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THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY TO ABUSED CHILDREN

The family is most important of all human relations as it is the basic unit of society and the womb of the development of every individual's personality. The adult of tomorrow is fashioned to a great extent in the family atmosphere of today.¹ According to Delores Curran, the family must achieve five basic functions in order to be considered a healthy family. The family must achieve economic survival and operate on its own internal resources. It must be able to provide protection for the individuals within the family group and be a place for withdrawal and security. It must be able to pass on the religious faith they hold. It must be able to educate its offspring. And, lastly, it must be able and willing to impart a sense of worth to the individuals within the unit.²

In order for normal development to occur, the family must provide a stable yet flexible environment for the child which allows for change as the child develops and as new situations present themselves. The family must also provide a basic source of authority and a system of government that is reliably consistent over time. The family must also provide a constant, caring attitude for each individual as well as provide goals for the child and for the entire family to work toward.³

Perhaps the worst problem facing the family today is the abuse of children within the family structure. The problem as to how pervasive abuse of children is in society has been brought to light only recently in studies by different groups. Abuse of children must be dealt with! Too many children have been warped by mistreatment.

Christians may wish to disagree, but there is also abuse among the ranks of the church. The sad fact is that many abusers use religion to rationalize abuse. Doesn't the Scripture say, "Spare the rod and spoil the child," and "Rebellion is born in the heart of a child, but the rod of correction drives it far from him"? Some Christian parents abuse their children for the same reasons non-Christian parents abuse their children. The major purpose for this work is to present a program which the local church might develop in order to combat child abuse in the local community.

The Problem: Child Abuse

Wesley Monfalcone stated:

The basic meaning of "to abuse" is to use improperly, to misuse, to treat another with harshness born of insensitivity or of malicious intent. . . . We may think of abuse as ranging from socially acceptable ignoring, through verbal and physical mistreatment, to physical violence. All of us at some time in our development are involved in family abuse.⁴

Child abuse can be separated into four rather broad categories which invariably overlap in some areas. Child abuse can be considered any action or inaction which endangers a child's normal development. This includes any danger to the child's physical body as well as to his emotional, spiritual, or intellectual development.

Emotional or psychological abuse is abuse in which the child is subjected to a threat of words, ridiculed, or in any way jeopardized by the withholding of love.⁵ Emotional abuse stifles the normal development of the child's personality by undermining his sense of self-worth or by emphasizing his inability to be of value.

Physical violence is abuse in which the child is exposed to bodily injury in which medical treatment is needed whether or not the child receives the treatment.⁶ The child who is physically abused may endure this abuse for several years with no one recognizing the problem. The child may exhibit the evidence of the abuse by cuts, bruises, or broken bones. Often physical abuse terminates with the death of the child.

Neglect is a broad category of abuse which includes "both passive neglect and active abuse or exploitation, and covers the social, emotional, educational, as well as the physical needs of the child."⁷ Neglect presents itself when the parent fails to consider the needs of the child. This may either be their total neglect in an area or their expectations exceeding the limits of the child's abilities.

Sexual abuse not only affects the child physically but also emotionally and spiritually. Physical injuries are likely to occur because the child is not prepared by his development for sexual relations. Also, emotional and spiritual damage occur that will impair the child's normal development throughout the rest of his life. Sexual abuse of children has been defined as,

the involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents in sexual activities that they do not fully comprehend, to which they are unable to give informed consent, or that violate the social

taboos of family roles. It includes pedophilia . . . rape, and all forms of incest.⁸

Characteristics of Abusive Parents

There is no clear-cut definition of the kind of person who becomes a child abuser. The abuser can come from any social level or background. The majority of cases reported, however, come from the lower income levels or from minority groups. While this has been true, it is the factors which can lead to abuse that seem to be the deciding component in the mistreatment of children.⁹

Underdeveloped emotional control of the parent seems to lead to child abuse. The parent suffers from low self-esteem and does not possess the resources to improve that outlook. His personality has been affected by his upbringing to the point that he no longer knows appropriate behavior toward his child. He cares for and treats the child in the same way he was treated.¹⁰ He often feels ineffective in the role of parent but lacks the background for developing the skills to be an effective parent.¹¹

Abusive parents were often subjected to abuse in their childhood. A high rate of incidence of abuse is transferred from one generation to the next.¹² Therefore the parents' childhood experiences have much to do with how they will react when a given set of circumstances occur. Their ability to cope with and respond to their children will draw heavily upon how their parents met these same situations.

Physical and mental stability or limitation of the parents are contributing factors in the abusive treatment of children.¹³ Physical limitation could hamper a parent's ability to handle a child properly and lead to frustration abuse. Intelligence below normal could impair the parent's ability to cope with everyday stress in an adequate manner.

A common characteristic of the abusive parent is the isolation to which he is subjected. He has no close friends who relate to him or care for him in a loving and sharing way. The only people he relates to are the members of his immediate family. This can lead to a distortion of the normal family relationship.¹⁴

Another common characteristic of the abusive parent is his attitude about what being a parent means. Some parents view their children as property rather than individuals whom they should educate, shelter, encourage, and help to develop. Others view their role as parents as overseers who are to bring their child into subjection to strict guidelines. With this false idea of authority comes the idea of punishment being equated with discipline. The parent sees his duty as punishing the child so that the child will turn out right.¹⁵

Another common factor among abusive parents is the unrealistic expectations as to what a child is capable of doing.¹⁶ The parent accuses a very small infant of activity or thoughts that the child could in no way accomplish. The parent sometimes cannot differentiate between the needs or abilities of children of differing ages, but expects the same behavior from all children.¹⁷

The factor having the greatest effect on the abusive treatment of children appears to be the amount of stress the parent is under. Family money shortages can be a very pressing cause of stress. Another cause of stress is a child behaving in a fashion contrary to the parent's expected norms. The areas that are sources for stress are many and varied.¹⁸

Intervention

There are several factors which contribute to child abuse. In order to work effectively in abuse situations, one should understand that abuse does not just happen. There are steps leading up to abuse. Ruth and Henry Kempe related that,

Child abuse occurs in the presence of four factors. (1) the parents must have a background of emotional or physical deprivation and perhaps abuse as well; (2) a child must be seen as unlovable or disappointing; (3) there must be a crisis. The fourth factor is that no effective "lifeline," or line of communication to sources of aid, exists at the moment of crisis.¹⁹

This will allow one to understand that abuse is the end result of a chain of events which reach back several years. There are several problems to be faced by the church as it seeks to break that chain of events and to bring about help and healing for those who are abused and for those who abuse.

The place to begin in any abuse situation is with the child. The church must seek to aid the child to be free from the threat of further abuse. In doing this, the church faces the real possibility of alienating the abusing parent and also faces the possibility of legal action through some mistaken deed in seeking to intervene in a family situation. Be that as it may, the first responsibility for the church must be the welfare and safety of the child.

The first thing to be done is for the situation to be assessed as to the prevailing danger to the child. Persons should be trained in order that they might watch for and recognize the signs of abuse.²⁰ When behavior is perceived to indicate abusive treatment, the next step should be to make sure the appearance is in fact true.²¹ This can be done through candid observation and or talking to the neighbors of the suspected person. If the action is confirmed to be abusive, the persons involved should be confronted with the abnormal-

ity of the behavior.²² Solutions to the abnormal behavior should be discussed with the person. It should be realized that intervention is rarely as easy as just talking with the persons involved. The behavior has taken years to develop and will likely not end without further treatment.²³

If there is a present danger to the child, the next action should be to notify the police or the appropriate local governmental authorities so that the child can be removed from the area of danger. These various agencies have the training and experience to evaluate the circumstance as to its threat to the physical and mental welfare of the child. They also have the legal means at their disposal to place the child in a protected environment if they feel such action is warranted.

The federal government and most states require one to report all suspected child abuse situations.²⁴ The church needs to be aware of the legal requirements and comply with the law to the extent that it does not violate Christian ethics. The well-being of the child should take precedence over all other concerns.

The church must always keep the idea of their moral responsibility foremost in this type of situation. Child abuse has been considered "the major killer of children in the United States . . . one of the primary destroyers of their emotional and physical well being."²⁵ This is why the child's welfare must come first. The action of intervention may be life saving in its extent and, at the least, it may be what is needed to break the chain of events which leads to further generations of abuse.²⁶

The following is a checklist of characteristics which have been found to lead to child abuse.

1. As a child was the parent repeatedly beaten or deprived?
2. Does the parent have a record of mental illness or criminal activities?
3. Is the parent suspected of physical abuse in the past?
4. Is the parent suffering lost self-esteem, social isolation, or depression?
5. Has the parent experienced multiple stresses, such as marital discord, divorce, debt, frequent moves, significant losses?
6. Does the parent have violent outbursts of temper?
7. Does the parent have rigid, unrealistic expectations of the child's behavior?
8. Does the parent punish the child harshly?
9. Does the parent see the child as difficult and provocative (whether or not the child is)?
10. Does the parent reject the child or have difficulty forming a bond with the child?

11. Are there currently excessive stresses in the family or parent's life?²⁷

The workers of the church which are to deal with this type of family situation should be familiar with this list. When dealing with the family in the early stages of the process, the evaluator should seek to obtain the answers to the questions on the checklist. The risk that the child is under can be predicted from the answers to these questions.

Programs for Abusive Parents

The church should also seek to help the parent stop his abusive behavior. Taking on a judgmental air when dealing with a suspected or known child abuser will only alienate the person. Seek to show an understanding of the person's feelings and pain. Offer friendship and assure the parent that the church family will help in any way possible.²⁸

The worker should understand that 10% of the abusive parents cannot be helped by any type of treatment. These are people who are under delusions of one kind or another, those who cannot communicate without violence, those who are just cruel and hurtful, or who are fanatics of one type or another. The only real alternative for them is the removal of the children from the home permanently.²⁹

Actually only two types of aid or treatment can be given to abusive parents. These are professional counseling and a crisis telephone line which the family can contact in times of family stress. The long-term counseling treatment will be the most difficult for the parent because it involves the idea of acknowledging the seriousness of his abusive behavior.³⁰

The parent must be involved in an ongoing therapy of treatment by a qualified counselor, or the recovery will be rendered doubtful. The counseling treatment will likely involve in-depth therapy to reveal the underlying causes of the abuse. The counseling appears to be a most crucial factor in the breaking of the cycle of abuse.³¹ The ability of the parent to gain new insights of the problem through counseling allows him to understand how his being abused and or neglected by his parents has affected his actions toward his children.³²

The church should involve several of its members as caregivers to provide support for the parent and his family. The church family should live out the message of love, hope, and healing that it preaches by reaching out to the family in crisis. The church should enlist its various groups to give the disturbed family support and encouragement during any crisis situation.

The church can provide "crisis nurseries" in which the children can be placed during stressful situations.³³ This place for the child will not only

protect him from harm but will also relieve the stress which he would add to the parent's situation if allowed to remain in the home.

The church should activate a telephone ministry to meet immediate crisis needs of the troubled families. It has great potential for crisis times. A staff must man the phones seven days a week for the crisis nursery to work.⁵⁴ The sheer fact that there is someone available to listen and to help will be a great advantage in the recovery of the abusive parent.⁵⁵

The person staffing the phone needs to keep an accurate record of the calls received and the nature of the things discussed. He needs to be knowledgeable of the existing agencies to contact. He should also have some training in giving information and advice to callers. He should be aware of when the situation calls for intervention by the police.

When abuse is recognized the welfare of the child is of first importance. Afterward, the parent's treatment is most needful. While the child must be treated, the untreated parent will continue to abuse. The success of the treatment will depend largely on the motivation of the parent to stop the abusive treatment.

Treatment of Abused Children

Abused children come in all shapes and sizes. Contrary to popular opinion all abused children are not

unwanted, physically deformed, unattractive, or handicapped. While some abused children fit these categories, many do not. In time, however, abused children develop their own uniquenesses. While some are hyperactive and aggressive, a larger number are compliant, tense and withdrawn, almost all are distrustful, looking for love, and delayed in social, intellectual and sometimes physical development.⁵⁶

The program should be directed toward revealing to the child that he can trust and be loved. The church should concentrate on building the child's self-esteem and giving the child emotional stability and physical security.

When abuse is uncovered, the child will enter another crisis caused by concerned people seeking the best for the child's safety and welfare. The church worker must be careful to explain to the child that the things that are taking place are in no way the child's fault.⁵⁷ The entire family should be included in any treatment process, yet here the "child" shall be considered separately.

The child's total situation will need to be ascertained by a professional staff who can deal with the various aspects of the child's personality and physical

development through an ongoing treatment program. The church can then begin to help the child in the process of recovery.

The mental impression that the crisis is having upon the child should be established. The fears of the child should be relieved as much as possible.³⁸ Next the church worker should talk to the child. This drawing out can be fruitful only after the child's confidence has been gained.

The church can aid an abused child by providing friends. The abused child is usually lonely and has very little self-esteem because he has been put down by his abusive parent. The child may have trouble sharing, playing or getting along with other children. "The child has the same needs as the parents—friendship, support, information, good parental models, and massive injections of self-esteem."³⁹

The church could provide an area and set a time for play therapy.⁴⁰ This allows the child to act out his feelings without fear of being put down or punished. He is encouraged to play with dolls and stuffed animals to act out these feelings. The child needs time to come to trust in order to be able to act out his hostility or fear. This approach takes time for the worker to come to understand what the child is trying to communicate and what to make of his actions.⁴¹ The worker must have a greater ability to understand human nature and a perception of the child's action rather than seeking to compel the child into "correct" behavior.

The church program should be aimed at building the child's self-esteem and giving the child emotional stability and physical security. The counseling should be left to those professionals trained in that area. The church should be open to helping the child in any area possible. The presence of God should be actively acknowledged to the child throughout the process. God's concern about the child's situation should be spoken of in a matter of fact way. His questions about God should be answered honestly.

Church Program for Prevention

The very first step to be taken by the church is to acknowledge that abuse of children is taking place in the community and very likely within the congregation. The refusal to believe that abuse is taking place is the first step in the destruction of any program designed for the prevention of child abuse. Prevention, if successful, breaks the chain of events and stops the transgenerational continuation of the abuse cycle.⁴²

The program for the prevention of child abuse is a series of classes on the traits of the healthy family and the child/parent relationship. This program should be divided by age-levels and should present the biblical perspectives on the family as created and organized by the Lord. The program should

inform individuals as to what is considered a healthy family and what steps to take in order to have a healthy family. It should also introduce the causes of marital strife and stress which produce the tendency for violence.

The families should consult the traits of a healthy family and honestly assess their family's functioning. The 15 traits of a healthy family are:

1. It communicates and listens to each member.
2. It affirms and supports each member.
3. It teaches respect for others and for the property of others.
4. It develops a sense of trust between the members.
5. It shares leisure time.
6. It has a sense of humor.
7. It has a proper balance.
8. It has a sense of shared responsibility.
9. It teaches right and wrong.
10. It has a sense and an acceptance of rituals.
11. It has a religious core.
12. It has a respect for privacy of members.
13. It values the service rendered to others outside the home.
14. It admits problems and seeks help.
15. It values table time.⁴³

This program should present the family as a social unit with a primary function to perform. This function is found in Genesis 2:24, which says, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." Both man and woman should find fulfillment through their relationship with one another.

God intended man, woman, and child to be built-up together. The program should reveal the things that tear down people instead of building them up. The resources and avenues for building each other up should be presented. The false assumptions of family life should be discussed. The truth about what brings happiness into the family and concrete data on the stresses and problems associated with marriage should be presented.

Stress is the trigger to many family crisis situations. Some stress is helpful but when the level rises to an unmanageable quantity then a crisis develops. Various ways of dealing with stressful situations should be presented.⁴⁴

Factual information about divorce should be presented. Unreasonable expectations of many individuals, infidelity to one's mate, and the falsehood of the 50/50 idea of marriage should be explored and alternatives discussed.⁴⁵

The value of different local and national public agencies which deal with crisis situations should be presented. The desirability of seeking counseling

and its lasting effects in the prevention of a crisis situation should be openly and honestly evaluated. The program should strive to bring about an honest evaluation of the different individual's thoughts; either for or against counseling.⁴⁶ Realistic self-evaluation should be presented as one of the signs of maturity and not as a sign of weakness.⁴⁷

Conclusion

The prevention of child abuse discussed would be brought about by the breaking of the chain of events which leads to the abusive treatment of children. The intervention in child abuse situations should be done with caution but with the assured purpose of delivering a child from danger. Children are not property of their parents; rather, they are a gift given to nurture and to protect. When a child is neither nurtured nor protected, then someone needs to intervene. The church is in a position to help.

If the parent or future parent can be made aware of the causes of abuse and the serious nature of the continuation of abuse, then perhaps the cycle can be severed. If the person who was abused as a child can understand and reshape his opinions of how parenting is to be done, then the cycle of abuse can be broken. Counseling and support can increase the chances of success.

If the parent can be made aware of the various agencies which work for the betterment of family life, then perhaps he will be more willing to seek out those agencies in times of crisis. If the parent perceives that the church is serious and is there to aid his family in times of crisis, then he will be more willing to ask for aid.

Only through early training, serious work, and intervention by individuals, churches, and public agencies can there be real hope of helping reduce the risk of child abuse.

Endnotes

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