



**RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS AND THE FAMILY:  
STRATEGIES AND PROGRAMS FOR EMPOWERMENT**

by

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As we approach the next century, our society has become immersed in looking to resolve the problems which we face locally, nationally, and globally. Globally, one issue which is becoming of prime importance and concern is that situation of the modern family. For the past two decades, we have studied and restudied the nature of the problems facing the family. However, if we are to enter the 21st century with hope for the family, we must begin to move beyond the rhetoric currently available. What is called for are possible strategies, programs, and policies which can strengthen and nurture all families globally. Further, it is important to include all systems and institutions which are working for the health of the family unit. This paper seeks to present those strategies and programs of one such system which is concerned with the family - those of the religious systems. The paper will not only offer a rationale for the inclusion of religious systems as dialogical partners but will study programs in actual use. By studying these programs within the framework of the United States, we might discern some common strategies which, when used in conjunction with other policies and programs, can further support a healthy family unit not only within the context of the U.S. but globally as well. Specifically, this paper will discuss two types of programs: family education programs and family support programs.

# Religious Systems and the Family: Strategies and Programs for Empowerment

## Introduction

There has been a tremendous amount of discussion and debate in our current literature given to the question of the family - its structure, health and status. This, however, is not new. There has been debate concerning the family for many centuries. In the *Republic*, for instance, Plato argues for something other than the traditional understanding of the family as practiced at that time. Soon after, Aristotle felt it was important to speak out against these "radical" suggestions and argued in support of the traditional family. Since then the debate has been carried out in all areas and disciplines - sociological, political, religious, economic, etc. Regardless of whichever view gained prominence, though, the family has undergone a series of inevitable changes which have usually reflected the changes taking place in the broader society. Some changes could be viewed as being of great benefit to the family and could actually be said to have strengthened the family unit. Others, however, have proved to either be detrimental to the family overall or of no benefit.

Over time, there has also been an equal amount of time and space devoted to a search for the ways and means to aid family survival or to renew the family, depending on one's perspective. For those who believed that the family unit was in peril, a call went out to formulate policies or create agencies and departments geared to "build up" the ailing family. Government, business, and the religious institutions have often been pressed into service for these plans. If the changes facing the family unit were understood to be part of an overall healthy

transformative process, either no policies were suggested or programs were idealized which would nurture this transformative process.

Whether one has taken the perspective that the family unit has been in a state of decline or not can be debated ad infinitum, as can the nature of the problems which have challenged the family unit. However, what may be more deserving of our time and energy is a search for strategies and programs which can empower the family regardless of the challenges and obstacles which it faces. Are there strategies which can empower both healthy and unhealthy families alike? If so, how can these strategies be utilized in a variety of settings and adapted to a variety of circumstances? These, I believe, are the questions which we need to research before we enter the next century.

There are a variety of agencies and institutions to which we can turn for these strategies. For the most part, in the Western world we have sought the help of the private business sector, special interest organizations as well as governmental departments for support in formulating policies and programs to empower the family. What this paper seeks to focus on are those programs and strategies that have been developed and/or utilized by our religious systems. In doing so, I will first offer a rationale for including the religious perspective as a partner in dialogues concerning empowerment of the family unit. This will provide the motivation and philosophy for the strategies and programs which will form the main body of this paper. Throughout the discussion, I will not only describe the programs in operation, but I will also seek to analyze the programs for their strengths and weaknesses so as to understand their general applicability beyond the specific religious system.

## **A. Benefits of a Religious Viewpoint**

There are many issues which have been cited as the most crucial for family policy, depending on which studies one chooses to follow. However, many of the more recent studies are beginning to focus on three broad areas which need to be addressed by policy makers. These areas are: family education and preparation, narrowly-defined policies versus a broader family perspective focus of programs, and the need for more effective support systems. This paper will utilize these three issues as target points for easier categorization.

### **1. Family Life Education**

...we need to advocate programs that encourage responsible preparation for marriage and parenthood and that communicate that if society acknowledges family cohesion as a desirable personal and communal goal, it is the responsibility of society to support families.<sup>1</sup>

A look at current statistics reveal the real need for family life education. For example, more than one American child in five is born out of wedlock with 40% of these children born to teenagers.<sup>2</sup> Further, there has been a sharp rise in the number of single-parent families with over 27% of the total number of children under the age of 18 in the U.S. living in either a single-parent household or in a home headed by a single adult guardian.<sup>3</sup> Fifty percent of single-parent Black households and 48% of the Hispanic single-parent households live below the poverty rate. The National Commission on Children also found that 88% of those surveyed cited that it was more difficult than ever to be a parent in our time. These figures, along with others, are not an attempt to make a judgment on the state of the American family, but rather, they indicate that as the structure of the family changes, more challenges

confront the family unit, and parenting begins earlier there is a need for programs which target parental and family life education.

Governmental agencies are not designed or equipped specifically to implement the variety of educational programs which may be needed. Nor can the business sector handle this task fully without interfering with its own responsibilities to their total work force. However, religious institutions have continued to conduct a variety of forms of parenting and family life education. This is so because of religion's traditional theological rationale for the family. For the most part, each of the worlds' religions view the family as an integral part of one's total spiritual journey and as a part of our identity with or relationship to the Divine.<sup>4</sup> The religious faith is so strongly identified with the family unit that it would be hard to have one without the other. In that way, the religious institution is more than obligated to formulate programs and policies which seek to educate and nurture the family. Non-religious agencies generally do not have such a rationale and philosophy undergirding their activities and so are not compelled to conduct such activities.

The added strength of the religious realm is its ability to further teach about the meaning of commitment, an essential component in family stability and family education. While public policy can address many of the short-term problems faced by individuals within the family unit, they cannot engender a sense of commitment among members of the family unit. Religious systems, on the other hand, are a natural force to develop and nurture the meaning and value of commitment. This is because religious faith requires, to a large degree, a sense of commitment to the primary deity or spiritual essence being worshipped. Commitment is endemic for faith development and spirituality. However, this is not confined to the center of one's faith. It also extends to all which is considered sacred and important - such as

the family. The focus of marital fidelity counseling is commitment. The goal of religious education for youth is commitment, not only to the deity, but also to one's family. This sense of commitment is a crucial element for a stable and healthy family unit.

Further, most religious institutions approach the problems of the family from a theological rather than political, social, or economic position. They do so by presenting a fundamental understanding of the spiritual root cause of family problems, seeking to alleviate those problems as well as their extended manifestations. This is something that public policy cannot address as strongly.

## **2. Specific versus Family Perspective Policy**

Within the past several years, we have seen a variety of policies targeting different individuals of the family. Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Head Start, the 1988 Family Support Act, Medicaid, and others are governmental policies which, when combined with the "family-centered" programs in the workplace, still constitute a largely fragmented perspective of family support. Policies and programs that are considered "fragmented" are those that target specific groupings of individuals - children, the elderly, single-parents, etc. in order to avert or alleviate problems specific to them. The programs usually do not originate from a comprehensive philosophy stemming from the a more wholistic perspective of the family as a healthy unit. As has been suggested by David Blankenhorn, director of the Institute for American Values, this should be balanced with policy originating from a family perspective.

Formulate family policy "from the inside out," that is, from the distinctive vantage point of family functions and the family as an institution, rather than from the

imperatives of broader policy or political goals.... if it is to be different from simply ideas to help people, it must derive solely from what might be called "family business...."<sup>5</sup>

In principle, religion comes from a starting point which could be termed fully "family business," rather than politically or economically oriented. Within Judaism and Catholicism, for instance, the family is a sacred organism which is part and parcel of one's spiritual journey toward salvation. As an aspect of the divine, the religious institution therefore, has a direct mandate to exist to serve the family through programs and educational outreach. Confucianism holds the family and familial relationship as so important that it expands the familial perspective to include all aspects of society. The decidedly family perspective of religious systems, therefore, enhances its value as a valued partner in the family policy dialogue.

### **3. Effective Support Systems**

Public policy programs impacting the family are created in a given time for a given purpose and to meet a given need. Often these programs need constant revision due to the constant change which society experiences. In this way, family programs are not impervious to such changes as modernization, technological advances, and social/economic/political changes. Religion, however, maintains a philosophy which deals, for the most part, with the spiritual realm. In this way, religion works on a level which is not bound to the physical realm and its constant state of flux. That is why religion has been able to withstand many of the changes which impact our day-to-day existence. Consequently, in terms of family policy and support systems, religious support programs provide the balance to the temporality of governmental and business programs. Many religious associations have created a



rich and varied network of programs and resources to aid the troubled family unit because of its natural outreach and concern for the health and well-being of each faithful adherent. William D'Antonio has suggested that, "...religions and families reinforce one another in two ways: through social support and social control. The social support dimension emphasizes that religion supports family life through norms that encourage love, family, solidarity, and marital satisfaction..."<sup>6</sup> Other studies of Black families have found that, "...church members were important sources of assistance in coping with stress associated with racism, marital difficulties, and psychological problems."<sup>7</sup>

Thus far, this discussion has stressed the idealized characteristics of a religious concept of the family. It would only be fair to balance this with the areas of potential difficulties. Traditionally, religious concepts of the family present the stereotypical structure of husband/wife/children. Configurations beyond this norm have then been considered dysfunctional or abnormal. Secondly, religious systems have usually taught and encouraged each family member to maintain a more traditional and conservative role within the family unit. Men are in the role of head of the family, women support their husbands through being good mothers, taking care of the household, and generally keeping the homefront safe and secure, and children are to be submissive and obedient to the parents.

Finally, as imperfect human beings, our institutions do not always reflect the stated ideals or the ideals are interpreted in narrow terms. In terms of the family and religious systems this may be visible in several ways. The institution, as a political unit, may be swayed to act in ways which will justify its continued existence. When segments of society appear threatened, the institution may feel compelled to rely on previous modes of conduct and act conservatively. Further, institutional systems are slower to change. The informal structures will further reinforce the

conservative tendency of the particular faith. For example, Jobs Daughters and the Order of Jacques Demolay are youth organizations which stem from Masonic orders and Eastern Star rites, both of which reflect a strong Protestant philosophy and encourage traditional roles for males and females. Rainbow Girls, the Catholic counterpart to Jobs Daughters, similarly strongly reflects Catholic teachings and traditionalism.

However, not all of the programs formulated by religious systems perpetuate these possible disincentives to a healthy contemporary family. The programs which will be presented for consideration are not dependent on religious particularities, institutional largesse or traditional formulations of the family perspective. Additionally, they may be instrumental in guiding the particular religious institution toward change which will alleviate the possible areas of controversy.

What then are the specific programs which should be considered as part of a discussion on the global empowerment of the family? In the following section are a few of the more highly developed programs which can be utilized in a broad-based program.

## **B. Programs Which Empower the Family**

### **1. Family Education and Family Perspective Programs**

This section will present programs currently in use which come under one of two main headings. They are: Family Education programs and Family Support programs. These programs are said to "work." But what criteria is used to determine if a program works? This is difficult to show in terms of quantifiable data because research studies have not been conducted on these programs. This is a consistent problem in the field of religion and the family. As summarized in an article reviewing studies in religion and the family for the past decade:

Given that there are no national institutes of family and religion, and few universities able and/or willing to fund such expensive long-term research in this area, it may be left for religious organizations to pick up the ball and generate long-term programs of research.<sup>8</sup>

At this point in time, the religious systems involved have not been able to initiate the research indicated.

Secondly, in educational programs prevention is a major emphasis. Consequently, it adds to the difficulty of obtaining objective data. How can one measure how much the program in question has decreased abuse, alcoholism, divorce, unwanted pregnancies, etc.? This serves as a two-edged sword for the organizers as well when it comes to requests for funding or continued support.

Therefore, the criteria for what works will focus on such points as: how inclusive is the program, can the program be adapted in any situation, is the program geared to enable the family unit to draw on its own resources, can the programs be initiated without the religious systems' hierarchy, and can the program retain its strengths without a dependency on the particularities of the religious system involved. The following programs fulfill this list of criteria. This does not negate the real need in the future, however, of concrete data and research into the substantial benefits as well as weaknesses of these programs.

Possibly some of the strongest programs in support of the family have originated within the Catholic Church. This position was re-affirmed in the later part of the 1980s with Pope John Paul II's encyclical on the family, "Familiaris Consortio." The encyclical clarified the centrality of the family in the life of not only the church institution, but within the spiritual life of the individual. It further

offered a rationale for the continued development and renewal of programs designed to support the family.

Consequently, in 1990, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States adopted a new resolution, "The Plan of Pastoral Action for Family Ministry," which further emphasized the need for clear programs on the family. Of the four goals cited, two are of particular interest: "(1) To help family members develop their potential for nurturing and healing each other, for reaching out in active concern to others, and (2) To establish structures at all levels of church life that will facilitate marriage and family ministry."<sup>9</sup> This statement was soon followed by a more recent resolution of the Bishops in November of 1991 called, "Putting Our Children and Families First: A Challenge for Our Church, Nation, and World."

How have these theories and ideals been put into practice? While the National Conference of Catholic Bishops may address the issue of the family and even formulate guidelines for a variety of programs, it is the responsibility of each archdiocese to actually develop the programs.

The archdiocese of New York has created a program which is now being utilized in its 10 counties. The organizers of the programs have also conducted training sessions nationwide in how to initiate these activities. Under the auspices of the Family Life Department, "Bringing Families Together: Parent Education Programs" is a series of programs and activities to promote healthy families. What constitutes a "healthy" family? It is a structure where the individual members have satisfying relationships, family members have a sense of healthy goal development, each member has developed self-esteem, and communication is open between family members.

The philosophy of the program is based on releasing the power that is within the family itself. Further, each program seeks only to offer the skills or tools which can help to develop healthy relationships and self-esteem. They also strive to build on existing community networks so that each program becomes a community affair. Finally, the directors have sought to create an educational/preventive program rather than merely reacting to the negative problems. That takes the programs beyond a one time only effort to become on-going programs with the right kind of energy to sustain them. The drawing power of these programs is that they refocus the family as a unit to depend on each other rather than shift their dependence and security on an external agency which is often a criticism of public policy. It is also important to understand that the programs have not been created and organized by the clergy. Rather, they are organized predominantly by lay personnel and are sustained by the community members.

What are the basic programs currently available? One program, Parents and Teens Together (PATT) is dyadic in structure. Pairs composed of one parent and their teenaged child come together with other like dyads. Each session is an opportunity to open lines of communication and understanding. Through exercises and discussion, differences, commonalities, problems, and issues are studied. One particular unit, "Me and My Shadow," focuses on discussing one's role in that particular family. In this unit, each member of the pair can explore their perceived, idealized, and real role within their family unit. Each person is therefore challenged to respond to the family unit dynamically rather than statically or in a stereotypical manner. Learning to listen to each other, developing problem-solving tools, and learning to communicate sensitively are hallmarks of this program unit.

Siblings Without Rivalry focuses on helping the children in the family learn how to live together. Again exercises and working sessions bring the siblings

together to address their problems and/or emphasize each other's strengths.

Growing Up Together is yet another group of programs involving the entire family. As its brochure states: "We have to work at 'growing' a happy family life. Love is not enough. We need to 'know how.' In Growing Up Together, a six session educational program, parents learn practical ways of promoting quality relationships in the family..."

The educational/preventive component becomes readily apparent in these descriptions. No magic formulas are offered nor are solutions given from outside the particular family unit. Each member must learn to simply communicate and rely on their own strengths and release their own power.

Each program is initially conducted by trained professionals and parents, primarily from within that particular community. Those who continue the network are trained initially by the Family Life Education staff. However, each program is fully allowed to adapt itself to the needs of the community and its families who are utilizing the program.

The strengths of Bringing Families Together are many. They are not top-down strategies imposed on the family but are more grassroots in nature allowing them to build on the strengths of the particular community and adapt to its particular needs. The programs are inclusive. Within New York, all configurations of family units have been encouraged to make use of the programs. In its brief history, the program has been used by single-parent families, healthy and dysfunctional families, families of all economic levels, and non-traditional configurations.

National Parenting for Peace and Justice Network (NPPJN) is a second type of program.<sup>10</sup> Many of the principles operating in the New York program are found in NPPJN. Originating in St. Louis, Missouri in 1980, the program is similar in style to

Worldwide Marriage Encounter, a program popularized in the mid-1970's by Father Chuck Gallagher, which is built around a retreat concept in which couples spend an intensive weekend together communicating with one another. However, there are slight modifications in the format and content of the NPPJN. Whereas Marriage Encounter relies almost completely on discussion sessions, within NPPJN, there are lectures and presentations to balance out the discussion sessions. Also, rather than beginning with only couples, the program immediately involves the entire family unit. Nor is the content confined to a discussion of one's vision of marriage and family. Rather, a panoply of issues and concerns which impact each family is encouraged systematically. These issues are discussed by each participating family singly and then by several families in clusters in order to understand how these issues involve the family within a wider context of social relationships. From there, the cluster of families seeks to find appropriate ways to reconcile these issues constructively and to discover strategies that families can use to resolve them within the context of their own situation. As a consequence, not only are families learning to communicate more effectively, but they are developing problem-solving strategies and techniques. As Flinn points out, "They discuss ways to reduce conflict, listen to feelings, create an affirming atmosphere, and raise more responsible, caring children."<sup>11</sup>

A second set of programs under the rubric of Family Education programs which is gaining wider notice is that of the Family Home Evening Program of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (LDS). The Family Home Evening Program has two stated goals. One is obviously to teach the religious principles of the LDS faith. The second, and most pertinent to our study, is to build family unity.<sup>12</sup> The format of the evening is fairly flexible so as to reflect the needs of each particular family at any given moment in time. Family Home Evening is a program

whereby each member of the family unit agrees to spend one evening each week together without interference from work, school, or friends. During the evening, the family prays together, discusses what has occurred within the week among the members of the family, creates a forum for discussion about concerns, questions, and issues which individuals may have, and takes time to look at spiritual and practical issues important to that particular family.

A resource book is available to assist and guide the families with creative ideas for their evening together. For instance, under the heading, "Love at Home," suggestions offered include: (1) talk about those in the family who have demonstrated love for another family member, (2) express love for someone within the family unit, (3) write down how a family member could be helpful and show appreciation for them and practice that before the next home evening and then discuss the experience at that next session, and (4) talk about why it is hard to love someone in the family. Another general topic is family unity and order. Suggested activities are: (1) discuss family goals and how to meet them, (2) select a family problem or need which could be the focus for the week in seeking a solution, or (3) do some activity together in which everyone in the family can participate. Other home evening resource lessons include, "Loving Our Neighbors," "Developing Compassion," "Understanding Those Who Are Different," and "Sharing Our Blessings." From this, one can see the range of issues which can be discussed by each family. These issues also allows each family to go beyond their own unit to develop a sense of an interconnectedness with others in the wider community.

This approach has two distinct advantages. First, it takes the family beyond their own particular situation to see the interconnectedness of the global community. This can be quite healthy in maintaining a fresh perspective on one's



own problems as well as gaining insight into resolutions which can impact all families and human beings as they reach out toward one another.

Secondly, and most important, it allows families to spend needed time together. As indicated through some of the more recent studies, time together, or the lack of it is quickly becoming a serious issue. "Americans do perceive threats to the family. The most important threat is lack of time. In particular, American families suffer from a lack of time together as a family."<sup>13</sup> Urie Bronfenbrenner also indicates that this may be a global trend as well. "Recent studies reveal that a major disruptive factor in the lives of families and their children is the increasing instability, inconsistency, and hectic character of family life. This growing trend is found in both developed and developing countries..."<sup>14</sup> A study by Juliet Schor of Harvard and Laura Leete-Guy of Case Western Reserve also found that the average American worker works 140 hours more a year with only 16.1 days off per year compared to ten years ago, concluding that less time is being spent with one's family unit. All of these points indicate that programs which encouraged family members to spend more time together could be most beneficial for the future of the family.

Admittedly, one evening a week may be difficult to arrange in these troubling economic times. Further, it will not be a panacea for all the problems facing our families. However, as a strategy which is utilized in conjunction with other policies, this program can become a part of the empowering process. It is also a strategy which depends, to a great extent, on the personal initiative of the family unit. It differs from most governmental or business programs which are often top-down strategies that are imposed on the family in question and which may be disconnected from the specific family and its real needs. Therefore, accountability and action rests solely with the family unit.

Another hindrance to implementing this strategy in a wider sense is the ability of certain families to conduct such a plan. Homes in which the Home Evening method is currently used the most tend to be white, educated, and middle to upper middle class. Families from depressed urbanized settings, single-parent homes with the parent under the age of 20, or families in remote isolated rural areas may be hard pressed to initiate such activities or at the very least, limited in the resources on which they can draw to conduct such an activity.

What might help ameliorate the problem is to have “presenter” families guide a few sessions as is done in Marriage Encounter and the NPPJN system along with resource manuals or written suggestions. Because of the religious philosophy behind the creation of this problem, if the local church organizes and guides the implementation of this program, the natural moral persuasion and/or strength of the religious institution in each given community can greatly enhance the attractiveness of the program as long as the program does not become merely a tool for other ends, i.e. proselytizing and the inculcation of specific doctrinal beliefs. An added advantage is the fact that in most of the special situations cited above, the church/synagogue/religious institution has more natural access to the homes than does a governmental/business institution. Within the district of Harlem in New York City, for instance, the church is a far stronger institution and is often a welcomed visitor to the home. The church can also more naturally monitor its progress as a part of its day-to-day outreach and activity in the community. Further, the Family Home Evening is not doctrine-specific and fits easily into any religious theological basis.

Marriage Encounter, National Parenting for Peace and Justice Network, and the Family Home Evening programs also have a few points in common. They focus on communication and family interaction. An old adage is that what is most

obvious is the least obvious. This may be true of family communication and interaction. While this may seem a naive or simplistic point, often times, what a family in distress may need more than anything is to be able to talk together and spend time together. In our rush to hand out money, aid, and assistance we forget that the least intrusive activity may be the best course to take for the long-range security and well-being of the family.

Further, these programs begin with the particular family unit and its own needs. This offers flexibility for the family being served. If the family is already "healthy," these programs can further nurture the family. If the family is in distress, the programs can begin the healing process. Either way, the programs begin in the home and are accomplished by the family members themselves. All "outside" assistance is only there to guide and mediate - not intrude. And, because it begins from within the family, the family is given tools which can be utilized over and over again through all situations.

Finally, the generality of the programs enable them to be utilized by any faith perspective. They can be adapted to fit the particular faith community so as to make them relevant to the particularities of the family and the wider community. And, they are not confined to one's place of business or political structure. All of which make the programs applicable in a wide variety of situations.

## **2. Support Programs**

As we have seen, there are many types of support systems available for the family. However, my question is, how effective are these policies and programs if they are disconnected from a wholistic family perspective? Are fragmented policies the most efficient strategies? And finally, can they be helpful in the long run? I believe that they can only become secondary to those which resonate from within

an altruistic family philosophy and are unencumbered by political or business concerns. Therefore, those support programs developed by the various religious institutions may be more empowering over a long period of time.

One such network of programs is the Family Cluster or Family Growth programs. Recognizing the aforementioned lack of family perspective, Margaret Sawin offers that,

Our society has tried to amend this by providing support structures of individual family members in public schools, social work agencies, and mental health units; but often these agencies offer their aid only after a family has become dysfunctional and is in difficulty. We have not reached the point of realization that such structures cannot change individuals while neglecting the family system in which that individual lives.<sup>15</sup>

There are many features which allow Family Clusters to stand out as a good strategy for family support. These characteristics include: (1) in-depth family sharing, (2) intergenerational relationships, (3) interfamily support, (4) respect of privacy, (5) greater openness to "others," (6) sense of connectedness and community, (7) realization of family potential, and (8) learning of new styles of problem-solving and conflict resolution.<sup>16</sup>

What differentiates Family Clusters from the Catholic programs previously mentioned? One, the primary focus of the Catholic programs are on family life education within a particular family unit guided by a trained individual. The sessions emphasize more of the concepts which make for a 'good' family. Family Clusters embody these concepts and hopes, but primarily focus their energies on supporting families at any stage. Solutions to real problems may very well result from the experience. But the Clusters are not pointedly striving for solutions. They

strive to offer basic support for each other's family unit-how ever it is needed. Further, Family Clusters are encouraged to maintain their support over a longer period of time.

A Family Cluster, as developed by Herbert Otto, is:

...a group of 4 or 5 complete family units which contract to meet together periodically over an extended period of time for shared educational experiences related to their living in relationship within their families. A Cluster provides mutual support, training in skills which facilitate the family live in relationship, and celebration of their life and beliefs together.<sup>17</sup>

The format of typical Clusters include shared activities and outings, providing some time away from the family unit by one or more families stepping in to take care of the household for the dysfunctioning person or family, discussions of problem-solving methods, working together on a common task, and generally provide a friendly listening post to air our questions and problems.

A variation of this strategy is formulated by the Unification Church through its organized "Trinity System." While this remains largely a theoretical concept due to the relative youth of the church, it promises to provide a strong support system for the family. The concept includes three families living either under the same roof or at least in close proximity and communication with each other. The trinities should function to support each other through discussion emphasizing strengths and positive elements, financial support if needed, moral and emotional support, and general encouragement. Trinities are created at the time of one's marriage. This, in itself, is unique. Most families which utilize the Cluster method, are usually formed well after the family has been formed and often comes into existence during a problem. By working through the Trinity System, families and couples have a

long-term means of support which begins as they come together to form a family. Consequently, a support system is in effect throughout each significant stage in the family's development.

This system of Family Clusters could be utilized in any community with a variety of resources or abilities. The local church, synagogue, or religious community could organize such a clustering activity with little or no difficulty. Each Cluster would therefore become sensitive to the particularities and needs of that community and population. This strategy is not dependent on economic status, educational level, or technical ability. I believe that, in conjunction with a good family education strategy, Family Clusters can be a further empowerment strategy to nurture our families in the future.

A final group of support programs that I believe deserves mention are the Relief Society and the Welfare Society of the LDS. The Relief Society is a women's organization which offers temporal as well as spiritual help. The Society has two types of activities. One activity is to produce and process commodities that will be needed by members of their community. The second focus is to consistently visit each woman within their geographic area at least once every three months. The purpose of the visits is to identify real needs of that particular family and to actually assist them in obtaining the help necessary. This might be particularly valuable for single-parent homes - especially as surveys reveal that most single parents are women.

The Welfare Services, established in 1936, is a system whereby those families finding themselves in sudden need will be aided by the Church. This occurs in two ways. First, members of the family are given work in the Church or Church-related industry rather than simply given aid. This is quite similar to the recent proposal in the United States Congress to return to the New Deal programs which placed people

on welfare in public works' related jobs. Secondly, those families within each Ward area are encouraged to save up to two years' worth of food, clothing, and basic necessities. In times of need then, the Church and community can draw on these resources to further support families in need.

## Summary

In 1980, the World Council of Churches sponsored a conference to address the family. The report from the conference summarizes this discussion quite appropriately:

(Family empowerment involves) teaching families to communicate openly, honestly, caringly, nurturingly... to strengthen their family system...to confront and resolve their needs openly and constructively so they will not be rendered impotent by them...to discover resources for personal and family education...to strengthen their relatedness to their extended family, their clan, support group, caring community.<sup>18</sup>

I believe that the family will always need support and nurturing - whether it is already healthy and strong or whether it is dysfunctional or in trouble. As imperfect people, living in an imperfect world there will always be challenges and obstacles to life and thus to the family. I further believe that no one program alone can provide all that is needed, nor do I believe that unlimited amounts of money will magically create healthy families.

I do believe that we need to draw on the natural strengths of institutions that are already in place, the primary one being the religious institution. The philosophy and vision of our religious institutions are more than conducive to creating healthy thriving families. The strategies cited in this paper have already been in place and

have been shown to meet the challenges and needs of the contemporary family unit. Taken together as a whole, I believe they can be most effective in resolving many of the problems which confront the family so that it may be more empowered in the future. It is even possible that once these programs are advertised and utilized more globally, other successful and vital strategies offered by religious communities will be discussed and made public. Either way, religious systems must once again see themselves as valued partners in the discussion and formulation of global strategies to empower the family. And, society in general must once again begin to provide the opportunity for religious systems to take a more active role in deciding policy which effects the family.

The family of the 1990s may be facing serious obstacles and challenges. And we can continue to debate the nature and cause of these obstacles. However, the path to change and positive growth for the family can only begin when we focus all of our energies on discussing, studying, and creating policies, programs, and strategies which will actually empower the family. As Richard A. McCormick, University of Notre Dame, expressed it, we can readily admit the problems, needs, and rights of our contemporary families. What we must work toward are practical programs and strategies to satisfy these needs.<sup>19</sup>



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## Endnotes

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