

Saving the family

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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Marianne Gingrich, Newt Gingrich's ex-wife, [revealed](#) that Newt asked her for an open marriage or a divorce while speaking around the country about family values.

It's not the first time we've heard about a personal indiscretion from those who seem to be working hard to protect our country from breakdown of the family. I'm sure that our popular attention will now swarm around the hypocrisy, like a shark to blood.

But, I'm wondering, can we grasp this moment and talk about the *real* issues that cause the breakdown of families?

As a pastor, I'm also concerned about our families. Men and women often go to a clergy person when they want to get married or when they contemplate divorce, so we have a unique perspective on this issue.

Healthy families can be a center of support, a wellspring of love, and a source of wholeness for individuals as well as communities. Of course, as a supporter of marriage equality and as someone who has counseled single women to have children, my idea of "family" may be a little different than the typical family values voter. Nonetheless, I agree that families can undergo stress in these difficult times.

So can we put Newt Gingrich's personal life and rhetoric aside and focus on how we can fix our families? Can we move the discussion of family away from demonizing same-gender relationships and taking rights away from women? Can we have an honest discussion about what we can do to help American families?

First, work to decrease student loan burdens. When a man or woman leaves college with a great deal of personal debt, enters an urban area with high housing costs, and receives low wages, it can be difficult to ever achieve a small measure of financial security.

In our society, we like to have a bit of stability before we make a commitment to marriage. Because financial stress can cause tension in marriage, many people do not feel responsible making a commitment to a loved one when they live with insurmountable debt. So they put off marriage. If we could help ease the educational debt burden in our society, it would help many young men and women be able to make commitments to each other and start families.

Second, help to insure young Americans. [30 percent](#) of young men and women in our country do not have health insurance. With high unemployment rates, finding a job is difficult, and securing employment with benefits can be especially daunting.

When a young woman cannot pay for a doctor's appointment, she will probably put off having children. If she does have a child, the uncovered medical costs may mean that the child will be born in an economically risky household. High rates of uninsured men and women threaten their ability to become parents and add stress to family life when they do.

Third, take serious measures to fight child poverty. Now [21 percent of all children are born into poverty and 42 percent of children are born into low-income families](#). Although most of the parents work, they are not able to make enough money to provide basic needs for children.

Financial pressures, especially when a family includes children, can become an insurmountable stress for many relationships. What are we doing to take care of the children in our society? Will we continue to cut beneficial programs, like food assistance programs, that help the youngest and most vulnerable in our country?

Fourth, work against the "over-indulgent parent" stigma. With young men and women going into personal debt with student loans and internships, they often find that moving back with their parents is the most responsible thing that they can do. When an older couple lives in a home with three unused bedrooms, it makes sense to let go of those dreams of a big, empty nest, and allow their son or daughter to live in one of them.

Now, about half of young adults live with their parents, because they are working to decrease their debt, they cannot find a job, or they make below a living wage. This arrangement makes sense, especially when young Americans [face historic unemployment rates](#). Yet, we continue the break-down of the family when we act as if parents are over-indulgent or that adult sons and daughters are losers when more

than one generation of adults lives in one household.

As we weather this economic crisis, we will need to keep protecting our families from all of the stress that harms them. Do our politicians truly care about our families? Will they do something positive to safeguard them? Or will they simply continue with rhetoric and hypocrisy as young men and women struggle in our country?

(This is cross-posted from [Huffington Religion](#))