and their congregation should take a pro-active approach in strengthening family values and in providing care for those who fall short of these family values.

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Questions for Discussion:

1. How can pastors best assist members to relinquish their irrational beliefs about, and judgmental attitudes toward, divorced persons?

2. What approaches are effective in helping children to get over their irrational guilt feelings about their parents’ divorce?

References


PARSONAGE PERSPECTIVE from page 5

MUSINGS from page 1

the marital challenges they face. Though seeking our advice, they’re often indirectly asking for our support, permission, or encouragement to proceed with their divorce plans. They ask for the biblical perspective and the church’s position on divorce and whether they could remarry if they chose to do so later in life. They wonder about prenuptial agreements, and some want to know whether being unequally yoked together with an unbeliever is grounds for divorce.

Our challenge as Family Life Professionals is to find the wisdom to address these very complex issues that cause so much distress and heartache to members of our church. We must learn how to be better advocates for marriage and to be more effective in our efforts to provide members with the tools they need to have healthier marriages and happier families for eternity.

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2 Ibid., p. 23
Adult Children of Divorce

Al and Tipper Gore shocked America when they announced their divorce in 2010, after raising four children in a forty-year marriage. However, researchers were not as surprised. This couple came of age in the 1960s and ’70s, an era when even the most intimate relationships were radically altered by a huge social upheaval. “This is the generation that weathered a lot of changes that didn’t match their expectations when they walked down the aisle,” according to Betsey Stevenson at the University of Pennsylvania.1

One of the effects of that ‘huge social upheaval’ is the continuing reality of those divorcing at older ages. Sometimes referred to as the fade-away divorce, versus divorce by crisis, these divorces are rarely consensual after the age of 50. The terms Silver Splitters, Silver Separation, and Grey Divorces are also used to describe those in their 50s, or older, who divorce. The increase in these divorces is not strictly an American phenomenon. The rate of divorce among those 55 and older is also creeping up in Britain, France, Canada, and Japan, even though divorce rates on the whole are inching down.

Today, almost anyone can share a personal story of how divorce has affected his or her life. Research is abundant on the effects of divorce on adults and their children. Thankfully, today there are resources available to many children—through their parents, schools, and counselors—for dealing with issues of divorce; but there is less information and fewer resources available for children whose parents divorce when they are young adults or older.

Perhaps this is an area where family life educators, and others whose ministry touches families, can contribute to those in our churches who are facing these issues. Let’s take a look at some of the challenges of older divorcing couples and for ACODs (adult children of divorce) and their extended families.

There is a general myth that adult children have an easier time coping with their parents’ divorce than younger children, but this isn’t necessarily the case. Having seen their parents together all their lives, they may now begin to doubt their ability to maintain their own relationships forever. They are more easily confused about their own conflicting emotions and may suffer from insecurity, guilt, and anxiety.

One study showed that adult children who had reached the age of twenty when their parents divorced were more likely to have ended their own relationships by the age of 33 than their peers whose parents had not divorced.

Divorcing parents of adult children may think their children are going to be fine, as they are now grown-ups themselves, but many of them won’t be “just fine.” The divorced pair often loses their sense of boundaries and they may involve trusted people, including their own children, in inappropriate ways.

Not only do adult children struggle with their own shaky emotions, they are often unwisely taken into confidence by one or both of their parents. They can be influenced by the antagonistic attitude of one parent towards another and are all too often pressured to serve as intermediaries or messengers between the parents.

Some adult children have to face the sale of their childhood home. It’s not that they ever intended to use it as their own, but their parents’ home was a touchstone they could always go to. Suddenly there’s no family home, or there’s a new home (or two) and a new partner to contend with.

Sometimes there are sudden role reversals because a left-behind spouse will lean heavily on children for emotional and financial assistance. Some adult children see their parents spending money they never knew they had, and they wonder what was authentic about their own childhoods.

Parental Divorce Triggers

Children’s Crisis of Faith

Adult children also have to respond to their own children’s anxieties about changes in their grandparents’ lives. The grandchildren may worry that divorce will happen to their own parents too.

Depending on the circumstances of their own growing-up years, some ACODs are angry because their parents didn’t divorce earlier. When the dissolution of the marriage isn’t a shock, they recall bearing the brunt of their parents’ anger and loneliness, and ask why their parents put them through years of misery by staying in their unhappy marriage.

Adult children of divorce may also face a crisis of faith. They thought they knew what their parents believed about the sanctity of marriage. Now their parents’ practice calls into question

continued on page 8
to hire divorce attorneys. There are many advantages to this approach. It is likely to be less expensive; there is typically an earlier resolution; there are greater chances of a fair settlement; and instead of the proceedings being in the public eye, the negotiations are private and confidential.

In her excellent book, Divorce Busting, Michele Weiner-Davis describes ways in which marriages which appear to be “dead on arrival” can be revived. While acknowledging that in extreme cases “certain relationships are better terminated for the health and well-being of everyone involved,” she maintains that, “most people considering divorce do not fall into this extreme category.” She then explains practical and very effective steps that counselors and pastors can take in their efforts to save failing marriages.

Prevention is obviously preferable. Using this book as a starting point and drawing upon other resources, Family Life Professionals can present marriage-saver workshops where couples can learn how to avoid potential hazards and how to strengthen and enhance their life-long relationships.

Scripture teaches that it’s our privilege and moral imperative as church leaders to “search for the lost, bring back those that strayed away, put bandages on those that were hurt, and make the weak strong.” This is what Jesus did. It’s the work He’s commissioned His under-shepherds to do.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How do you draw the fine line between interference and intervention when working with a couple bent on divorce?

References

1 Matthew 18:12, 13
3 Hosea 1:2; 3: 3:2, 3
4 Malachi 2:16, New Century Version
5 http://www.mediate.com/articles/jamesb1.cfm
7 http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,993151-1,00.html
8 Ezekiel 34:16, New Century Version

those religious beliefs. This can be a time when faith is tested; when earlier faith may seem to be outdated, or when personal faith in marriage is actually affirmed and strengthened.

Every family has its own response to divorce. Some ACODs say they see and talk more with their parent or parents than before and that it’s now easier to spend time with them. Learning from their parents’ mistakes, some are determined to work harder on their own marriages.

It is important that we remain sensitive to the complexities of the family circumstances of those with whom we come into contact. Though we may readily notice how divorce is affecting young children and teens, we may easily overlook the anguish of an adult child who is suffering because of his or her parents’ choice to divorce.

When we have opportunity to respond to someone whose parents have divorced, or are divorcing, we need to help in whatever practical ways we can, and follow God’s leading as to how best to encourage and support them.

Sue Murray is a spouse, a passionate mother, grandmother, and loyal friend. A retired Andrews University professor, her teaching focus was in the areas of Family Studies and Social Work.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What can be done to motivate older divorcing parents to lessen the negative impact of their divorce on their adult children?

2. How can the children of older divorcing couples best accomplish the necessary realignment of their relationships with those in the nuclear and extended family?

References