If You Talk to Them, They Will Come

Understanding and Ministering to One-Quarter of Today's Young Adults–Children of Divorce

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Today, one quarter of all young adults between the ages of 18 and 35 have grown up in divorced families. Overall, young people from divorced families are substantially less religious compared to their peers from intact families. The life of the church will be dramatically enriched and strengthened if it can effectively minister to those from divorced families. This essay shares new quantitative and qualitative data about the religious and spiritual lives of grown children of divorce and practical steps that church leaders can take in their congregations.

Each year in the United States, about one million children experience their parents' divorce. Despite the ubiquity of divorce, there has been very little investigation of the moral and spiritual lives of children and young people from divorced families. Too often, churches miss opportunities to minister to these young people because they do not understand their lives. Even worse, their lack of understanding can evoke the losses these young people have already experienced in their families and cause further suffering.[1]

The church must learn about the experience of children of divorce because it is called to minister to the most vulnerable, especially children. Importantly, too, the life of the church will be dramatically enriched and strengthened if it can effectively minister to young adults from divorced families who now make up so much of the young adult population.

Overall, on a number of measures, young people from divorced families are substantially less religious and less tied to faith communities compared to their peers from intact families, and they often approach the stories of the faith in dramatically different ways.

We found that 55% of young people from divorced families, compared to 68% of their peers from intact families, say they are "very" or "fairly" religious. Just 49% of young people who grew up with divorced parents, compared to 63% of young adults from intact families, say they are currently a member at a house of worship–and fewer of the children of divorce hold leadership positions at a house of worship. We also found that if young adults from divorced families are religious, they are more likely to be evangelical. Forty-two percent of them identify as evangelical, compared to 37% of their

peers from intact families, and this difference is even more significant since the children of divorce are overall less religious.

Our most poignant finding–and the one that should challenge churches everywhere to take a hard look at their ministry to children and families–is that of those children of divorce who were active in a church at the time of their parents' divorce, only one-quarter recall being reached out to by a member of the clergy or congregation. When parents divorce, children too often are left alone to sort out enormous and confusing moral and spiritual questions that continue arising throughout their lives.

The spiritual journeys of children of divorce are often winding, lonely, and surprising. Compared to those from intact families, three times as many young people from divorced families agree "I was alone a lot as a child" (44% versus 14%). As adults over one fifth (22%) say, "I don't feel that anyone really understands me," compared to 14% of their peers from intact families. Almost one quarter of young adults from divorced families (23%) agree, "I feel like I can depend on my friends more than my family," compared to 12% of young people from intact families.

For some, their suffering has caused struggles in their relationship with God. One-fifth of young people from divorced families (20%) agree, "When I think about bad things that have happened in my life I find it hard to believe in a God who cares," compared to 13% of their peers from intact families.

For some children of divorce, loss and the search for belonging provoke them to seek the meaning and comfort that can be found in practicing a faith. Yet, unlike people from intact families, it is not uncommon for them to seek out faith on their own, showing up at church without their parents even when they are young children or teenagers. For others, religion as they have encountered it ignores or, even worse, painfully evokes the losses that result from their parents' divorce. As they grow up they are more likely to confront spiritual questions alone, without being a full part of a faith community and without having the model of their parents to look to.

Yearning and Fearing, Searching but Repelled

Angela is a deeply thoughtful young woman with pretty, dark eyes and soft, chin-length hair. As we talked it seemed to me that she was stuck in a spiritual middle ground, deeply interested in a life of faith, wanting what she believes it can offer, but also struggling with lingering cynicism and wary of any beliefs that smack of hypocrisy.

At one point I asked Angela if she believed in God. She sat in her chair, one hand wrapped around a cup of coffee, the other resting in her lap, and stared at the floor thinking about my question. "I don't believe in God," she said slowly, "but I do believe in some sort of connectedness between people and nature. Not in a cosmic sort of way, but just that human beings share so

much in common. Our lives are so short. At the end we break down to nothingness again, and if we don't look after each other while we're here then there won't be any goodness for us." She looked up at me. "That this is our chance, you know? And the only chance that you have to improve the world is to try and be good to other people."

Angela told me she had not always been so certain she did not believe in God. Her parents divorced when she was four years old. Her father was Jewish, and her mother was raised Catholic but converted to Judaism when they married. After their divorce Angela's mother did not practice Judaism anymore, but Angela found an example of committed faith in her stepmother, who was Lutheran.

"I admire people with faith very much," she said. "My stepmother is a woman who believes in God so sincerely. I admire her for having so much faith and for always trying to do the right thing–and say the right thing and feel the right thing–because of the obligation that she believes she has to God." Angela went on: "When I was twelve or thirteen, I decided that's what I wanted. I wanted to have that kind of faith and have that kind of sense of belonging because that's the other thing that I see with religious people. They join a church or a synagogue, and they have this built-in group of friends and supporters and people who care about them. So I prayed and I went to church and put a lot of effort into it.... I really tried to find faith in the Christian faith."

Angela was attracted to her stepmother's faith, but she was also troubled by it. As the daughter of a Jew and a former Catholic she felt that the church held out so much promise, but it also too often fell painfully short of the vision laid out in the Bible. "I was always disturbed by the historical problems of the church," she recalled. The summer she was twelve years old, she remembers saying to the pastor, "How do you respond to questions about the Crusades? Like that was terrible. People died." She paused and shook her head. "He was like, 'Oh, you know what? You don't have to worry about that.'" His response offered little solace to Angela, nor did it take seriously the genuine problems she was already encountering in her pursuit of a life of faith.

When the summer ended, Angela went back to her mother's home on the west coast. She said, "The only thing I remember my mother saying about it when I came home, and I said I want to be a Christian and I believe in God now, she says, 'Oh, that's nice.' Then she says, 'You know, your grandparents are Jewish.' And I said, 'Yes.' And she said, 'And now you think they're going to hell.' I said, 'Oh! How could you say that?' Angela took a sip of her coffee and said, "I think she was just teasing me a little bit for being twelve and being completely wrapped up in things the way twelve-year-olds are. I think that she saw it as just a phase."

But for Angela it wasn't a phase. Her quest to discover and live the right kind of life, her search for belonging, her struggle with the deep paradoxes of faith as we live it out–these were serious questions that were not going to go away. Early adolescence is a powerful time in which many young people solidify

or break away from their ties to faith traditions. Children of divorce are no different. Yet young Angela, already attuned to paradox and suffering, was dismissed by grown-ups who saw her as precocious or flighty. Lacking support for her questions, Angela remembers, "After a while I realized I just didn't have it. When it came right down to it, I didn't believe that there was a God…I just decided that you have to have something else to base your life philosophy on."

Even though Angela told me she doesn't believe in God, she continues to be attracted to a life of faith because of her loneliness as a child and the sense of belonging that might be found there. "It's nice to have a group where you can know people and they will care about you," she says wistfully. "At my stepmother's church they still announce if somebody's in the hospital and then everybody prays for them, and they would go visit them. And it's nice that these people would be willing to care for you even if they don't know you very well. Just because you belong." But her young adolescent cynicism, born of dashed hopes, still voices itself too and causes her to keep her distance: "The flip side is what about the people who don't belong? Like shouldn't you care about them too? And isn't it a little fake to care for people just because they're sitting in the same room with you for two hours on a Sunday? And so I go back and forth. Sometimes I find the idea so comforting, and then other times I find it a little hollow."

When God Imitates Life

Others experience tensions even greater than Angela's. These young people have experienced so much loss that they are unable to find meaning in a faith that does not seem to recognize their loss. For them, the way the faith is presented too often evokes the losses they first felt in their families so many years ago.

Melissa's parents divorced when she was five years old. Her father left for the West Coast to find a job and never moved back, though she continued to see him occasionally as she was growing up. Melissa considers herself only slightly religious today, though she does believe "there's something out there–I usually call it God." Yet her lack of interest arose in part from the way in which religious faith, as it was taught to her as a child, painfully brought up the losses she'd already felt in her life.

"When I was really little, my mom was fairly active in the Episcopalian church," Melissa recalled. "They always teach you prayers. . . . So when stuff was happening that I didn't understand, I'd be like maybe I should pray." She remembered, "I'd sit down and go–okay, now how do I pray? You'd usually start it as a letter. Dear God, how are you–I'm fine. Today was warm. I was hoping that you could help me." She paused and laughed. "But then you kind of wonder about it cause they never answer. So that made me wonder–well, I wrote to him. I didn't get a letter back. *That sounds like dad!*"

By the time she was a teenager, Melissa said, "I pulled away from organized religion. They promise so much and when you're little and especially when your parents are divorced, you want something that's consistent." As a child of divorce, she said, she felt "very bouncy." "You bounce back and forth between this parent and that parent and this role and that role, and you're never quite sure what's going to be happening, so when in religion they say that God's always there and he's always constant–you know I'm going to embrace that." She thought a moment and said slowly, "It's hard though because it's not that type of consistency, that type of stability that you're looking for. It's not somebody you can just walk up to and be like, 'This is God, I am holding God. . . . ' It's so much built on faith and at that point in my life I'm like, faith?!" She looked at me, eyes wide, "Faith in what? What am I going to believe in? I believed that my parents were going to be there. . . . Now what do I believe in?"

The problem, Melissa eventually realized, was that a relationship with God "wasn't like a substance. I couldn't touch it. And I wanted to touch it, feel it, taste it, bite it, break it–something. It had to be real. I didn't want to deal with what-ifs or promises or dreams. I was like, if I can't walk up and hug it, I'm not even going to think about it."

Melissa's young hopes swelled when she contemplated the thought of an ever-present God, but for her the possibility of loss was already inherent in the hope. A God she could not touch was too much like a father she rarely saw. As a teenager she pulled back to prevent the possibility of losing again. Over and over again I found this connection between a child's experience of her or his parents and feelings about God.

When God Becomes a Father

Others do find spiritual healing and joy in the church. At a young age Michael embraced the church. Yet like so many children of divorce, he came to God and the church alone, without the company of his parents. "I wasn't raised in a religious home," Michael recalls. His mother and stepfather would go to church "on Christmas and Easter and that was about the extent of it." When he was fourteen years old, though, Michael's best friend invited him to go to church. "It was a Baptist church and they had a separate youth worship service and it was really, really neat. The more I went, the more it became somewhere that I really felt safe and like I belonged." After a while, he told me, "I gave my life to Christ and started going to church regularly."

Michael sat back and smiled as he recalled, "I remember being very excited when I got my first Bible. I can remember the smell of it. And I just would spend hours in my room reading it and thinking, this is the most exciting stuff in the world, you know, that God cares for me, that all this is possible for me. There had been this huge void in my life," he told me. "But

once I accepted Christ, from that point on, I really looked at life differently." As a child, he said, "I had always believed in God, but now it was like God could be with you . . . God wasn't out there anymore. God was walking with you and living in you." Michael's newfound faith changed every part of his life, including at school. "I had been doing mediocre in school at that point. But it just really gave meaning to life for me, to excel in life. I got more involved in school and my grades got really good."

When Michael was in high school, he started going to a different church with the girlfriend who would later become his wife. "It was a Presbyterian Church. And I started to learn then that you could question your faith. It didn't have to be that 'this is what you believe' and that's it. Doubt had a place. That was really important. So I joined their youth choir and sang with them. The church became my home away from home."

Michael's growing relationship with God in part filled a huge void created by the tense relationship he had with his own father. Michael's father had left his mother for another woman. At their house the children of his father's first and second marriages vied with each other and Michael's older brother would often turn on him, teasing him mercilessly when they visited their dad. Meanwhile, Michael's father was often out at work or playing golf. "God really became my father," Michael said. "He was that father who never leaves and is always there. Who you can always talk to and who will listen to you."

Children of divorce are almost twice as likely to agree, "I think of God as the loving father or parent I never had in real life," with 38% feeling this way compared to 22% of those from intact families. If we had included in our study the many children of divorce who lose all contact with their fathers this number might well be higher.[2]

For some children of divorce, faith and a relationship with God fill a void. They turn to God for love and guidance in place of an absent father or parent, or a lonely home life. The church becomes their "home away from home," but unlike children of married parents they more often go there alone.

Taking a Different Path

Young people from divorced families feel just as spiritual as people from intact families do–a similar majority in the national survey say they are "very" or "fairly" spiritual–but they are more likely to say that institutional religion is not relevant to them. Over one third of those from divorced families (37%) agree, "Religion doesn't seem to address the important issues in my life," compared to 29% of the people from intact families. Similarly, almost half (46%) agree "I believe I can find ultimate truth without help from a religion," compared to 36% of the people from intact families.

Looking at their childhood involvement in faith communities turns up striking differences. Young people from intact families are much more likely

to say that they attended religious services regularly as children, with three quarters saying they attended every week or almost every week compared to just over half of children of divorce. People from divorced families are only half as likely as those from intact families to say that they attended services frequently throughout their childhood.

One reason children of divorce grow up to be less religious is that their parents, too, are less likely to be religious–overall, people who divorce are less religious than people who do not. But even if their parents did practice a faith while married, the complicated logistics of divorce–with a family divided in two and the children traveling between them–could spell an end to the children's ties to a faith community.

Overall, whether due to their parents having less interest in religion or the lack of closeness some had with their parents after the divorce, children of divorce are much less likely to recall finding sources of religious and spiritual guidance in their families. For example, they are far less likely to say that their parents encouraged them to practice a religious faith. Just over half of young people from divorced families (57%) but 78% of those from intact families agree, "My mother encouraged me to practice a religious faith." That difference is even greater when it comes to their fathers, with only 31% of children of divorce saying their father encouraged them to practice a religious faith compared to 64% of people from intact families.

The national survey also turned up similar, striking differences in the likelihood that children of divorce had parents who taught them how to pray and prayed with them. Fewer than half of children of divorce (41%) but 69% of people from intact families agree, "My mother taught me how to pray." Slightly more than one-third of children of divorce (36%) but 54% of people from intact families said that they often prayed with their mother. Similarly, only 17% of young people from divorced families but almost half (47%) of people from intact families said that their father taught them how to pray, and just 16% of children of divorce versus 40% of people from intact families said they often prayed with their father. As young adults, children of divorce are surprisingly likely to feel that they are more religious now than their parents ever were–twice as likely as people from intact families to feel that way about their mothers (31% versus 15%) and even more likely to feel that way about their fathers (47% versus 29%).

Although it is a minority overall, the national survey also showed that young people from divorced families are also at least twice as likely to say that they doubt the sincerity of their parents' religious beliefs–a feeling that not only indicates the skepticism some have about their parents' religious beliefs but also hints at a deep lack of respect among some for their parents. Almost one in five children of divorce (19%) compared to 9% of their peers from intact families feel this way about their mothers, and over a quarter of children of divorce (27%) compared to 14% of people from intact families say the same thing about their fathers.

God as a Parent

I asked young adults from divorced and intact families to reflect on the idea of God as a parent. The responses of the children of divorce revealed a great deal about what they thought of their parents as well as what they thought of God. Many of them find thinking about God painful.

Will had been angry at his father for years because he had cheated on Will's mother. When I asked Will if God is like a father or parent he paused, looking puzzled. "Yeah, I think a father is somebody who is your last string of hope," he said. "He'll watch over you, make sure everything is going to be okay." Then he stopped and looked down at his hands in his lap. "I'm drawing a blank," he repeated, "I'm just drawing a blank."

Kimberly said that God is like a parent because God "is trying to test you . . . in life you're going to have many challenges. And the challenges come from somewhere." "Do they come from God?" I asked. "Yeah, I think they do," she said. In Kimberly's unusual perspective, the role of her parents and of God was to confront her with challenges. In the national survey, 22% of children of divorce agreed with the statement, "The hardships in my life come from God," compared to 17% of people from intact families.

Rochelle said that God is like a parent because God "supplies things I need." She emphasized, "Like you're *supposed* to be able to ask your parents for things and they're *supposed* to take care of you." As we talked she told me many stories of how her father rarely supplied her needs when she was growing up, even when she specifically asked.

Others said that God did *not* seem like a parent. Allison said that thinking of God as a parent "would be a negative relationship for me." Alicia said God is "like a mentor, an older, wiser person . . . not like a parent," revealing a lot about how she saw her parents and God. One young woman said that God is not like a parent because God is "something smarter" than us. Another said that parents are supposed to be nurturing and comforting but, to her, God seems "like a manager, keeping tabs on things."

Daniel referred to the book *The Color of Water* by James McBride. In that book the author, who grew up the child of a black father and a white mother, took comfort in his mother's assurance that God was neither black nor white but was "the color of water." Daniel speculated that, similarly, God is neither father nor mother but the color of water, which felt liberating to him. Melissa said she didn't think of God as a parent, she thought of God as "authority, control, and safety." She told me that she didn't experience "full, untainted love" in her family so she didn't think of God as being "part of the family."

Prodigal Parents

Since young people from divorced families seem to have so many unexpected

reactions to the idea of God being like a parent, I decided to ask them and their peers from intact families about the parable of the Prodigal Son, which portrays God as a kind and loving father who welcomes his errant son home.

Some young people from intact families do not find this story very interesting or relevant to their lives, but many respond quite warmly to it. They see themselves as the prodigal son or daughter (although some said that their sister or brother was) because they had disappointed their parents by getting bad grades, dropping out of college, doing drugs, wasting money, or making career choices their parents hadn't liked and their parents had continued to love them and welcomed them home when they were ready to return.

In talking with them, I often noticed that people from intact families focus on the end of the story, when the son comes home and finds himself loved in spite of his mistakes. Children of divorce, by contrast, often think about the beginning of the story instead. They recognize that act of someone leaving home, and although in the story it is the son who leaves home, the departure of a family member often reminds children of divorce of being home alone while their divorced parents were working or socializing, or of the original departure of their father or mother that caused the divorce in the first place. In their understanding of the parable, the roles are reversed: the story is not about the Prodigal Son but their Prodigal Parents.

Joanna said that, growing up, when she heard the story of the Prodigal Son in church it always made her think, "Well, maybe my father will decide to come back one of these days." After her parents' divorce when she was five years old, Joanna's father lived in the same town but saw Joanna and her brothers only once a year. During the Christmas holidays he would pick the children up and take them out to breakfast for a couple of hours. When he dropped them off afterwards he would say–"like clockwork," Joanna recalled–"Yeah, I'll come around and see you one of these Saturdays," but he never did. Joanna would run to her room crying after these visits. She always wondered why her father would spend far more time being a dad to the five children his second wife brought to their marriage, but not to his own three children.

Joanna says she has given her father many chances to come back. She is wary and cautious with him, but she wants to give him a chance to know her and, especially, her baby. She even recently said to him, "I'll make the effort, but I have to see you making the effort. And I don't mean like you come once and disappear for another year." In the story of the Prodigal Son it is the father who is willing to give his son a second chance, despite his mistakes. Yet this story reminds Joanna of her own willingness to continue hoping–despite the constant rejections as a child–that her father will have a change of heart and start showing interest in her life.

Other children of divorce also think of their parents leaving when they hear the story. Alicia's parents divorced when she was seven years old. Each remarried within a year after that, and both later divorced again. When I asked her if the story had any relevance to her life she said, "Well, I don't

really see anybody going away and coming back and being welcomed, you know?" She laughed bitterly, "In my life people have either gone away and done something else or gone away and stayed away."

Other children of divorce interpret the story slightly differently. They think about the end of the story, when the son comes home, but they say that even if they had rebelled and left home there would not have been a stable home for them to come back to. Instead, they see *themselves* as the stable one who stayed put while their *parents* came and went, or they were the ones who bore the responsibility of traveling back and forth to keep their families connected.

Melissa thought about the story and said, "I thought it was a nice idea if it would ever really work. . . . To actually believe that you could just leave and the fact that love would always be constant." She reflected, "For me it was like if they love me then why do they live so far away? . . . Or why are they always going out with boyfriends?" As a child of divorce, she said, "You're always staying put in one place and trying your hardest to make something stable." Melissa concluded, with only some exaggeration, "I figured if I left and went away, when I came back my house would be gone."

Similarly, another young woman from a divorced family said she had friends for whom the story of the Prodigal Son meant a great deal. "They feel like they've gone away and rejected their families and came back," she said. But, in her family, "I was always kind of the dutiful one–the one traveling distances to be sure I saw my mother, traveling distances to be sure I saw my father. My family didn't even give me anything to reject! There wasn't a stable enough thing to go away from or come back to."[3]

Honor Your Father and Mother

I also asked young people from divorced and intact families to reflect on another well-known Biblical passage about family life, which is the commandment to honor your father and mother. While the children of married parents I talked with usually struggled with the commandment only if there had been serious problems in their family, children of divorce *typically* find the commandment quite challenging. One problem is that the commandment implies that their parents are a unit, while theirs are not. But the problems go much deeper than that.

Some children of divorce say they honor a parent who sacrificed a great deal for them–often a single mother who faced great odds and succeeded at raising her kids well. But when one of their parents was *sacrificial* it was often because the other parent had *failed badly.* When they thought about the honor commandment they tended to focus on the failed parent, saying they struggled with how to understand the commandment in light of that parent's serious mistakes. Still other children of divorce thought that *neither* parent sacri-

ficed much for them, and they were the ones who struggled with the commandment the most.

Infidelity and abandonment created a huge dilemma for some children of divorce when it came to honoring their parents. Joanna said she wondered how she could honor her father when she knew that he had had an affair and left her mother. Will said that he honors his mother but that given his father's infidelity and "the pain he's caused my mother and me, I guess I couldn't honor him right now." Eric said he has come to respect and honor his mother now, but it has not always been the case. Her affair with a boyfriend ended his parents' marriage and he lost respect for his mother for many years.

Others struggled with a lack of love or trust in one of their parents. Kimberly fought often with her mother growing up. She told me that as a child she would have responded to the commandment by asking, "Why? Why honor my mother if she's not able to show love or honor for me?" Ashley had a similarly troubled relationship with her mother and said that she now sees the commandment as, "Honor my father, deal with my mother, that's how I look at it." To "deal" with her mother meant to maintain the pretense of a bond with her–to be sure and give her gifts on Mother's Day and her birthday, for example–but otherwise to keep her distance from her mother and the pain in their relationship.

Samantha said, "To honor your parents is a good idea, maybe to a certain age, until you learn about the world for yourself." I asked her, "At what age did you learn about the world for yourself?" She replied, "I think I learned early because of my mom's second marriage when I was ten years old. I learned that I don't necessarily agree with everything that she's doing. So the honor commandment becomes 'Honor, but use your best judgment.'"

For some children of divorce their relationships with both parents are so thin or painful that fulfilling the honor commandment seems mysterious or impossible. Melissa said she does not honor her parents because "I don't think they thought about the children as much as they should have. When you have a child they're helpless and you're supposed to give your full life to them. . . . It never occurred to me to have unending honor for them because they never had it for me." Another child of divorce said, "It doesn't resonate for me. Honor means respect and in that definition it just doesn't really apply for me."

Alicia, who talked easily about other spiritual issues, was stumped by the honor commandment. "What does that mean exactly? Honor their wishes? I don't know what that means." She frowned. "Everybody's honor is different, isn't it? How do you honor?"

Although some had given up on the honor commandment, other children of divorce–especially those who were actively growing in a faith–spoke of how the honor commandment *called them into relationship* with their parents. An awareness of the commandment was what kept these young people working at a relationship that had often hurt or disappointed them, rather than abandoning it altogether now that they were independent and grown.

Katy said the commandment is "very much a supporting theme" in her life, because "through thick and thin that would hold me to honor both of them." In fact, she recalled that a sense of needing to honor her father partly explained why she continued to make the effort to visit him routinely even after she left home.

Anthony said he thought about the commandment a lot growing up. He recalled his father's hurt when, as teenagers, Anthony and his brother did not want to visit him as often. His father said to him, "The Bible says honor your father, and I don't feel you're honoring me." Anthony recalls arguing with his father, saying that the Bible also says that parents should honor and do certain things for their children, which he felt his father had not done.

As an adult, Anthony has resolved the problem in his own mind by deciding, "The commandments are things we do for God, so honor your father because God told you to do it–that is how you honor God." Today, he does not struggle so much with honoring his father as feeling sorry for him: "With regard to honoring him, I've not ever wanted to just completely leave him and not have anything to do with him. Because I feel bad for him," he said. "I feel sorry that he doesn't have people that really love him and are attached to him as a father."

Rochelle had been deeply disappointed by her father and said that she went through a long period of trying to forgive him, during which she had searched her heart, prayed, and talked to her father about her feelings. She has reached a point where she can "care for him now in a way he never did for me," in part because of her awareness of this commandment.

When I asked Steve about the honor commandment he said heatedly, "I have struggled with that commandment from the point at which I became a believer to this day . . . It's only because of my faith that I would even approach that as something that I need to be doing. If it weren't for that I would probably have written off my mom, the same with my dad . . . but I can't honor God if I'm not honoring my mother and my father."

Michael recalled that after his conversion to Christianity as a teenager he often reflected on this commandment and what it meant for his faith and his relationship with his parents. Honoring his mother was easy, he said, but with regard to his father he concluded, "Okay, I'll respect him, but it doesn't mean that I always have to like him."

Coming Home

Faith traditions can too often seem alienating or irrelevant to children of divorce, especially when they are interpreted in ways that ignore their experience. But these same traditions also harbor moving stories that can name their experience in powerful ways. One example is the story of the Exile. The story of the Exile is a central theme in some of the prophetic books of the

Hebrew Bible and in the history of Judaism, and exile is a formative theme for the Christian faith. Some of the parables, such as the story of the Prodigal Son, are deeply shaped by images of exile and return.

Children of divorce who stay in touch with both parents are travelers on the move. They often feel far away from home and sometimes uncertain where they really belong. Their experience of being travelers in search of roots is not unlike the biblical story of the Exile. Children of divorce are not usually *sent away*–although they are much more likely to recall being kicked out of a parent's house, a fairly small number overall say this happened to them–but rather they have to *go away* because of forces beyond their control. Usually it was a custody decision that keeps them on the move, rather than the wishes of their parents.

Children of divorce experience exile in two ways. The first is when they lose their original family. When their parents' marriage ends these children may still have a mother and a father in their lives, but life is never the same. The experience of having a mother and father as a unit, the home in which they live, their neighborhood and the friends, the larger network of relationships in which the marriage existed–some or all of this world is often lost for children of divorce.

The second experience of exile stretches throughout their childhoods as they journey between their parents after the divorce. There is an elemental wholeness that children feel in the company of both their parents, a wholeness that can only be compared to the closeness and security we seek in intimate relationships when we are adults. Yet as children, once their parents became individuals and not a married unit, children of divorce could never experience that elemental wholeness again. For children of divorce, to gain one parent *always* means to lose the other. Over time children of divorce feel divided inside, torn between two worlds. Exile is a spiritual name for that feeling of inner division. It helps explain their sense of being fragmented, spread out, scattered.

But exile is not the end of the story–the faithful are assured they can come home to God. If they are supported and reached out to, many children of divorce find that a spiritual journey in the context of a faith community is both possible and healing. Through their faith journeys they find a deep and profoundly meaningful sense of wholeness, discovering a single identity and life story that helps them make sense of the shifting and complex family narratives out of which they came.

Churches today are challenged by widespread divorce. Many young adults in their congregations and communities have been deeply shaped by this experience. If the church is to minister to these children and young people, and if it is to grow, an understanding of the impact of divorce must be incorporated throughout the life of the congregation. The following are some practical thoughts on ministering to children of divorce in the areas of liturgy, preaching and teaching, and pastoral counseling.

Suggestions for Faith Communities

Rituals of Healing

Some faith communities are trying to develop rituals and prayers that can be used at the time of divorce. While these efforts are well-intended they often contain language that is intended to make divorced parents feel better but can hurt children of divorce. For instance, one denomination has a prayer to be used at the time of divorce that ends with the words "in the name of the One who sets us free from slavery to the past and makes all things new."[4] This sentiment may reflect the experience of some divorcing adults but children do not experience the breakup of their families as being "set free from slavery to the past," nor do they long to have their families "made new."

More appropriate might be rituals in which parents vow to be kind to one another and remain loving, involved parents to their children, but even these words could feel intimidating rather than comforting to young children. However, rituals of healing for adult children of divorce might be welcomed by some.

Often, those who want to help children of divorce want to tackle liturgy first, but it might be wise to engage more deeply with the experience of these children and young people before trying to name their experience in liturgy.

Counseling

When it comes to counseling parents, some marriages are so destructive that they must be ended, but many low-conflict marriages might be saved–and the majority of marriages that end in divorce are low-conflict. Clergy who marry and counsel couples have a distinct responsibility to be aware of quality marriage education and counseling resources in their community and to make sure members of their congregation know where to find them. Marriage education, in particular, should be encouraged for all kinds of couples, not just those in crisis.

When faith communities want to help children of divorce often their first idea is to start a support group. Some children might be helped by support groups around the time of their parents' divorce, especially if leaders use a well-written curriculum that is sensitive to the children's needs.[5] But churches should see support groups for young children only as a beginning. One problem with support groups is that they can isolate the "problem" at the margins of the community and do not require the whole congregation to learn about the experience and its wider implications. Another problem is that divorce powerfully impacts children into young adulthood, so a support group structured around the time of the divorce is only the first step in min-

istering to them.

What is more important is for faith communities to take a comprehensive approach to marriage and divorce as a whole. They must respond to the needs of young people of all ages whose lives have been shaped by divorce. They should also make supporting and strengthening marriages in the congregation and community a priority so that there will be fewer children of divorce.[6]

When counseling young or grown children of divorce, one of the most important and easiest things a counselor can do is simply ask about and remember all the people in that young person's family. One young woman from a divorced family told me how extraordinarily healing she found it when a counselor at their first session took out a legal pad and wrote down the woman's complex family tree so that she could remember all of the names and relationships as their sessions went on. For many children of divorce it is quite common to socialize routinely with people who are not even aware of the people in the other half of their family, much less know their names. A simple act like asking about their entire family and making an effort to remember their names indicates genuine respect for and interest in the complex lives of children of divorce.

Teaching and Preaching

Many churches avoid discussing family issues, especially divorce, because they fear alienating or hurting single and divorced adults. Prophetic messages might flow from their pulpit every week that touch on all kinds of social justice issues but rarely will there be mention of family structure and its effects on children. Such a message might hit too close to home and actually make some adults uncomfortable. Yet this kind of challenge is exactly what faith communities are called to.

It is fully possible to be compassionate to children of divorce and emphasize the importance of marriage while, at the same time, affirming and supporting single and divorced parents.[7] Yet most church leaders, in all denominations, could be more informed, more prophetic, and more compassionate on the topic of family than they currently are.

Church leaders should realize that by not tackling this topic they may inadvertently be alienating young and grown children of divorce. No preacher can afford to ignore the complex and surprising reactions that children of divorce have to passages like the honor commandment, the parable of the Progidal Son, or images of God as a father or parent.

Tackling the topic of family and addressing the child's point of view might ruffle feathers among some, but faith communities are also likely to discover that many young adults respond favorably to honest examinations of marriage and divorce. Today's generation of young adults has grown up in a di-

vorce culture. Even those whose parents did not divorce have seen its effects among their friends. This generation tends to take a more balanced approach to questions about marriage and divorce than their baby boomer parents often do. Faith communities so often wonder how to involve young adults more fully in their community. I predict that responding honestly to the widespread effects of family change today, especially its effects on children and young people, will make more young adults of all backgrounds feel more welcome and committed to the life of the congregation.

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Endnotes

1. This article is adapted from a chapter in Elizabeth Marquardt's *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce* (New York: Crown Publishers, September 2005). The book reports the first-ever nationally representative study of the inner lives of children of divorce, focusing in particular on their moral and spiritual experience. The study was led by Elizabeth Marquardt and Norval Glenn and funded generously by the Lilly Endowment. All data in this chapter is drawn from our nationally-representative study of 1500 young adults, fielded by SRBI, Inc., half who grew up in divorced families and half who grew up in intact families. The stories and anecdotes are drawn from 71 additional in-person interviews. Names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

2. Our study involved those children of divorce who continue to see both parents at least once a year after the divorce.

3. She is quoted in Elizabeth Marquardt, "Children of Divorce: Stories of Exile," *The Christian Century*, volume 118, number 6, pp. 26-29.

4. "Ministry with Persons Going Through Divorce," in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashvillem TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992).

5. An impressive new curriculum is *Divorce Care for Kids*. See www.dc4k.org.

6. For a wealth of marriage education resources in your area, visit www.smartmarriages.com. A large

national organization that has successfully helped clergy in many local communities organize to strengthen marriage and reduce their divorce rates is Marriage Savers. See www.marriagesavers.org.

7. The Religion, Culture, and Family Project at the University of Chicago Divinity School has published numerous books and articles in recent years that explore contemporary problems of religion and the family and offer ideas for restoration of a “critical familism” in the churches and the culture. See their website and publications at http://divinity.uchicago.edu/family/.