

Peggy Way

Family Systems



Various forms of kinship families make up our congregations. Sometimes we forget the great variety of forms, not only of the families living amongst us but also those presented in scripture. There are single person families like, Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus. There are families experiencing difficulties, like Joseph and his brothers, or broken families seeking new life, like Naomi and Ruth. There are small families and big, extended families, multigenerational families and childless families

Moreover, family language is integral in faith understandings. God has been addressed as Father, and recently maternal images and names for God have been reclaimed. Many congregations speak of their membership as brothers and sisters in Christ, and we are frequently urged to regard Christians throughout the world as our sisters and brothers.

When churches develop family programs, they sometimes forget the great diversity of family form. In some congregations, defining "family" has become a divisive, political issue. Too seldom do we

recall Jesus' profound question, Who is my mother and who are my brothers?—and his response: All who follow me. These struggles should not surprise us, for "family" is a historical form which is constantly being worked out in the middle of an ever changing cultural existence. Scripture invites us to move from the biological family toward inclusion in the family of faith; to move from kinship identification toward identifications with the household of God.

Family Systems Theories

Much of congregational ministry occurs around the care of families, especially as they experience transitions and brokenness, issues related to drawing boundaries and embodying inclusiveness, and care of the most vulnerable ones, children and the aged. It is helpful to understand the connections among the kinship (biological) family, the congregation as family, and the scriptural imperative to move always from the kinship family to the family (the household of God.) Three perspectives are particularly useful in strengthening congrega-

tional care and family life: 1) family systems theories, 2) family as domestic church, and 3) current secular and theological understandings of the nature of family life and its central functions as we face unanticipated futures.

The kinship family and the congregational family are both historical organisms, that is, their dynamics get worked out in everyday existence and there is no simple model that can be applied to any given family. Family systems thought, however, can help us understand the general patterns of how persons live together and it can helpfully inform our ministries. Both kinship and congregational families are emotional systems in which memories and past experiences affect present life together.

One generation's memory of meaningful worship may conflict with a different generation's experiences of rhythm and lyrics. A "family feud" may occur in the worship committee or on youth Sunday. A congregation's memory of who they used to be may interfere with their ability to welcome new family members or trust in a God who invites the household to new futures.

Through family systems theory, pastors and other congregational leaders can identify their own family roles, as the good or bad father or mother, the valued or disdained brother or sister, the thoughtful or erratic child. Without such self reflection, congregational leaders can become trapped in the very roles and anxieties they are called to help others move beyond. Without giving up commitment to or

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involvement in the life of the congregation, leaders can then offer themselves as a "non-anxious presence," when they might otherwise be "hooked" or overwhelmed by the anxiety of the person in need.

Systems thinking can also help congregational leaders avoid the parental impulse to control and the temptation to "fix" everything. Such parentalism can truncate the full emergence of a creative and assertive laity. The challenge is to call forth the gifts of laity, not to control the creative expressions of their faithfulness.

For anyone seeking to pursue this approach, I highly recommend *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership and Congregational Life* by Ronald Richardson (Fortress 1996).

Domestic Church

Another way of looking at the connection between kinship family and the family of faith is the "Domestic Church," a concept particularly important in the Roman Catholic tradition. Here, the kinship family is invited and taught to live out the Church's faithfulness in its own practices. Whatever the family form, ministry helps those living in that form learn how to treat one another with equality, mutuality and equal regard, even as this is the prophetic expectation. Thus parents and children, brothers and sisters, members of extended or broken families find ways to live hopefully and gracefully with one another in their own situations, embodying God's intended style of relationship.

Domestic church perspectives also call for kinship families to extend their concern beyond their own family identity.

However important the kinship family, their "way" is not to be understood as the center of the world or to be automatically equated with God's Way. The kinship family is not to become an idol. Kinship families are encouraged to extend themselves to include the total household of God, that is, to reach out to the poor and homeless, the outsiders and abandoned. Children are included in mission programs and household eco-

nomics, so that they will through daily family experiences learn about diversity and the need for care and justice.

A very helpful resource for congregations interested in this family connection is *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* by Lisa Sowle Cabill (Fortress, 2000).

Current Secular and Theological Understandings

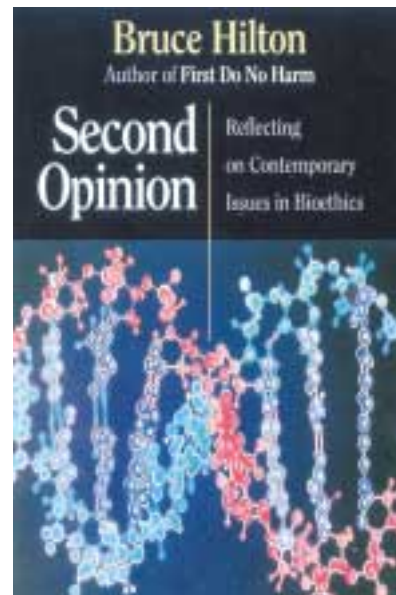
A marvelous series of resources is now available for congregations that want to study today's family life, with special emphasis on marriage and children. The congregation plays a central role in the formation of family life, as it participates in marriages and has the opportunity to offer premarital conversation and reflection about the rigors and demands of living together and raising children. The Religion, Culture and Family Project, sponsored by The University of Chicago, has published major texts covering many aspects of family life and structure, utilizing the sociological and biological sciences, as well as probing the theology and history of family life. You can investigate these resources through the project's website: www.uchicago.edu/divinity/family or call for information at 773-702-9249. It offers material that could spur marvelous congregational conversations about family life and public policy.

I believe that pastors and other congregational leaders have much to offer to the family dialogue. I hope you will intentionally seek to join those important conversations. □

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