

## GENERATION TO GENERATION

(Family of origin issues and the Christian counselor)

"Ich und mein Haus wollen dem Herrn dienen." (But as for me and my household we will serve the Lord. Joshua 15:15b) A special wall-hanging. The silvery letters sparkle in contrast to the shiny black background. An heirloom. My German heritage. A connection from generation to generation.

Awareness. It is the first step. As counselors, we first hear the problems identified in our offices. It may be one of feeling guilt due to an inability to care for aging parents. Parental interference (in-laws) may be stated as a reason for a strained marital relationship. Current problems may be blamed on neglect/abuse as a child. Not growing up in a Christian home may be stated as a reason for a weak faith. These are all issues which involve adult children and their parents and families.

Increased awareness of our families can lead to a better understanding and acceptance of ourselves. This acceptance and understanding results in being better able to make decisions on what to retain from our past and what to change for our future. Awareness and acceptance of ourselves and our family of origin, followed by appropriate action, can be significant factors in helping us to better understand ourselves. This awareness, acceptance and action can help us in counseling others.

I will begin by sharing some thoughts and feelings about my own family of origin. As you are reading, I would ask that each of you begin to think about your own feelings about your family of origin. Which thoughts and feelings are the same as mine? Which are different? Which issues have been discussed with your parents? Which have gone unsaid? If one or both are deceased, what do you remember? cherish? hope to forget?

I am an only child. This results in a more intense parent/child relationship. All of whatever is passed from one generation to the next is channeled through one person, me. All of the parenting issues have only one recipient, me. Marriage and grandchildren depend upon one person, me. And, as my parents get older, concern for their care is more intensely felt by me, their only child. It was with this aging issue that I began to significantly increase my awareness about myself and my relationship to my parents.

Being an only child made a difference from early on. As a child it meant growing up with more contact with adults rather than with children. Leaving home and the family farming community for college was more difficult. My early years of marriage were marked with overly-conscious efforts by me and my parents to separate in order not to interfere with the new marital relationship and, subsequently, with issues of parenting. This arrangement tended to be somewhat uncomfortable for me since I could feel a strong emotional bond to my parents and yet wanted to not have it interfere with bonds to my new

family. It also was somewhat uncomfortable for my wife. She sensed the strong emotional bond between me and my parents, and tended to deal with this by remaining more quiet and rather distant when my parents were present. This was interpreted by me as her not caring as much for my parents as I would have liked. It appeared to me as though she could be so open and talkative with others but not with my parents. During the early years of our marriage, I thought it was her problems. I wished she would change.

Slowly, I began to realize that it was my problem. Rather than thinking about how my wife should change, I needed to begin the process of looking at myself. I needed to increase my awareness about myself and being the only child. I needed to determine which issues were the most important to me as an adult child with aging parents. It was important to me to more clearly think about the things I wished to retain from my past and the things I wished to change. Awareness had occurred.

Acceptance with understanding was step two. I needed to better accept myself as the only child living in mid-life years and the situation of my aging parents. I needed to begin to talk more honestly with my wife about myself and my thoughts and feelings about my parents. As I did this my wife gained greater insight into my situation. As I more openly and honestly discussed my feelings (not facts), my wife could more openly relate her feelings to me. I needed to accept the ramifications of being the only child. We needed to honestly explore the differences in parental bonding for me as an only child and for her as one of ten children. Acceptance with understanding had occurred.

Action (change) was step three. I realized a need to discuss some issues directly with my parents. I needed to talk with them about the issues of their care as they got older. Both of my parents are the oldest children and had provided direct care for their parents in their rural community. I have left that community and will not be able to provide the same kind of care for them as they did for their parents. I needed to address this issue directly with them. I was able to do this more appropriately after I better understood myself and had discussed the situation with my wife. The opportunity arose for the four of us to directly discuss this issue. It resulted in significant changes.

My relationship with my parents has been much more comfortable since we were able to honestly approach this very difficult and emotional issue. My wife is also more comfortable with my parents than in our earlier years of marriage. The reason for the changes is due to my increased awareness, acceptance and follow-up action which I took to improve our situation and make it more comfortable for all of us. All thanks to God for the wisdom and strength He gave us to be accepting of each other and approach these sensitive and emotional issues in a loving and caring manner.

Awareness - Acceptance - Action. As counselors we need to first explore these three with ourselves in our own families of origin. This experience and process will be valuable to us in working with others. After this process we can do the same for the people who come to us

seeking counsel. We can help them to become more aware of their families of origin, to better understand and accept their roots, to alert them to the possible effects upon their current situation and to help them take action and make some changes.

Awareness of the real issue is frequently the most difficult for people. Frequently, there is much awareness of how the other person should change. Adult children can blame their parents rather than trying to understand them. Spouses may be blamed for in-law problems. Children feel guilty by permitting their parents to lay "guilt trips" on them. Blaming others and pitying ourselves are common responses originating with our sinful nature. Both responses avoid the task of increasing self-awareness. This results in non-acceptance and prevents any positive change.

An example: You are providing marriage counseling for a couple. In your second session with the couple, the husband indicates that his mother-in-law is too involved with their family. He thinks their marriage could be much better if there wouldn't be this interference. He says he has tried to talk to her but she doesn't seem to change. At this point his wife forwards many suggestions on how her husband could improve his relationship to his mother-in-law. You also think that the husband could make some changes in his relationship to his mother-in-law. Their interview continues with the focus on how the husband could change. STOP! This is a cover-up of the real issue! The husband blames his mother-in-law and the wife blames her husband. The real issue, however, lies with the mother/daughter relationship. Mother's over-involvement in her daughter's marriage is mostly due to the lack of separation between mother and daughter. Maybe the daughter feels inadequate and permits her mother to "take charge." Perhaps mother feels a need to retain parental relationship with her daughter rather than a more appropriate adult to adult relationship. The daughter may feel guilty for her rather rebellious past, and now feels the need to "make up." The list could go on and on. The real issue, however, is between the daughter and her mother. The counselor needs to help the wife (daughter) to become increasingly more aware of her relationship with her mother and how this has an effect on her current marital relationship.

How does the counselor help the daughter? The counselor begins by making a statement of what he hears and understands. He says, "I hear Mary (wife) mention things that you could change, Dick (husband). And, I hear you, Dick, talking about things which Mary's mother could change. However, I think there is a special relationship between a mother and her daughter. Tell me, Mary, about your relationship with your mother."

Mary begins by talking about her relationship. The counselor checks out Mary's assessment of her relationship to her mother by asking Dick, her husband, if he observes it in the same way as Mary describes it. Maybe Dick has some valuable insights (not criticism or blame!). Maybe Mary has difficulty looking at herself in her relationship to her mother. As Mary begins to explore this relationship, the counselor needs to encourage the expression of

feelings. Generally the feelings will include both negative and positive ones. expressions such as these are common: "There really is nothing wrong between my mother and me." - "I really love my mother but it feels like she is still in control." - "I care about my parents but I have my own life. I can't be responsible for their happiness." - "It is so hard to develop an adult-to-adult caring relationship." - j "It seems so easy to continue the parent/child (superior/inferior) relationship."

The counselor keeps the focus on Mary and her thoughts and feelings about her mother. he wishes Mary to become increasingly aware of her feelings and acknowledge them as her own. The counselor may restate and reflect to Mary what he hears. Her are some examples of these statements: "I hear a struggle within you, Mary. On one hand you wish to show love and care for your mother, but sometimes it feels like she still controls you! Yo feel like a little girls." - "When you think of your rebellious teen years and how you hurt your mother and how she continued to stick by you, you think you need to 'make up' for those years now by never saying, 'No,' to your mother." - "I hear you wanting to continue to show care for your mother, but you want it to be different than it was when you were a child." To these messages, clients frequently acknowledge that these are their thoughts and feelings. They are increasing their awareness about themselves and their relationship to their parents.

Awareness is the first step toward understanding and acceptance. awareness helps people to better understand their own strengths and weaknesses and how these have an effect upon their relationship to their parents. Awareness also helps people make decisions about what aspects of their family of origin they wish to and can retain and which ones they wish to and can change. Without this awareness, people frequently react only to their feelings. They may feel that everything about their family of origin was horrible and they wish to change everything. This has a result of removing all roots and identity and frequently leaves people feeling rather lonely and without any sense of belonging. On the other hand, persons may think of their childhood only as wonderful and may wish to duplicate it exactly with their spouse and children. This idea has a tendency to alienate the spouse and children. In anger, a spouse may say, "Just go back and live with your parents, since the kids and I can't ever match up to them." This type of comment clearly reflects a problem involving the family of origin. Counselors can help people increase their awareness of their particular family situation.

Greater awareness can lead to greater acceptance. In my counseling with people about their families of origin, understanding, which results in acceptance of their past, is positive. As family members better understand their parents, their brothers and sisters, the possible reasons for certain actions or inactions, they are better able to realistically accept their family of origin. Persons better understand the stresses and joys of their family. They assess both the positive and negative aspects. They are better able to understand how the devil, the world and their own flesh are continuously at work and to experience, in some cases, the sad consequences. Without judging right

or wrong, good or bad, all need to be aware that what went on in their family of origin has influenced what they are today.

Situations that cause shame, guilt or embarrassment are events which are frequently called "family skeletons." The skeletons are usually kept in closets. Family members would rather not talk about "bad things" - divorce, pregnancies outside of marriage, abuse, neglect, alcoholism, scrapes with the law, prison terms, etc. In some cases, families may even pretend these "bad things" never happened. Parents feel that their children will disown them if they ever reveal certain "skeletons." By not discussing these matters in a spirit of honesty and love, families miss an excellent opportunity to forgive and accept each other as Christ forgives and accepts them. This process provides an excellent model for their own "new" families. Christian families can gain valuable insight in knowing that they need to be continually aware of the temptations of this world and the importance of using God's word to fight these temptations. This is truly living the Christian life.

Alcoholism is a common example of a skeleton which Christian families may not wish to acknowledge. Family members offer excuses for their past rather than understanding the facts of the past and learning from them. Children who are now adults but grew up in a family where alcoholism was a problem are called "adult survivors." An example will illustrate the process in a counseling situation.

A single parent comes to your office. She begins talking about the difficulty in raising her two children alone. She says her husband left her three years ago and she feels so alone and overwhelmed with parenting. The counselor may think that it is important to focus on "helpful hints on parenting." As he begins to discuss some good parenting techniques, she begins to wonder if she is "normal" and how a "normal" family acts. She states that she has difficulty with consistency and follow-through. She says she loves her children but has trouble "getting close." She also shares with you that her former husband told her that she was "emotionally cold" and wanted to live in a perfect world. The parishioner has shared with the counselor several characteristics of "adult survivors." The parishioner is also giving the counselor a strong message that she wants to talk about herself rather than focusing on parenting skills.

The counseling pastor begins by saying, "Tell me a little about your growing up experience, your relationship with your parents." Sometimes you may hear a glowing report about a "Huxtable Family". The counselor says, "Sounds like your family was almost a perfect place to live. Most Christian families have both joys and struggles. Can you share some struggles or difficult times your family encountered?" Sometimes tears come at this point and the counselee then states that it was an awful family and there was nothing good about it. She talks about her dad drinking and being "super good when sober, and abusive when drunk." The goal of the counselor is to help the parishioner to better understand a family where alcoholism is a problem. The parishioner thinks she is "crazy" when she can't make much sense out of her childhood years. And yet, this is the reality of growing up in an

alcoholic family. There may be many broken promises, mixed messages, inconsistencies, blaming, covering up, lack of intimate relationships, etc. It is a confusing and chaotic picture and lacks structure, trust and caring among the family members. Through a better understanding of alcoholic families, a person can better accept the situation as real and learn from it rather than ignore it and just try to live with fantasies about some dream world. Acceptance of ourselves and our family of origin is an important step.

Acceptance permits us to view the blessings which God has given to Christian families. In spite of our weaknesses, God continues to guide and lead Christian family members. Parents and children can openly share the situation in which man made on decision, but God had different plans for his people. The Old Testament story of Joseph is an excellent example. This type of sharing can help another generation to better cope with their current life situation which at times may seem so hopeless. Some families may have experienced and endured severe hardships. Death or permanent injury may have been the result. How did Christian families cope? How did they permit God to lead their lives during the crisis? How did they refuse His guidance? This type of information can be significant in the lives of succeeding generations. It may be a real strength for Christian families to better learn about themselves and the manner in which their families dealt with changing situations.

In some cases this knowledge becomes very painful. Children gain insight into the reality of being abandoned, of never having a trusting and dependable parent, of being without food or shelter, of being abused, etc. Increased awareness of their family of origin can result in substantiating their imagined thoughts and feelings. People may resist this heightened awareness process because the memories are so painful. (People may make this decision.) However, the denial process has more negative than positive consequences. With God's strength and guidance, Christians can realistically become aware of their growing up experiences, accept them and deal with them as part of God's total loving plan for them.

If acceptance and understanding of our family of origin helps us to accept our Christian parents as sinners redeemed by Christ, we can better accept their strengths and weaknesses. Blaming is a very common sin among all people. Blaming is used as a way of focusing attention on someone other than ourselves. We need not look at ourselves nor accept the responsibility of our own thoughts and actions when we blame others. As we keep on blaming our parents, our childhood, our husband, etc., we very conveniently divert the responsibility of our own issues to others. We avoid accepting our responsibility by blaming others.

Acceptance and understanding of our family of origin can lead to positive action. Action refers to changes which people can make in their lives. These changes are based upon an understanding of options which people have in deciding which things to retain from their growing up experiences and which things to alter or dismiss. Rather than blaming their parents or refusing to accept the past, they can realistically understand and accept both the past and themselves. By

doing this, they can take action in making God-pleasing decisions about their own lives and their families.

An example.

You are providing counseling in a marital situation. During the sessions the husband complains that his wife doesn't want him to accept a better job in another state. He feels he can't even talk to her about it. The wife said that she would feel very guilty about moving and she feels as though she would be abandoning her parents. She has kept this thought to herself since she didn't think her husband would ever understand her feelings toward her parents. Her parents paid for her college education and provided so much care for her when she was young and very ill. Now she feels as though she owes them care until they die. Ideally, the scenario would play out something like this: She needs to better understand her projected feelings of guilt and how they interfere with her current marriage. She should be encouraged to discuss her feelings with her parents. In many cases the parents would be receptive and understanding. They probably would help her to resolve her feelings of guilt. They may admit that they will miss the family being close, but that they do understand she needs to be involved with her own husband and family. They assure her that they can manage without her living near them and that they know she cares for them even if she lives at a distance.

Action - looking at options and making choices and changes - is difficult. It takes much energy to begin to talk with parents about past and present relationships. It is much easier to talk about day-to-day events than to talk about feelings. It is especially difficult to express feelings of guilt, being controlled, loneliness, abandonment and insignificance. If the parishioners wish to begin some serious talking with their parents, it is important for the counselor to coach them. It may even be worthwhile to have a practice session in the office. If this occurs, the counselor pretends he is the parent and responds in different ways to assist the parishioner in anticipating various parental responses. Throughout this process, it is important to stress the sharing of honest and sincere feelings. Any type of ulterior motive or manipulation must be avoided.

There are several important items which need to be implemented when wishing to begin discussing important relationship issues with parents or other family members. The first is that the adult child needs to take the initiative and approach the family members. Waiting for precisely the right time and place usually results in procrastination. A right time and place needs to be established rather than waiting for it to come. An honest and clear statement of intent is the first step.

The adult child wishes to avoid creating a defensive atmosphere. If the situation is not handled properly, the parents or other family members may feel attacked. The desire to change things may be viewed as fault-finding and blaming the parents' child-rearing practices. This situation can be mostly avoided by the adult child speaking for self by using "I messages" and by desiring the change for himself. The purpose

of the discussion is to better help the adult child understand himself; it is not to find fault with the parents and blame them.

Here are some examples of communication with parents that has the probability of being most helpful:

"I need help with my feelings. I feel love and care for you at times I feel like I love you as a small child. I want to love you as an adult. I need to talk with you about this."

"Since we live at a distance, I sometimes feel as though I am neglecting you. I need your help in sorting out my feelings about you."

"I have some very mixed feelings about growing up. At times I have felt like you don't care about me. I have felt very alone. I need your help in sorting out my feelings about my childhood."

If parents respond by saying, "You are just blaming us, you didn't think we did a good job, you are just trying to cover up your own faults," the response from the adult child can be, "I can hear you are upset with me. I can understand that I may sound to you like I'm blaming you. However, I really am trying to figure me out. I need to better understand myself and I need your help for this."

It may be that a parishioner feels quite strongly that some changes need to be made in his relationship with his parents or other family members. He may wish to take advantage of a birth, marriage, divorce, illness, or death within the family. A crisis or a family transition point affords an excellent opportunity to begin the process of change. Family members tend to be more receptive to change at these points of family life.

Contact with family members may begin on a one-to-one basis rather than with a group. An individual contact prevents the family members from relating to each other in their usual pattern. If possible, it is best to begin with the family member with whom the relationship appears to be least understood. This type of one-to-one contact offers the greatest probability of a change within the family pattern. If two people who weren't understanding each other can change their relationship, it will have an affect on various other relationships also.

An example:

There has been a remarriage of a parent whose spouse died after thirty years of marriage. A son has difficulty relating to his step-mother. Initially, he blames his step-mother. However, as he increased his self-awareness about the situation, he realized that he really feels he has lost his father. They had been so close during the time his father was single. Now his father is sharing his life with a new spouse. The son realizes that it would be very important to him to share his feelings of loss with his father rather than blame his step-mother. His father's remarriage



was the life transition which permitted changes in the family relationship.

One last comment. Establishing a more open and comfortable relationship with our family of origin also significantly helps us in parenting our own children. It helps us be better able to have our own children relate to their grandparents, aunts and uncles. Our children can better establish their own significant relationship with their grandparents if we, as parents, are open and comfortable with our parents and relatives. Our children can benefit from being able to openly and honestly relate to the persons who are significant in their heritage. This is making a connection from generation to generation.

## CONCLUSION

Points to consider:

1. Our family of origin has a significant influence upon us, especially upon our marital and parental relationships.
2. Awareness and acceptance of our family of origin significantly helps us in our counseling with others.
3. Understanding and accepting our roots helps us in parenting our own children. We can provide our children with honesty and openness which permits them to accept their heritage.
4. Awareness and acceptance energizes us for action, for change. We can better decide what things to retain and what to change.
5. An awareness and understanding of our past helps us to view it more objectively rather than emotionally glorifying it or despising it.
6. For Christians, a better understanding of our family of origin can help us to see God's hand in our lives and in the lives of our forefathers. We are better able to see His will rather than our will.