Mixed messages: Churches' witness on the family

by W. Bradford Wilcox in the February 21, 2001 issue

Despite a mounting body of research showing that high rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock births pose serious threats to the well-being of children, mainline Protestantism has had remarkably little to say in recent years about the nature, health and prospects of the family. We now know that, in all socioeconomic groups, children raised outside of intact two-parent families are significantly more likely than their peers to drop out of high school, end up in prison and experience serious psychological distress. This research has sparked a growing movement on behalf of marriage supported by religious and secular organizations committed to helping families.

Mainline Protestant leaders appeared to take an important step toward joining this movement in November when Robert Edgar, general secretary of the Nation Council of Churches, signed a statement calling on churches to do a better job of articulating God's purposes for marriage, supporting married couples and proclaiming the good news about marriage to the wider society. But Edgar quickly withdrew his name from the statement after some interpreted the document as an attack on same-sex unions.

This imbroglio is emblematic of the mainline's difficulty with articulating a substantive vision of family life and family ministry in recent decades. Since the 1960s, mainline Protestants have drawn on prophetic strands in Christianity and the political left to focus churches' attention on an evolving series of social-justice issues—from racism to poverty. To the extent that they have addressed family-related matters, mainline churches have aligned themselves with a therapeutic ethic of care and self-fulfillment that affirms a range of family configurations and sexual practices.

The power of therapeutic liberalism to crowd out substantive discussions of family matters at elite levels is evident in mainline periodicals and in the denominational

meetings of three representative churches—the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the United Methodist Church. Between 1980 and 1995, 32 percent of the articles in the *Christian Century* dealt with social-justice issues, only 5 percent with family- and sex-related topics. The subjects considered at national church meetings in the ’80s and ’90s exhibit a similar, though less extreme, pattern. Approximately 17 percent of the pages in the journals recording these meetings mentioned social-justice issues, while only about 10 percent mentioned family- or sex-related topics. Moreover, more than 40 percent of family-focused articles in these journals and in the *Century* dealt with social-justice-related issues like child poverty. Specific discussions of marriage, divorce and parenting were rare.

The mainline has focused on the plight of children. The millions of American children who grow up in desperately poor and dangerous neighborhoods are striking symbols of the “least among us” championed by Jesus. They also are popular beneficiaries of public-welfare measures even at a time when Americans are suspicious of government. Consequently, the mainline has increasingly framed its political advocacy of economic and social equality around the needs of “children and their families.”

In the past decade all three of the aforementioned denominations issued major statements on children—such as the Episcopal Church’s “A Children’s Charter for the Church” (1997) and the United Methodist Church’s “Putting Children and Their Families First” (1996). These statements underline a host of hazards confronting children—from gun violence to poverty—and call for generous welfare policies. Also stressed is the churches’ responsibility to take up the cause of children at the federal, state and local levels. Simultaneously, denominational offices and social-justice groups have worked to raise churches’ awareness of children’s issues.

The mainline’s primary partner in this political advocacy is the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF). The two most prominent examples of this partnership are the 1996 CDF-sponsored rally Stand for Children and the annual Children’s Sabbaths that are designed to focus congregational attention on the plight of disadvantaged children. On June 1, 1996, more than 200,000 people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., to demonstrate their commitment to “protecting and improving the quality of life for all children,” in the words of Marion Edelman, head of the CDF. Although the extensive media coverage did not highlight the event’s religious dimension, Stand for Children was the mainline equivalent of the Promise Keeper rally, Stand in the Gap, held on the Mall a year later. Mainline congregations, social-

justice networks and national organizations like United Methodist Women sponsored approximately 50,000 attendees.

Edelman's keynote address conjured up images of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. It was laced with religious allusions, such as "God's sacred covenant with every child." Edelman also touched on the importance of parental responsibility, national spiritual revival and cultural renewal. Nevertheless, the bulk of her speech was dedicated to underlining the social forces putting millions of children at risk, and the imperative of relying on public policies, from publicly financed child care to gun-control laws, to help them. She did not mention the impact of the dramatic rises in divorce and out-of-wedlock births on children.

Similar themes emerge in the Children's Sabbaths program started by the CDF in 1992. The program, scheduled for the third weekend of each October, is designed to promote child-centered worship, advocacy and educational initiatives around particular themes, such as health care or early childhood education. The CDF puts out a book containing a model worship service for Protestant, Catholic and Jewish congregations, as well as a series of activity modules for children and adults. It reaches more than 35,000 congregations across America, most of them mainline. A Protestant sermon in the 1999 volume suggests that "works of faith" should result in "programs, laws and policies that support children and their families," that "labors of love" ought to be focused on activities like mentoring teenagers and working for universal child care, and that Christians are called to "hope" that God will supply adequate food, shelter, health care and education to all children.

All this is in keeping with the liberal tenor of mainline discourse on the plight of "children and their families." While the mainline has a great deal to say about the social-structural evils that afflict children, it sidesteps the impact of family breakdown on child well-being and has very little to say about the responsibilities that parents have to their children. For the most part, the ethic of responsibility is pushed upwards into the civic and political arenas.

But what about congregational discourse? Of course, sermons often refer to family life. Many mainline churches foster what sociologist Nancy Ammerman calls "Golden Rule Christianity," stressing an ethic of care for one's self and others, especially one's children. But even here the influence of therapeutic liberalism makes itself felt. Many churches base their acceptance of family pluralism on an ethic of tolerance and a desire to validate people's sense of self. A recent survey of

Presbyterian pastors found that 73 percent of them think that the church should be "tolerant of family changes (divorce, remarriage, same-sex couples) now taking place."

The mainline faith in tolerance leaves many clergy unable or unwilling to articulate theological and moral concerns about divorce, even when children are involved. For instance, one survey of pastoral care counselors—62 percent of whom are mainline clergy—found that only 50 percent are more cautious about divorce when children are involved, in contrast to 74 percent of secularly trained family psychiatrists. Pastoral care's commitment to humanistic psychology—particularly its insistence that relationships must promote personal fulfillment—appears to trump concerns about children's need for stable families.

This ethic of tolerant acceptance can also contribute to an inability to articulate a broader, normative vision of family life. Coupled with a distaste for the Religious Right's approach to "family values," it has kept many churches from presenting a clear vision of what families should aspire to be. One prominent Presbyterian church in Chicago offers a theologically grounded discourse that critiques the Religious Right's "family values" by talking about Jesus Christ's ministry of inclusion. Such churches, says Christian ethicist Lois Livezey, favor "conversation" rather than "definitive guidance."

Sociologist Penny Edgell Becker's survey of mainline pastors in upstate New York found that more than 85 percent believe that "God approves of all families" and almost half reject the term "family ministry" as exclusionary. By contrast, no conservative Protestant pastors thought God approved of all families, and only 13 percent thought that family ministry was an exclusive term.

Ironically, despite an emphasis on inclusiveness, mainline churches actually offer fewer formal programs for nontraditional families than do conservative Protestant churches. As Don Browning, director of the Religion, Culture and Family Project at the University of Chicago Divinity School, has argued, churches that have articulated a normative theology of the family, tempered by a strong emphasis on human fallibility, are often better equipped to speak frankly about departures from their ideals and to offer services to members who have fallen short of those ideals. For example, the National Congregation Survey (NCS) reveals that conservative Protestant churches are more than twice as likely as mainline churches to offer nontraditional family ministries like support groups for divorced and single adults.

Becker's survey of 125 upstate New York churches reports similar findings: "Liberal and moderate Protestants report virtually no programming, formal or informal, directed to meeting the needs of single mothers or divorced mothers."

Even more ironic is that mainline congregations actually have slightly more formal programs for conventional families than do conservative Protestant churches. While 22 percent of mainline Protestants attend churches that offer formal marriage or parenting programs, only 20 percent of conservative Protestants do (though many evangelicals and fundamentalists get family support from parachurch ministries like Focus on the Family). Thus, mainline churches continue to offer what Becker calls the "standard package" of family ministries that were institutionalized earlier in the century for married couples with children.

The mainline mix of conventional practice and discursive liberalism is apparently attractive to many young and middle-aged married couples with children, who made up 34 percent of the active adult attendees of mainline churches in the '90s, a clear majority of the active attendees age 60 and under. This paralleled the larger population, in which 34 percent of adults age 60 and under were also married with children. But compared to the population at large, members of mainline churches were significantly less likely to be single parents age 40 and under, young single adults or married couples without children. Surpisingly, mainline churches were also less likely than conservative churches to attract members from nontraditional households.

Given the mainline's stress on inclusion, why do fewer young adults in nontraditional households end up in mainline congregations? Apparently, the inclusive family ethic articulated in mainline congregations functions more as an identity marker than as a guide to congregational practice. Talking about acceptance and diversity allows mainline churches to signal their adherence to the canons of liberalism and to erect symbolic boundaries against fundamentalism. At the same time, pastoral practice maintains the longstanding ties between mainline Protestantism and the two-parent family. The mainline family paradox is that the church talks about the value of diversity, but practices conventional familism.

This paradox makes sense in light of the patterns of middle- and upper-class American life. Many middle- and upper-class adults raised in the mainline, or disillusioned with their upbringing in Catholic or conservative Protestant churches, come back to church only when they are married and have children. They want to

give their children the religious and moral formation they themselves received, they want to meet other young families, and they tend to connect their new social status as parents and community members with churchgoing. At the same time, they are looking for a form of Christianity that does not violate middle- and upper-class cultural conventions of tolerance, gender equality and a therapeutic ethic of self-realization.

This leaves mainline churches in a difficult predicament. On the one hand, if they want to thrive and remain true to their deepest theological commitments, they must reach out to America's growing ranks of unconventional families. They must develop programs for divorced men and women, single parents and cohabiting couples. On the other hand, if they are serious about improving the welfare of children, mainline churches must do more to articulate a substantive vision of the family that confronts the mounting evidence that divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing pose serious threats to children. This means adding their distinctive perspective to the budding marriage movement, as well as addressing public policy issues related to marriage, divorce and unwed parenting.

Articulating a vision of the family centered on marriage but sensitive to the growing ranks of adults and children who do not live in conventional families is, of course, a challenging assignment. Still, the difficulty is not insurmountable. The success that conservative Protestant churches have achieved in combining a clear vision of family life with innovative family programs for nontraditional families suggests that the mainline could do something similar. A successful mainline approach to family ministry would be distinguished by its emphasis on egalitarian gender roles and—given the egalitarian trajectory of mainline churches—its eventual incorporation of gay marriage. The destiny of the mainline and the well-being of countless "children and families" will depend on the success of such an approach.

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