

Counselor's Corner, part 1 of 2—

Rehabilitating the Heart: Ministry to Children of Discord

by Gary and Debbie Pratt

"Pastor, pictures are just not going to tell the whole story."

I was caught a little off guard by Bob's comment. Bob had been standing near the altar. It was a Sunday night and numerous people had responded to the altar call, many of whom were young people. Bob's two teenage sons were among those who were praying with others at the altar. Bob had tears in his eyes as I walked up to him, put my arm around him, and asked how he was doing. I'm sure my response to his answer caused him to explain.

"A couple of weeks ago, Clint told me that his mother would like their most recent school pictures. Jokingly, I told him to tell her that she could use last year's pictures because they hadn't changed much. We both laughed.

"Tonight during the altar call, I was on my way to the front, when I saw Craig praying at the altar with another person. I looked around and saw Clint praying at the other end. My thoughts went back

to my divorce and all the turmoil involved. I thought of the trouble the boys had gotten into, especially Craig. Then I thought about all the changes in the boys and myself since we became Christians—the new friends and attitudes. The way we all look at life has changed.



"The moment I saw them praying, I thought about their mother's request for new pictures and how irrelevant that was to what is actually going on in her sons' lives. I thought about how much she has missed the last several years since she has been gone. She doesn't truly know her sons. Pictures are so

insignificant; there is no way pictures can adequately explain what has happened in their lives over this past year."

Three years ago Bob, out of desperation, had come to our church seeking help for himself and his two sons. Their lives were devastated by divorce. Bob had called a local government agency; they suggested he contact our church. Neither Bob nor his sons were involved with any church. His oldest son had been involved in gang activity, and the police had picked him up on numerous occasions.

Over the next three years they became involved in our singles and youth ministry. God did a marvelous work in them. These two boys, who were once struggling with their lives and identities, were now ministering at the altars. But what happens to the countless number of other families struggling with the issues of divorce and discord and who have no church to plug into?

Listen to the silent cry of the following children whose parents experienced divorce:

"When my mother left, I was devastated. I felt it was my



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Being Sensitive Toward Children of Divorce

Children from single-parent households not only have the same spiritual and emotional needs as other church kids, they also have identity issues from their parents' divorce. Many churches have programs to help adults deal with divorce, but what about the children? They may have issues that cannot be dealt with through the typical Sunday School class or youth group.

As a result of divorce, these kids are left to deal with issues such as guilt, rejection, shame, and identity. Where do these young people get help?

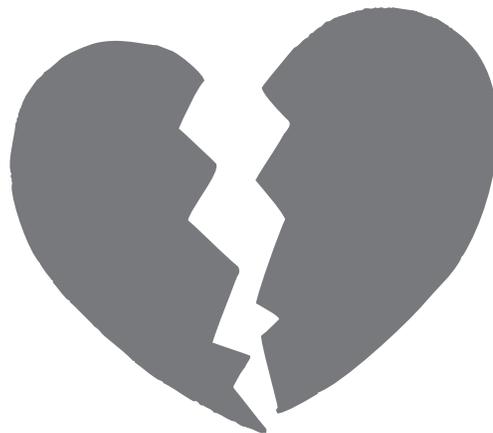
Churches should not be asking, "Should we have a ministry to these children?" but, "How do we minister to these children?" We can answer these questions by asking the following:

1 Do you have a Sunday school class for single-adult parents to help them deal with the issues of their children?

2 Do you have a ministry for children of single-parent households? In our church

we have a ministry called Lifiedare. It is important that the Lifiedare children know they are special. These children must receive positive attention and love. They have special needs; and, if we don't meet those needs, the world will.

We must love, care, and invest in their lives. The mis-



sion statement of Lifiedare is: "To reach the children of the single-parent household and meet their individual special needs through innovative curriculum, social activities, and involvement in ministry."

When children come to Lifiedare, they are deluged with doubt and disbelief. They may believe their world will never again be good. Satan has an easy

mark with these children; the foundation of their family lives has been torn apart and left in pieces. They long for security and stability, and the world will fill them with its lies if we do not teach them the truth.

3 Is your youth ministry sensitive to the needs of the children from single-parent households (such as a mentoring program)? Is your youth minister trained to deal with family dysfunction? Is consideration given when youth activities are planned to take into account that the slightest financial stretch for the children from a single-parent family can cause major distress in that family?

4 Is there professional Christian counseling available through your church or community?

5 Does your church provide counseling for second marriages to include counseling with the children? The majority of second marriages involve children who have not dealt with the emotional and psychological issues of their parents' divorce. These issues are then compounded in the second marriage.

S Are single parents and their children receiving love and understanding in your church? Maybe some churches don't have single-parent family ministry in their church because they are not meeting the needs of those families. What would happen if some of our churches started a singles ministry not because they *had* to but because they *wanted* to?

When we, the body of Christ, help families of discord, we help them function the way God intended. Jesus meets them at their point of need.

Transforming Lives

Single parents like Bob, and their children, need not be considered a liability; they can be assets. Bob is teaching our DivorceCare Series on Thursday

nights. His boys are actively involved in Lifestart and youth ministries. What would have happened to them if our church had no ministry for them? How many families like this are in your neighborhood with no place to go?

The church has an opportunity to communicate to these children that they can cast their sadness, fears, worries, and cares on the Lord. Unfortunately, the pain of divorce or abandonment does not heal quickly. Many children who come to you from difficult home situations are wrestling with anger, bitterness, and depression. They feel unworthy of love. Though we may not be able to fix the child's home, we can share how God heals broken lives.

We need to believe that what

we do matters not only to those around us, but to God and the world. Jesus empowered His followers when He sent the Holy Spirit to them, and they turned the world upside down. The same Holy Spirit can empower children today.

Many children from single-parent families will limp along for the next several years as they try to work through their family problems. What they need most are loving, caring people to walk alongside and hold their hands and their hearts. Your support and presence in their lives will be a critical part of God's healing process of rehabilitating the heart.

Gary and Debbie Pratt are singles pastors at First Assembly of God, Lawton, Oklahoma.

Questions for Further Study—

1. How can your church minister to children of single-parent homes?
2. List the names of some local Christian counselors whom your church can recommend to families.
3. What type of family resources or instruction opportunities does your church provide for families dealing with divorce or second marriages?